

The Cost of Not Breastfeeding in Timor-Leste

THE ECONOMIC COST OF NOT BREASTFEEDING ON HUMAN CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT AND HEALTH SYSTEMS IN TIMOR-LESTE

Breastfeeding is one of the best buys in global health to save lives and improve the health, social, and economic development of both individuals and for Timor-Leste as a nation. While almost all mothers in Timor-Leste breastfeed, less than 52 percent of babies are exclusively breastfed for six months as recommended by the World Health Organization and UNICEF. These low rates of exclusive breastfeeding amount to real costs in human life, quality of life, and national economic outcomes.

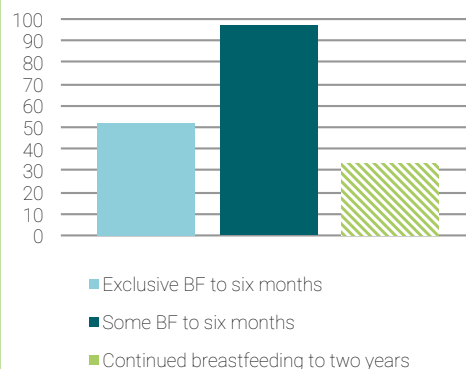
New research commissioned by Alive & Thrive in partnership with UNICEF in 2015 has quantified the economic toll that suboptimal breastfeeding takes on Timor-Leste and its people. The evidence is clear (see key findings): investing in policies and programs that support mothers to properly breastfeed saves lives and provides a high return on investment for the country.

Key findings in Timor-Leste

Optimal breastfeeding practices can:

- Save 110 children's lives annually, an important contribution to reducing overall under-5 child mortality
- Save 330,000 USD in health system expenditures annually
- Prevent 1,400,000 USD in annual wage losses by improving the learning abilities of children
- Reduce families' out of pocket expenditures to treat diarrhea and pneumonia
- Save families up to 15.9 percent of their monthly earnings by not having to purchase formula

Breastfeeding rates in Timor-Leste



Optimal breastfeeding improves human capital development and reduces health expenditures for families and Timor-Leste



Decreasing vulnerability to disease can accelerate reductions in child mortality

When children are not exclusively breastfed for six months, they are more susceptible to diarrhea and pneumonia — the two leading causes of childhood death worldwide. By supporting mothers to practice proper breastfeeding, nearly 50 percent of under-2 child deaths caused by diarrhea and pneumonia could be prevented annually across the ASEAN region compared to a situation with no breastfeeding. In Timor-Leste, 110 additional children's lives could be saved annually by moving from the current levels of breastfeeding to World Health Organization guideline levels, contributing to overall under-5 child mortality reduction.

Breastfeeding also helps protect the health of mothers. If 90 percent of mothers breastfed for two years, 10 percent of maternal deaths due to breast cancer could be prevented annually across the ASEAN region.



Health care costs to treat diarrhea and pneumonia could be eliminated

By ensuring optimal breastfeeding, Timor-Leste could potentially eliminate diarrhea and pneumonia caused by inadequate breastfeeding and subsequently save 330,000 USD in health care expenses per year, paid either by public or private sources.



Cognitive losses result in lost wages for individuals

Inadequate breastfeeding impacts a child's ability to learn and consequently their future earning potential. In Timor-Leste, annual wage losses due to lower cognitive scores were estimated at 1,400,000 USD.



Eliminating indirect costs to treat diseases can result in significant savings

When children become ill due to diarrhea and pneumonia caused by inadequate breastfeeding, parents often incur costs to take them to a health care facility to seek treatment. The economic losses that result include lost productivity and transportation costs. Studies in Timor-Leste and Indonesia indicate that families can incur additional lost work and transportation costs up to 25 percent of the actual cost to treat diarrhea and pneumonia.



Eliminating formula costs increases a family's disposable income

As Timor-Leste achieves economic growth, increasing disposable incomes will unfortunately attract companies to market their breastmilk substitute products to mothers to feed their children. The costs to purchase economy brand infant formula can be significant for families – up to 15.9 percent of the average monthly earnings for workers in Timor-Leste – compared to breastmilk, which is free, safe, and hygienic for all babies.

Policymakers must invest in national policies and programs to support breastfeeding

To realize essential health and economic benefits, Timor-Leste must invest to scale-up breastfeeding at the national level. Policymakers should move quickly to adopt, strengthen, and implement policies to support all mothers to properly breastfeed to WHO-recommended guidelines, including:

- Developing workplace lactation support programs, including work with employers to provide space for lactation and breastfeeding breaks for breastfeeding mothers
- Implementing the International Labor Organization's Maternity Protection Convention No. 183 and Recommendation No. 191, including key maternity protections for working mothers
- Developing a national Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes and aligning it with the International BMS Code and subsequent World Health Assembly resolutions
- Conduct monitoring of nutrition interventions in health services to support continued advocacy for strengthening IYCF in health systems

By strengthening and implementing these policies, policymakers can help all children achieve the healthiest possible start in life, and the best chance at life-long health and prosperity.

"I noticed so many female workers didn't come to work due to the fact their children needed to be breastfed regularly. This is one problem. Therefore, each institution needs to have a policy, a policy that can attract workers to come to work yet still able to breastfeed their babies for the length of time that is required by the MoH"
State Secretary, Gender Equality

References

Walters, D., S. Horton, A.Y.M. Siregar, P. Pitriyan, N. Hajeebhoy, R. Mathisen, P.T.H. Linh, C. Rudert. The Cost of Not Breastfeeding in Southeast Asia. Forthcoming 2016.

Acknowledgements

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Note, country breastfeeding rates are from latest MICS or DHS surveys available 2008-2012, acknowledging that several countries have new data in the meantime.

The Cost of Not Breastfeeding study also benefited from input provided by the Ministry of Health, Department of Health, UNICEF and development partners in Timor-Leste.