



The baby food industry's needless destruction of an irreplaceable natural resource – is this ecocide?

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The [International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes \[i\]](#) was adopted forty years ago by the World Health Assembly, the world's highest health policy setting body. The Code, the first consumer protection tool of its kind, was the result of a struggle between civil society, health professionals and academics – all committed to the health of mothers and their children and led by the [International Baby Food Action Network \(IBFAN\) \[ii\]](#) – and baby food industries based in the world's richest nations.

Today [70% of countries have adopted laws based on the Code](#), however far too many are limited in scope and full of loopholes as a result of industry interference. As a consequence [predatory marketing of baby food products continues throughout the world.\[iii\] \[iv\]](#) and the [global Baby Food Drink Market is forecast to rise more than 30% in 5 years](#) (from \$68bn in 2020 to \$91.5bn by 2026).

Although of smaller proportions, this struggle was, and still is, similar to the one currently being waged in the face of climate change – an immensely greater threat. Both are defending human life and health against threats posed by powerful, profit-driven forces.

Aside from its crucial role in child survival ([more than 800,000 children die each year because they are not breastfed and many more do not reach their full potential \[v\]](#)) breastfeeding is the most environmentally friendly way to feed an infant, [resulting in zero waste, minimal greenhouse gases, and negligible water footprint](#). As a renewable natural food resource, mother's milk makes an important contribution to local food and water security.[vi]

The COVID-19 pandemic has been in the spotlight for the last two years, and although it probably still holds unpleasant surprises, it has thankfully not prevented a global resumption of activism and political reaction to the climate crisis. But the baby food industry [lost no time in exploiting the fear and confusion during the pandemic: falsely claiming their products build immunity](#); that their 'donations' are humanitarian; [encouraging the needless separation of mothers and babies](#) and pretending that they are essential 'partners' who are [genuinely working to address the problems.\[vii\] \[viii\] \[ix\] \[x\]](#)

The pandemic also caused many significant events to go unnoticed. One was the launch of the [Lancet/UNICEF/WHO Commission report](#) that concluded [\[xi\]](#) "... today's children face an uncertain future. Climate change, ecological degradation, migrating populations, conflict, pervasive inequalities,

and predatory commercial practices threaten the health and future of children in every country.” The report calls on governments and international agencies to take immediate action to curb these threats.

Violence is another major threat that, through armed conflict or the pernicious effects of the arms trade, takes an [ever-increasing toll on children and young people](#).^[xii] The high toll of death and disease caused by commercio-genic malnutrition continues silently, but equally lethally.

Misleading labelling, advertising, consumer manipulation, health, education and trade policies and research plagued by conflicts of interest, unsupportive hospital practices and inadequate maternity protection are among the determinants of the decline of breastfeeding rates in many countries. These factors and the early introduction of ultra-processed products contribute to rising obesity, chronic diseases and life-threatening infections ^[xiii]. Most transnational food and baby food companies are also complicit in the climate emergency through the promotion of food systems that undermine bio-diversity and traditional food cultures and lead to [deforestation](#), mono-cropping, land and sea-grabbing and the promotion of a host of risky technologies.

Meanwhile [they will be continuing to push for the unrestricted global trade](#) of totally unnecessary, denatured, ultra-processed, plastic-wrapped, flavoured, additive-laden, sweetened drinks for older babies [at the forthcoming UN Codex meeting later this month](#).^[xiv] WHO policy is clear that the promotion of these products (that look deceptively like formulas for newborn babies) is a violation of the Code because it confuses parents and undermines breastfeeding that is a lifeline, especially where the majority of children are breastfed in the 2nd year of life.

In this context, breastfeeding stands out as a unique natural resource that has enabled humans to survive and adapt to the most diverse and challenging environments. A perfect sustainable food system that creates no waste or pollution and generates an imprint of empathy, which is the most solid foundation for the prevention of violence. In short, a powerful resource for dealing with major threats from the beginning of life.^[xv]

The protection of breastfeeding and sustainable complementary feeding through the full implementation of the *International Code* and subsequent *Resolutions* as law in every country is an imperative. Indeed, commercial efforts to replace, limit or displace breastfeeding should be described as a form of [ecocide](#)^[xvi] along with other forms of greed-driven, negligent destruction of natural resources.

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Footnotes:

^[i] *The International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes* was adopted in 1981 as a resolution by the World Health Assembly, the highest authority in international health. It has been clarified and strengthened by the 19 resolutions and Decisions adopted by the WHA that have equal status and must be read together with the original Code. <https://www.who.int/teams/nutrition-and-food-safety/food-and-nutrition-actions-in-health-systems/netcode/code-and-subsequent-resolutions>.

