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UNICEF RESPONDS TO REPORT ON VIOLATIONS OF BREASTMILK SUBSTITUTE CODE

UNICEF welcomes "Cracking the Code", a research study conducted by the Interagency Group Breastfeeding Monitoring (IGBM). It is, in our view, a careful and sound analysis of the marketing practices of a number of breastmilk substitute manufacturers, based on research in four disparate countries: Bangladesh, Thailand, Poland and South Africa.

We wish that the study demonstrated progress. Unhappily, it documents the opposite: it sets out a pattern of repeated violations of the *International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes*. In all, some thirteen articles of the *International Code* were violated in whole or in part in the four countries investigated. Thus, sixteen years after the *International Code* was embraced by the world community, its provisions are still being breached on a continuing basis.

This puts the health and lives of great numbers of infants at risk. Marketing practices that undermine breastfeeding are potentially hazardous wherever they are pursued: in the developing world, WHO estimates that some 1.5 million children die each year because they are not adequately breastfed. These facts are not in dispute.

Nor is there any dispute about the importance of monitoring. The *International Code* itself calls on NGO's to monitor compliance with its provisions, and to report any infractions to the companies and governments concerned. That's exactly what has been done in this case. It is both unfortunate and ill-advised that the International Association of Infant Food Manufacturers (IFM) saw fit to ignore the findings, and to reject the report as "biased in design and execution".

A group of twenty-seven independent and distinguished academic institutions, churches, non-profit organizations and experts in infant feeding formed the coalition behind the study and endorsed its research techniques. This is important because the study was rooted in the wish of the General Synod of the Church of England to seek unimpeachable evidence of violations of the *International Code*. It is significant to UNICEF to note that the Bishop of Coventry, upon receipt of the report, said that it "... provides compelling evidence from countries around the world that the *International Code* is still being violated". It is also noteworthy that the findings of the International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN), in its regular monitoring activities, are clearly vindicated by this report.

The question now becomes: how do we proceed when all the evidence suggests that, despite the protestations of good faith by the breastmilk substitute manufacturers, many continue to view the *International Code* as a covenant more to be honoured in the breach than in the substance?

Under the circumstances, UNICEF:

1) Publicly requests that the manufacturers and distributors of products within the scope of the *International Code* uphold its provisions, including Article 11.3, which calls on companies to monitor their own marketing practices and ensure that their conduct conforms to the *International Code* in every way.

2) In light of the companies' unhappiness over the findings of this and other monitoring reports, we would urge them (as our Executive Director has urged them in the past) to set out, country by country, their range of marketing practices, in order to demonstrate, through full disclosure, precisely how those practices are consistent with the *International Code*.

3) Will request that its country offices and National Committees ask governments to intensify efforts to give immediate effect to the *International Code*, and to apply and enforce its provisions.

4) Congratulates the IGBM; suggests that its study, "Cracking the Code", be given the widest possible distribution (with consideration for translation); and encourages the coalition to share the details of its experience so that NGOs in other countries and regions might follow its example.

5) Proposes that IBFAN and other nongovernmental organizations that regularly fulfill the monitoring role assigned by the World Health Assembly to NGOs be given renewed encouragement to continue monitoring compliance with the *International Code*.

6) Encourages all concerned parties to join UNICEF in urging the Committee on the Rights of the Child to ask every government reporting on the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), whether it is enforcing the *International Code*. Further, UNICEF will attempt to ensure that the 188 governments that have ratified the CRC be made aware that violations of the *International Code* are violations of Article 24 of the CRC, which specifically calls for education about and appropriate measures to support "the advantages of breastfeeding".

UNICEF views this as an issue of great consequence. The effort to protect, promote and support breastfeeding is one of our World Summit for Children goals; it is part of our country programmes, it has been endorsed by our Executive Board; it is explicit in the Convention; it is implicit in our Mission Statement. It speaks, quite simply, to child survival and development. There is too much at stake for the *International Code* to be ignored.

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