

**A letter from UNICEF Executive Director Anthony Lake
on the occasion of World Breastfeeding Week 2014**

Giving all children the best start in life begins with breastfeeding – one of the simplest, smartest, and most cost-effective ways we have of supporting healthier children, stronger families, and sustainable growth.

World Breastfeeding Week highlights the vital role breastfeeding plays in the lives of children and the critical importance of promoting the value of breastfeeding globally, nationally, and at the community level. The theme of this year's celebration, "Breastfeeding: A Winning Goal – for Life!" underscores the crucial link between breastfeeding and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

This linkage is especially clear when it comes to achieving MDG 4 – decreasing child mortality. Since 1990, the number of children under the age of 5 dying from preventable causes declined by a remarkable 47%. But nearly 7 million young children still die every year – and over 40% of those children are newborns.

Immediate breastfeeding within the first hour of birth could prevent 1 in 5 of these unnecessary deaths. That's more than 500,000 children every year. More than 1,500 children every day. And breastfeeding does more than help children survive; it helps them to thrive, with benefits that last a lifetime. It is the foundation of good nutrition, reducing the risk of malnourishment in early childhood and the risk of obesity later in life. By supporting nutrition and strengthening the bond between mother and child, breastfeeding also supports healthy brain development. This, in turn, may help prevent stunting -- a global tragedy that affects millions of children, undermining both their physical and cognitive development and the future health of their societies.

Knowing all this, it is hard to believe that fewer than half of the world's newborns benefit from breastfeeding. Even fewer are exclusively breastfed for the first six months. To shift this trend, we need to change social practices, working first and foremost with communities and families to encourage more mothers to breastfeed. And we must work across sectors -- nutrition, maternal, newborn and child health, early childhood development, and communication for development – to develop a more integrated approach, thus increasing the effectiveness of all our interventions to promote breastfeeding.

Global momentum to support breastfeeding is growing, through major international advocacy efforts such as A Promise Renewed, to reduce preventable child mortality, and the Scaling Up Nutrition Movement (SUN), to reduce stunting. And the recent Global Newborn Action plan includes increasing breastfeeding counselling and support as an essential part of community maternal and newborn care programmes.

This World Breastfeeding Week comes on the heels of the World Cup – which united millions in the spirit of sport. Let's come together again in the spirit of progress and score for children by making breastfeeding a global priority – to help give every child the best possible start in life.



Anthony Lake
UNICEF Executive Director