

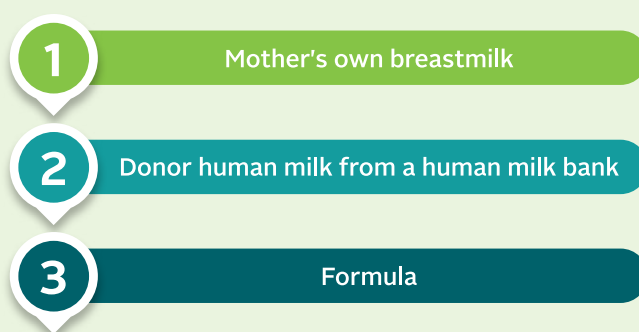
Ensuring every infant has access to breastmilk: Human milk banks in the ASEAN region

Briefing Note



The first six months of life are critical for child health and development. Breastmilk provides all the nutrients infants need during this period, supporting brain development and reducing the risk of infection and malnutrition. When mothers are not able to provide their babies with their own breastmilk, the World Health Organization (WHO) recommends providing donor human milk as the next best option.¹ Human milk banks (HMBs) provide safe, high-quality donor milk to infants who need it most.

Figure 1: WHO ranking of feeding option for at-risk newborns



Human milk banks

A human milk bank (HMB) is a service established to recruit breast milk donors, collect donated milk, and then process, screen, store, and distribute the milk to meet infants' specific needs for optimal health. Milk is donated by volunteer lactating mothers who have passed thorough health screenings. After donation, milk is processed, stored, and distributed following strict procedures to provide safe, high-quality milk to meet the needs of newborns at risk of malnutrition or infection. The mission of an HMB is to promote and support breastfeeding by providing safe, high-quality donor milk to address gaps among those who would not otherwise have access.

¹ World Health Organization (WHO). *Guidelines on Optimal Feeding of Low Birth-Weight Infants in Low- and Middle-Income Countries*. Geneva: WHO; 2011.



A supportive breastfeeding environment is crucial to the success of an HMB. This includes an ample pool of breastmilk donors, and necessitates broad social endorsement.

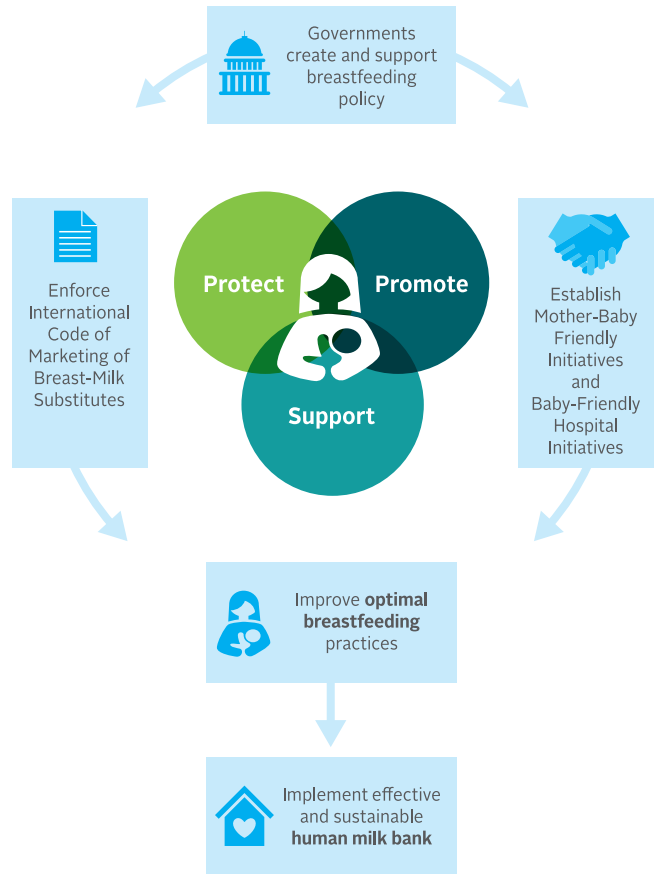
Protecting, promoting and supporting breastfeeding through human milk banking

A supportive breastfeeding environment is crucial to the success of an HMB. This includes an ample pool of breastmilk donors, and necessitates broad social endorsement. When mothers receive adequate support to breastfeed from family, community members, health workers, employers and others, they are more likely to start and continue breastfeeding. Early essential newborn care practices during labor, delivery, and the immediate postpartum period greatly impact breastfeeding practices.

Increasing resources for breastfeeding programs and advocating for policies that are supportive of breastfeeding will lead to a stronger and more effective HMB system. Critical steps to this process include consistent implementation of the Ten Steps to Successful Breastfeeding and adopting the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes. The Code, when enforced, protects mothers from marketing that may reduce their confidence to breastfeed and limit their understanding that breastmilk is the best choice for all infants.



