



Helen Keller  
INTERNATIONAL



## CAMBODIAN STORE OWNERS INFLUENCED BY PROMOTION OF BREAST-MILK SUBSTITUTES:

Research Findings and Recommendations for Policymakers

*A recent survey found that **43% of mothers in Phnom Penh fed their children under 6 months of age breast-milk substitutes.** The involved ministries, institutions, development partners, civil society, and the private sector must continue their joint efforts on an educational campaign to make them aware that **exclusive breastfeeding during the first six months is the best option** rather than breast-milk substitutes.”*

*–Prime Minister Hun Sen, Cambodia National Nutrition Day 2014*

## **CAMBODIAN MOTHERS INFLUENCED BY PROMOTION OF BREAST-MILK SUBSTITUTES:**

### *Research Findings and Recommendations for Policymakers*

**T**his brief summarizes research on the illegal promotion of breast-milk substitutes in Cambodia and proposes actions to improve the nutrition, health, and survival of Cambodian children. The research found that ten years following the establishment of Cambodia's Sub-Decree 133 on Marketing of Products for Infant and Young Child Feeding, manufacturers and distributors of breast-milk substitutes continue to promote them illegally, leading to an increase in the use of these products. The brief recommends ways to protect and promote breastfeeding in Cambodia, including enforcing Sub-Decree 133 and encouraging those who influence mothers and their families on breastfeeding choices, such as store owners, not to promote breast-milk substitutes instead of breast feeding.

### **SUB-OPTIMAL BREASTFEEDING POSES AN ECONOMIC AND NUTRITIONAL BURDEN IN CAMBODIA**

***“The economic losses due to sub-optimal breastfeeding cost  
Cambodia approximately 24 million USD per year.”***

***–UNICEF and World Food Program***

Cambodia has made significant progress in increasing exclusive breastfeeding rates. In 2000, only 11% of Cambodian infants aged 0–6 months were exclusively breastfed. This proportion increased to 60% by 2005 and to 74% by 2010.<sup>i</sup>

However, preliminary results from the Cambodia Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) 2014 reveal a worrisome reverse trend– exclusive breastfeeding during the first six months declined to 65%.<sup>ii</sup> While the full report is not yet available, the last DHS already demonstrated that the use of breast-milk substitutes, which are nutritionally inferior to mothers' breast milk, nearly doubled among children aged 6-24 months from 2000 to 2010 (4.8% to 9.3%).<sup>iii</sup>

Decreases in breastfeeding rates have financial implications for Cambodia. A recent analysis from UNICEF and WFP showed the economic losses due to sub-optimal breastfeeding cost Cambodia about 24 million USD per year.<sup>iv</sup>

While child mortality in Cambodia has dropped precipitously in the past decade, from 118 deaths per 1,000 live births in 1990 to 38 in 2010, malnutrition continues to pose a significant health burden. The 2014 Cambodia DHS reports that 23% of Cambodian children under five are underweight, 32% are stunted, and 10% are wasted.<sup>v</sup>

## **POLICIES TO IMPROVE CHILD NUTRITION AND PROMOTE BREASTFEEDING IN CAMBODIA EXIST, BUT ARE NOT ALWAYS ENFORCED**

*“Any manufacturer and distributor shall not, without prior permission from the Ministry of Health, promote infant and young child feeding products as stated in this Sub-decree by him or herself, or by his or her representative, at a point of sale, in a hospital, health center or elsewhere.”*

*–Article 13 of Cambodia’s Sub-Decree 133 on Marketing of Products for Infant and Young Child Feeding<sup>VI</sup>*

Cambodia has taken steps to regulate manufacturers’ advertising of breast-milk substitutes, and these laws build on and in some cases exceed international standards on regulating marketing of these products (See Box). In 2005, the Government of Cambodia issued the Sub-Decree 133 on Marketing of Products for Infant and Young Child Feeding to restrict the promotion of breast-milk substitutes and to set strict guidelines for the production of any information, education, or other materials related to infant feeding.

