

Breastfeeding: A Key to Sustainable Development

The recent *Lancet* Breastfeeding Series underscored that improving breastfeeding practices worldwide will be a fundamental driver in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.

Well-established evidence shows that breastfeeding is one of the smartest investments that countries can make to ensure a healthy, equitable and sustainable future. In low-, middle-, and high-income countries alike, the benefits for individuals and families include ending preventable child deaths and improving health, educational attainment, and productivity. Stronger breastfeeding policies and programmes are essential to driving progress in reproductive, maternal, newborn, child and adolescent health—and they directly support the achievement of numerous Sustainable Development Goals and the *Global Strategy for Women's Children's and Adolescents' Health*.

Goals 1, 8 & 10: End Poverty; Promote Economic Growth; and Reduce Inequalities

Breastfeeding is an effective, low-cost way to boost human capital and stimulate economic growth, while also giving children the equal opportunity to thrive from the start.

- Breastfeeding is associated with higher cognitive ability, which can translate into higher earnings later in life.
- Globally, the cost of lower cognitive ability associated with not breastfeeding amounts to about \$300 billion annually, representing 0.49 percent of global gross national incomes (GNI).
- The health benefits associated with optimal breastfeeding could save billions of dollars in healthcare costs each year by dramatically reducing hospital admissions for infectious diseases.

Goals 2 and 3: Achieve Zero Hunger; and Improve Health and Well-Being at All Ages

Breastmilk helps shape health and well-being from infancy through adulthood by providing all the vital nutrients infants and young children need, fighting infection and even preventing non-communicable diseases later in life.

- Breastfeeding is one of the top interventions for reducing under-5 mortality. It could save the lives of 820,000 children under 5 (87 percent of them infants younger than 6 months old) each year. This represents about 13 percent of all under-5 child deaths.
- Exclusively breastfed infants have only 12 percent of the risk of death in LMICs as those who were not breastfed. On average, infants younger than six months who are not breastfed are 3-4 times more likely to die than those who received any breastmilk.
- Breastmilk is a vital and superior food source for poor and wealthy households, providing important nutrients and 100 percent of a child's energy needs for the first 6

Thailand facts:

- **192.6 million USD** could be generated annually by improving breastfeeding and subsequently a child's learning ability
- **7.7 million USD** could be saved annually by eliminating diarrhea and pneumonia due to inadequate breastfeeding

By increasing optimal breastfeeding to WHO standards, Thailand can:

- **Prevent 262 additional child deaths** annually from diarrhea and pneumonia
- **Prevent 406 additional maternal deaths** annually due to breast cancer

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months of life; half or more of energy needs from 6 to 12 months; and one-third of energy needs between 12 and 24 months.

- Nearly half of all diarrhea episodes and one-third of respiratory infections would be prevented with any breastfeeding during the first six months.
- Improved breastfeeding practices could save an additional 20,000 additional maternal lives annually from breast cancer—helping to contribute to the global goal of reduced maternal mortality.
- Breastfeeding decreases the prevalence of overweight/obesity and diabetes later in life. Longer breastfeeding duration is associated with a 13 percent reduction in the likelihood of overweight and/or obesity prevalence and a 35 percent reduction in type-2 diabetes incidence.

Goal 4: Ensure Quality Education

Breastfeeding ensures children have the foundation they need to obtain and complete quality education by providing a nutritional head start for success.

- Breastfeeding is associated with an average three point increase in IQ among children and adolescents, when controlling for maternal intelligence.
- Greater cognitive ability leads to increased productivity and earnings later in life, and also to better learning and literacy outcomes relevant to global targets on more effective, inclusive education.

Goal 5: Achieve Gender Equality

Empowering women and girls to stay in school and pursue paid jobs outside of the home is critical to achieving gender parity. Birth-spacing, a well-documented outcome of continued breastfeeding, is one way to empower women and girls with greater reproductive autonomy—especially in countries with limited access to quality contraceptive information and care.

- Breastfeeding is consistently associated with longer periods of postnatal infertility, particularly when breastfeeding is frequent or exclusive, which contributes to improved birth spacing.
- By decreasing unintended pregnancies, breastfeeding may allow more women and girls to stay in school, pursue careers and lead more equitable lives.
- In 2003, it was estimated that in countries where breastfeeding was most prevalent, such as Uganda and Burkina Faso, there would have been 50 percent more births without breastfeeding.

Goals 12 and 15: Ensure Sustainable Consumption and Production; and Improve Life on Land

Breastfeeding is an investment in environmental sustainability. Supporting breastmilk over environmentally-toxic formula alternatives will help achieve global targets on reduced land and water pollution, and help drive global production and consumption patterns in a more responsible, renewable and eco-conscious direction.

- Breastmilk is a renewable resource that is environmentally friendly, produced without pollution and consumed with a minimal ecological footprint.
- Breastmilk contributes to a sustainable food supply, providing 100 percent of a child's energy needs for the first 6 months of life; half or more of energy needs from 6 to 12 months; and one-third of energy needs between 12 and 24 months.

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- Breastmilk substitutes, alternatively, require energy for manufacturing, materials for packaging, fuel for distribution and water and toxic cleaning agents for daily preparation—all of which pollute the air, contaminate oceans and generate billions of tons of plastic and metal waste that ends up in landfills.

As national governments throughout the world develop budgets and action plans to achieve the SDGs, breastfeeding should be prioritized as a powerful intervention that benefits not just child health, but many of the Sustainable Development Goals. It is every country's responsibility to protect, promote and support optimal breastfeeding at all levels.

When we support optimal breastfeeding, we support the success of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Sources

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