Figure 2: Effective HMB implementation requires investment by the government to protect, promote, and support breastfeeding



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Human milk banks in Viet Nam

In February 2017, the first HMB in Viet Nam opened in the Da Nang Hospital for Women and Children (DNHWC). The Ministry of Health (MOH), Alive & Thrive (A&T), and PATH selected DNHWC for the establishment of an HMB because of the hospital's strong commitment to breastfeeding and status as a "Center of Excellence" for early essential newborn care (EENC) by MOH and WHO. This means that the hospital promotes skin-to-skin contact for babies and ensures that mothers can begin early initiation of breastfeeding in line with national guidelines regardless of whether they delivered vaginally or via cesarean section (C-section). The hospital promotes breastfeeding throughout the facility and strictly enforces Decree 100 to ensure that breastmilk substitutes are not advertised or promoted in the hospital.

In addition to maintaining an environment that is supportive of breastfeeding, DNHWC has a high number of babies each year requiring special care in the neonatal unit. Approximately 3,000-4,000 babies that receive care at DNHWC each year are of low birth weight, premature, or otherwise vulnerable, including those born in the hospital and those transferred after birth from nearby hospitals. Prior to the establishment of the human milk bank, hospital officials estimated that roughly 30 percent of these babies (900–1,200) did not have access to their own mother's milk in the few days after birth and would benefit immensely from access to donor human milk. By February 2019, the HMB at DNHWC had provided about 4,000 liters of donor milk to more than 7,500 babies, including 2,600 at-risk newborns.

Following the success of Da Nang HMB, A&T is supporting the establishment of the second HMB in Viet Nam at Tu Du Hospital, the country's largest obstetrics and gynecology (OBGYN) hospital based in Ho Chi Minh City. Tu Du Hospital is responsible for providing technical support to 32 other hospitals in the south of Viet Nam, and is designated as an EENC "Center of Excellence" by the MOH and WHO. Each year, Tu Du Hospital welcomes more than 60,000 births, with approximately 12,000 at-risk babies who are born sick, at a low-birth-weight, or premature to be treated at the Neonatal Unit. In late 2017, the hospital upgraded its facility according to A&T's recommendations from a facility assessment and an exchange visit to DNHWC. In 2018, with funding from Irish Aid, A&T provided two pasteurizers and various trainings on breastfeeding promotion, mother and baby-friendly delivery support, and HMB procedures to prepare Tu Du Hospital for the HMB opening. Starting in early 2019, eligible infants at Tu Du Hospital and in Ho Chi Minh City will benefit from this HMB.

Increasing demand for HMBs in Viet Nam has led A&T and DNHWC to establish a Learning and Research Center at DNHWC to share lessons learned from a comprehensive approach with in-country and regional partners. In addition to the learning visit by Tu Du Hospital in 2017, DNHWC welcomed stakeholders from 10 countries in the ASEAN region and beyond participating in the Regional Workshop for a Breastfeeding-Friendly Health System, as well as two delegations from China and Myanmar in 2018. A&T facilitated each of these visits. In early 2019, the Learning and Research Center for Newborn Care and Access to Human Milk was officially established with approval from the Da Nang authorities.



To make the investment cost-effective, any hospital with an HMB should serve as many at-risk infants who would benefit from donor human milk as possible.

Replicating human milk bank services in the ASEAN region

HMB services. For an HMB to be successful, it must be part of a larger strategy in which breastfeeding is fully supported and promoted within the hospital and after discharge, with key indicators routinely monitored. HMBs also require significant financial commitments for both start-up and ongoing costs. To make the investment cost-effective, any hospital with an HMB should serve as many at-risk infants who would benefit from donor human milk as possible. Therefore, it is important to establish a mechanism to extend the HMB services, including:

1. distributing processed human milk from a HMB to hospitals in neighboring provinces; and
2. processing donated human milk collected by other hospitals and distributing back.

Centers of Breastfeeding Excellence. With funding from Irish Aid, A&T is working to strengthen the capacity of health systems in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Viet Nam to deliver high-quality breastfeeding-friendly services to mothers and infants. A&T provides strategic technical assistance to the governments of these countries to establish and sustain a network of 30-40 Centers of Breastfeeding Excellence that deliver high-quality breastfeeding and early essential newborn care services within a supportive policy environment by 2021. This network will play an important role in the sustainability and replication of HMB services.

Regional HMB Network. HMBs have also been established in other ASEAN countries, including A&T focus countries (Myanmar and the Philippines). Two HMBs are currently operational in Myanmar, both in the Yangon Region, at two of the eight Apex-level neonatal intensive care units (NICUs) in the country. The Central Women's Hospital established its HMB program in 1994, and Yankin Children's Hospital established its program in 2015. HMBs in the Philippines have been in operation for 10 years and have increased in number to 18 established HMBs nationwide. Considering that the Asian region has one of the greatest burdens of sick and vulnerable infants,² and that the demand for HMB services is increasing throughout the region, HMB systems are crucial. In this context, it is imperative that HMB standards, approaches and best practices be reviewed, harmonized and made available for better HMB implementation in the ASEAN countries. A&T has made great efforts to facilitate knowledge exchanges between countries and will support the establishment of the first regional HMB network in the ASEAN Region and beyond. This network will be composed of members from Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand, Viet Nam, and China, and will initially be convened by the Human Milk Bank Association of the Philippines.

² *The Lancet 2015. Global Burden of Disease Study.*

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