According to the Sub-Decree, manufacturers and distributors are not allowed to promote any breast-milk substitutes, including advertising or providing discounts, samples or gifts to mothers, distributors, or health care workers. (Article 13, quoted above) All information developed to accompany breast-milk substitutes must emphasize the superiority of breastfeeding. It must explain how to initiate and sustain breastfeeding, and reference the World Health Organization’s recommendations to breastfeed exclusively for six months and continue until the child is two years of age. Information must also be written in Khmer. (Article 6)

### **POLICIES TO IMPROVE CHILD NUTRITION AND PROMOTE BREASTFEEDING IN CAMBODIA**

- Cambodia Ministry of Health, National Maternal and Child Health Center and National Nutrition Program National Nutrition Strategy (2009-2015)
- MOH/NMCHC/NNP Fast Track Road Map for Improving Nutrition (2014-2020)
- National Policy on Infant and Young Child Feeding (2008)
- Cambodian Millennium Development Goals (2003)
- Government’s Rectangular Strategy (2013)
- National Strategic Development Plan (2014-2018)
- National Strategy for Food Security and Nutrition (2014-2018)
- Sub-Decree 133: Marketing of Products for Infant and Young Child Feeding (2005)
- Joint Prakas 061: Marketing of Products for Infant and Young Child Feeding (2007)
- World Health Organization International Code of Marketing of Breast-Milk Substitutes (1981)





*“86% of mothers with children less than two years of age in Phnom Penh had read, seen, or heard a promotion for a breast-milk substitute. 24% of these mothers reported observing promotions for breast-milk substitutes in stores.”*

*–Helen Keller International study, 2014*

Despite this clear policy issued by the Royal Government of Cambodia and Ministry of Health, a 2014 survey by Helen Keller International (HKI) found that 86% of mothers with children less than two years of age in Phnom Penh had read, seen, or heard a promotion for breast-milk substitutes (89% saw commercials on television and 12% saw advertisements in newspapers or magazines).<sup>vii</sup> 24% of mothers with children less than two years of age reported observing promotions for breast-milk substitutes in stores. HKI research shows that use of breast-milk substitutes among new mothers in Phnom Penh is significant: 43% of mothers with infants 0-5 months old, 40% of mothers with infants 6-11 months old, 14% of mothers with infants 12-17 months old, and 34% of mothers with children 18-23 months old.<sup>viii</sup>

## **RESEARCH ON STORE OWNERS' PERCEPTIONS AND RESPONSES TO PROMOTION OF BREAST-MILK SUBSTITUTES**

To follow up on these findings, HKI's Assessment and Research on Child Feeding (ARCH) project conducted in-depth interviews with eight owners of stores that sell breast-milk substitutes in Phnom Penh (For more on research methods, see HKI ARCH Methodology Brief: In-Depth Interviews with Store Owners).

The purpose of the interviews was to 1) identify promotion methods for breast-milk substitutes and the impact on sales, 2) understand store owners' relationships with the manufacturers and interactions with the mothers, 3) determine the types of incentives and degree of impact on store owners (to promote products) and customers (to buy products), and 4) uncover perceptions of breastfeeding and awareness of Cambodian laws on promotion.

The study also included focus group discussions with mothers who use and do not use breast-milk substitutes (See separate brief and methodology paper).

The research, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, aims to inform programs to improve child health and nutrition.

## RESEARCH RESULTS:

### STORE OWNERS REPORT PLAYING A PASSIVE ROLE IN PROMOTION

*“Normally, they do not allow the store owners to do it (promotion) because it is their job. They mostly send their staff to standby for sale and advertising.”*

*–Store Owner*

The store owners reported they generally allowed the manufacturers to do the promotion of the breast-milk products. The manufacturers often contacted the store owners to persuade them to buy the breast-milk substitutes. Then, the manufacturers handled promotion, hanging up posters and setting up booths in front of the store staffed by their own sales professionals.

