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Ethiopia Marked World Breastfeeding Week for the First Time



Dr. Belaynesh Yifru FMOH Disease Promotion and Prevention Expert, Ted Chaiban UNICEF Representative, Dr. Kebede Worku State Minister FMOH, Dr. Fatoumata Nafu-Traoré WHO Representative [Panelists left to right]

The Ethiopian Federal Ministry of Health (FMOH), UNICEF and other partners joined hands on 05 August 2009 with over 120 countries worldwide to mark World Breastfeeding Week (1- 7 August 2009). On the occasion it was disclosed that this is the first time for Ethiopia to mark this important worldwide event. "Ethiopia is joining the global commemoration of World Breastfeeding Week in recognition of the critical role played by exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life for child survival and ending hunger and poverty," said H.E. Dr. Kebede Worku, State Minister of Health.

The global theme of World Breastfeeding this year is "Breastfeeding – A vital Emergency Response – Are you ready?" drawing attention to the need for active protection and support of breastfeeding before and during emergencies. It highlights the need to protect, promote and support breastfeeding in emergencies for infant and young child survival, health and development.

Dr. Fatoumata Nafu-Traoré, WHO Representative in Ethiopia, underscored that Malnutrition is responsible, directly or indirectly for about one third of deaths among children under five. "Well above two thirds of these deaths, often associated with inappropriate feeding practices, occur during the first year of life" she said. "Breast milk is the safest, most natural and nutritious food that a mother can provide her baby. Exclusive breastfeeding for six months, initiated within the first hour after birth, is the best start to life that any child can receive.

According to Dr. Fatoumata breastfeeding is the best way to provide newborns with the nutrients they need. "WHO recommends that infants start breastfeeding within one hour of life, are exclusively breastfed for six

months, with timely initiation of adequate, safe and properly fed complementary foods while continuing breastfeeding for up to two years of age or beyond" Dr. Fatoumata added.

Mr. Ted on his part noted that "Children who are exclusively breastfed from birth to six months, and continuously up to two years with appropriate complimentary foods, grow up to be healthier, smarter and more productive than those who aren't."

"The National Nutrition Strategy and its' five year program and the Infant Young Child Feeding strategy are part of the Government's commitment to improve infant young child feeding practices, the most out-



State Minister Dr. Kebede Worku handing over UNICEF printed 40,000 umbrellas conveying breastfeeding messages to Health Extension Workers as part of the celebrations to spread the word throughout rural Ethiopia.



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standing being breastfeeding,” said H.E Dr. Kebede Worku. “Health Extension Workers are supporting mothers and families in their kebeles to exclusively breastfeed their children for the first six months, initiate breastfeeding within an hour so that the babies benefit from the highly nutritious first milk known as colostrum.”

Breastfeeding is almost universally practiced in Ethiopia; however appropriate breastfeeding practices are not always followed. About one third of babies do not receive breastfeeding within the first hour of birth and only half are exclusively breastfed for 6 months. Exclusive breastfeeding tops the table of life-saving interventions for newborns. Babies who do not exclusively breastfeed are six times more likely to die from diarrhea or respiratory infections than babies who do. During the first 6 months, complementary liquids and food given to infants can expose them to infectious diseases, negatively impacting their growth and development.

Health extension workers from Oromia and Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples Region gave testimony at the launching event on how they are supporting mothers and families optimize breastfeeding. They highlighted cultural misconceptions and malpractices regarding breastfeeding such as giving goat milk and other traditional herbs before giving breast milk to the baby thinking that breast milk is heavy to swallow and gives the baby indigestion.

“Through our advocacy work at the community level we are seeing changes in these traditional practices,” said Yewibdar Ketema, health extension worker from Fentale District in Oromia. “Mothers are increasingly adopting exclusive breastfeeding from birth as their preferred method of infant feeding. We need to keep up with this work to reach everyone.”

On the occasion it was announced that 40,000 umbrellas conveying messages on breastfeeding are also being distributed to Health Extension Workers and their supervisors as part of the celebrations to spread the word throughout rural Ethiopia. Similarly, renowned Ethiopian singer and mother of two, Zeritu Kebede, was contributed to the celebrations through public service announcements and billboards promoting exclusive breastfeeding.

World Breastfeeding Week was first celebrated in 1992 and is now observed in over 120 countries. The aim is to promote exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life. In Ethiopia, FMOH, UNICEF, WHO, and other partners are emphasizing the importance of early initiation of breastfeeding through different media advocacy events including radio and TV spots, billboards, flyers, SMS messages and a televised panel discussion throughout the Breastfeeding Week. The event was organized by UNICEF.



Official with the Health Extension Workers