^[ii] International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN) a global network of 273 citizens groups working in 168 countries to protect mothers, infants and young children from harmful marketing practices that undermine breastfeeding, child health and survival. www.ibfan.org

[iiii] *Marketing of breast milk substitutes: national implementation of the international code, status report 2020*, 27 May 2020. WHO/UNICEF/IBFAN <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240006010> Of the 194 countries analysed in the report, 136 (70%) have in place some form of legal measure related to the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes and subsequent resolutions adopted by the World Health Assembly (the Code). Attention to the Code is growing, as 44 countries have strengthened their regulations on marketing over the past two years. However, the legal restrictions in most countries do not fully cover marketing that occurs in health facilities. Only 79 countries prohibit the promotion of breast-milk substitutes in health facilities, and only 51 have provisions that prohibit the distribution of free or low-cost supplies within the health care system. Only 19 countries have prohibited the sponsorship of scientific and health professional association meetings by manufacturers of breast-milk substitutes, which include infant formula, follow-up formula, and growing up milks marketed for use by infants and children up to 36-months old.

[iv] National and global monitoring reports: <http://www.babymilkaction.org/monitoring-global> <https://www.htfmarketreport.com/reports/3598485-worldwide-baby-food-drink-market-1>

[v] Lancet Breastfeeding Series. January 2016. <https://www.thelancet.com/series/breastfeeding>. *Anti-viral Properties of Human Milk Oligosaccharides* <https://milkgenomics.org/article/anti-viral-properties-of-human-milk-oligosaccharides/>

[vi] 'Support for breastfeeding is an environmental imperative' BMJ, Joff and Shenker <https://www.bmj.com/content/367/bmj.l5646>

'Greenhouse gases from baby milk formula': Dadhich JP, Smith JP, Iellamo A, Suleiman A. Climate change and infant nutrition: Estimates of greenhouse gas emissions from milk formula sold in selected Asia Pacific Countries: Asia Pacific Journal of Human Lactation 2012. May;37(2):314--22. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33586512/> <https://www.bpni.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Green-Feeding-RC-Carbon-Footprint-10-Asian-Countries.pdf>

Powdered Baby Formula Sold in North America: Assessing the Environmental Impact, July 2020 Karin Cadwell ¹, Anna Blair ¹, Cindy Turner-Maffej ¹, Maret Gabel ¹, Kaisa Brimdyr ¹ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32758012/>

[vii] How companies exploit the COVID-19 crisis. <http://www.babymilkaction.org/archives/24341>

[viii] *Old Tricks, New Opportunities: How Companies Violate the International Code of Marketing of Breast-Milk Substitutes and Undermine Maternal and Child Health during the COVID-19 Pandemic* <https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/18/5/2381/htm>

[ix] *Infant feeding and the energy transition: A comparison between decarbonising breastmilk substitutes with renewable gas and achieving the global nutrition target for breastfeeding*, Aife Long et al <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2021.129280> "...decarbonising the industrial processing of breast-milk substitutes can increase social license for these products, potentially undermining breastfeeding... A key recommendation is to position breastfeeding support as both a public health and a climate justice issue that is relevant for a just transition."

[x] *Breastfeeding in India is disrupted as mothers and babies are separated in the pandemic* BMJ 2020; 370 doi: <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m3316> (Published 25 August 2020) Cite this as: BMJ 2020;370:m3316

[xi] *A future for the world's children? A WHO–UNICEF–Lancet Commission* [www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(19\)32540-1/fulltext](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(19)32540-1/fulltext)

[xii] <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-children>

[xiii] Commercially manufactured formulas and complementary foods are ultra-processed products which contain no live cells and provide no such protection against disease or boost to the immune system. They may become contaminated during the production process by pathogenic bacteria.

[xiv] *Governments must take the lead on public health policies: Safer labelling for baby drinks and foods urgently needed* www.babymilkaction.org/archives/30855 *CODEX: Exporting countries put trade before the health of the planet and children* <http://www.babymilkaction.org/archives/23295> Codex seems oblivious to the harm it causes when green-lighting the global trade of unnecessary, plastic wrapped, denatured, ultra-processed products that will stay on shelves for two years – many bearing deceptive claims – such as 'added nutrients'. According to a study by Dr Julie Smith, of the Australian National University, "The most alarming finding in our latest research is a very large proportion of greenhouse gas emission impact is associated with the so-called growing up milks or toddler formula ... In China, nearly half of the sales of milk formula is toddler formula."

[xv] Breastfeeding is lifesaving in emergencies and babies are at greatest risk of water-related diseases, with diarrhoeal disease the second biggest killer of under-fives. Breastfeeding is resilient and provides food, care and immune support, and protection from the worst of emergency conditions

[xvi] Ecocide definition: destruction of the natural environment by deliberate or negligent human action. Stop Ecocide is working to make Ecocide a crime. <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCCYolf880oaM419JO8XUHEA> For more visit: www.stopecocide.earth

[Green Feeding – action on climate change
https://www.ibfan.org/environmental-awareness/](https://www.ibfan.org/environmental-awareness/)