### STORE OWNERS REPORTED THAT SELLING BREAST-MILK SUBSTITUTES DID NOT GIVE THEM LARGE PROFITS COMPARED TO OTHER ITEMS

*“The company wants us to sell with higher price. However, I never listen to them. If it is expensive, no one will buy. I set the price with little profit.”*

*– Store Owner*

Many store owners reported that they didn't make a profit on sales of breast-milk substitutes. Their main reason for selling the products was because customers demand them and they perceive them as a “daily food” that customers need on a regular basis. Many of them believe that the customers come into their store to buy breast-milk substitutes, but then buy other products, thereby improving their profits through sales of other items.

Many store owners reported they felt their reputation with customers was more important than the profits from the breast-milk substitutes. So, they sold the breast-milk substitutes to meet customer demand rather than to make profit.

## **MANUFACTURERS PROVIDE INCENTIVES TO STORE OWNERS**

*“The rewards include motorbikes, refrigerators, fans and stoves.”*

*–Store Owner*

Store owners reported receiving offers of multiple types of incentives to sell breast-milk substitutes: cash, appliances, jewelry, travel, lucky draws, and meals. Some reported knowing this was not appropriate, but many appeared to be unaware that these incentives are illegal.

Because the profits on breast-milk substitutes are considered so low, the incentives are reportedly a major reason for the store owners to sell the breast-milk substitutes.

## **STORE OWNERS PERCEIVE MULTIPLE BENEFITS OF BREAST-MILK SUBSTITUTES, NOT ALWAYS BASED ON FACTS**

*“The main advantage of them is, they are used to replace mother’s breast milk. It helps babies’ eyes and the flavor can be changed when the baby’s sick of the old one ... it helps to improve the babies’ intelligence and make them stronger. The infant formula has something that mother’s breast milk does not have.”*

*–Store Owner*

The store owners reported many benefits of breast-milk substitutes, including their appeal as foreign products, the perception that they promote growth and prevent illness, and that they could make children clever. Many reported believing that breastfeeding beyond six months of age was impractical. The majority of store owners believe the packaging claims on breast-milk substitutes are believable.

## **SOME STORE OWNERS AWARE OF SUB-DECREE 133, BUT MANY BELIEVE ADHERENCE NOT THEIR RESPONSIBILITY**

*“I do not know about the purpose of the Law. All I know is that they can only sell to or advertise for children that are two years old or older. I do not know why they do that too.”*

*–Store Owner*

Store owners were not universally aware of Sub-Decree 133, but those who knew of it didn’t think it was their responsibility to adhere to the law. Some reported believing that the manufacturers were responsible for following the Ministry of Health guidance on promoting their products.

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Enforce Sub-Decree 133 and Joint Prakas 061 on Marketing of Products for Infant and Young Child Feeding
  - Put in place a government-led monitoring system to identify violations as they occur and a strong enforcement mechanism to hold manufacturers accountable for violations
  - Prevent breast-milk substitute manufacturers from promoting sales in stores through displays, discounts, putting sales professionals in stores, or other methods
  - Prevent manufacturers from providing free samples of breast-milk substitutes in stores
  - Prevent manufacturers from distributing incentives to store owners to get them to sell more breast-milk substitutes
  - Increase awareness on Sub-Decree 133 and Joint Prakas 061 among personnel from relevant institutions
  - Enforce rules about using correct nutritional information and providing information in Khmer
- Work with store owners to dissuade them from using unapproved promotional materials
  - Develop informational leaflets branded with Oversight Board for Sub-Decree 133 to persuade store owners that promotions are not only illegal but may lead customers to make poor choices regarding their children's health
  - Emphasize the cost-effectiveness of breastfeeding for valued customers
- Increase Ministry of Health education of store owners on the value of breastfeeding and the laws against promoting breast-milk substitutes



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All infographics courtesy of 1000 Days, [www.thousanddays.org](http://www.thousanddays.org)

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