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Save the Children Philippines urges exclusive breastfeeding for 6 months amid rising cases of stunting and malnutrition among children

Save the Children Philippines urged mothers to use breastmilk exclusively for the first six months to ease the impact of soaring food prices and ensure health of babies.

Atty. Albert Muyot, CEO of Save the Children Philippines said breastfeeding decreases financial burden of families hurting from increase in food prices including infant formula.

“Inflation hits the poorest families and children face the risk of malnutrition and stunting,” said Muyot. The first defense of poor mothers is to breastfeed their babies exclusively in the first hour after birth up to six months, extending to two years.

He said the last eight months have been difficult for the country’s more than 8 million food poor families (PSA, 2017) due to soaring prices of food commodities.

There are more than 3.3 Million children who are stunted and 800,000 more are malnourished, according to Save the Children Philippines.

Save the Children Philippines, in a research study titled: Barriers to Breastfeeding in the Philippines showed a slight increase in the number of mothers who continue to breastfeed at 60 per cent in 2017 compared to 51 per cent in 2013 based on the 2018 National Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) of the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA).

“There is poor enforcement of the Milk Code, a law the requires exclusive breastfeeding for babies up to six months due to strong influence of multinational Milk Companies in the country’s health care system,” said Muyot.

Milk companies spend \$100 Million (P53.6 Billion at 53.70 to US\$1) on marketing and promotions of infant formula. Such spending translates into \$260 Million (P13.9 Billion at 53.70 to US\$1) worth of annual profits from Filipino families.

The 75-page research study shows strong advertising campaigns of Milk companies that discourage mothers to breastfeed thinking that infant formula can equal the nutrients from breastmilk.

In the last three decades, there were blatant violations of Milk Code committed by manufacturers of milk formula.

Under the Milk Code, milk companies are prohibited to sponsor professional trainings and publications of health clinic materials such as baby book.

“But the practice of full sponsorship of doctors and midwives training and seminars continues,” said Muyot.

Since doctors are highly regarded by Filipinos and listen to recommendations, milk companies build strong doctor-patient/parent relationships through sponsored seminars and giveaway samples.

“Doctors and midwives should be partners in building a society where infants achieve optimum growth and development through exclusive breastfeeding,” Muyot said.

Save the Children Philippines is pushing for the passage of the "First 1,000 Days" bill, now awaiting signature of President Rodrigo Duterte.

The bill promotes optimal infant and young child feeding practices. These practices include the early initiation of breastfeeding on the first hour after birth, exclusive breastfeeding during the first six months, complementary feeding starting at 6 months with continued breastfeeding, and extended breastfeeding for more than two years.

Exclusive breastfeeding of up to 6 months can prevent 1.3 million deaths of children under 5 years, according to a global study of UNICEF.

“Companies of breastmilk substitutes are prohibited by law to advertise their products, or hand- out gifts or samples to lactating mothers,” the study said.

The research study showed that Milk companies advertise infant formula products containing breakthrough nutrients that are only found in breastmilk.

These include HMO or human milk oligosaccharides; DHA or docosahexanoic acid and ARA or arachidonic acid that are all essential fatty acids found in breastmilk.

“We trust that our esteemed physicians and health professionals will not be instruments of deception when it comes to telling mothers that only breastmilk contains the nutrients that can save lives of their children from various diseases and malnutrition,” said Muyot.

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