

## WORLD BREASTFEEDING WEEK

SAARC SECRETARIAT; 1000 hrs to 1230 hrs; 01 August 2022

### REMARKS BY H. E. MR. ESALA RUWAN WEERAKOON, SECRETARY GENERAL OF SAARC

Mr. George Laryea-Adjei, Regional Director, UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia;  
Deputy Regional Director of UNICEF ROSA, Ms. Noala Skinner;  
Dr. Sangeeta Mishra, Chief Specialist, Ministry of Health and Population;  
Dr. Rohana Haththotuwa, President, South Asian Federation of Obstetrics and Gynaecology;  
Dr. Sapna Desai, Evidence Consortium on Women's Groups South Asia,  
Dr. Kalpana Subedi, Chief, Consultant Paediatrician, Paropakar Maternity and Women's  
Hospital;  
Colleagues from the SAARC Secretariat and UNICEF ROSA;  
Ladies and Gentlemen;

A very good morning!

It is an honour and a privilege for me to address the distinguished audience present this morning.

I extend a very warm welcome to all of you to this event to celebrate the "World Breastfeeding Week", dedicated to the theme, "Narrowing the Opportunity Gaps to Protect, Promote and Support Optimal Breastfeeding in South Asia".

UNICEF has been an active partner of SAARC and we are happy to host this event at the SAARC Secretariat. I also recall the event we jointly organized at the SAARC Secretariat on 09 December last year to commemorate UNICEF's 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary.

I am grateful to Mr. George Laryea-Adjei, the distinguished Regional Director of UNICEF ROSA, for his insightful remarks introducing this event and its theme to us. The curtain-raiser film, "Narrowing the Opportunity Gaps", that we watched this morning brings to the fore issues of immense concern to all of us. I congratulate UNICEF ROSA for preparing a comprehensive concept paper highlighting the theme of this event.

I thank the eminent panelists for joining us this morning. We look forward to benefitting from their erudite presentations.

Respected Panelists,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As you are aware, we celebrate the World Breastfeeding Week every year to highlight the importance of breastfeeding to infants, which protects them against many childhood illnesses. Breastfeeding also acts as a child's "first vaccine." Initiation of breastfeeding within the first hour of birth, followed by exclusive breastfeeding for six months and continued breastfeeding for up to two years or beyond offers a powerful line of defense against all forms of child malnutrition, including wasting, stunting, and obesity. It is widely acknowledged that children's lives can be

saved by protecting, encouraging, and supporting breastfeeding than by any other preventive measures.

Survey data shows that six in ten infants born in South Asia do not receive nursing during the first hour of life; four in ten do not receive breastfeeding exclusively for the first six months of life; and two out of ten miss out on the benefits of continued breastfeeding till two years of age.

Against this backdrop, the annual World Breastfeeding Week is a crucial reminder to step up our efforts to ensure that breastfeeding is safeguarded, encouraged, and supported. In order to ensure that the child is nursed as effectively as possible for the first two years of life, this year's World Breastfeeding Week aims to connect many actors from health, home, and workplace in promoting breastfeeding. Health professionals such as midwives, obstetricians, gynaecologists, and paediatricians happen to be the most crucial players in promoting breastfeeding. We greatly appreciate the presence of Dr. Rohana Haththotuwa, President of the South Asian Federation of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, who is here with us from Sri Lanka. We also acknowledge and appreciate the presence of Dr. Sapna Desai, who is here with us from India.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Breastfeeding plays an important role in managing the burden of malnutrition. Breastfeeding provides food security and reduces inequalities. We must strengthen the capacity of support systems in order to achieve the global nutrition targets of 2025.

Our goal is to develop collaboration strategies and Conflict of Interest safeguards. We must aim to support the Warm Chain by coordinating training, technical support, and research to improve knowledge and skills, and promote the Warm Chain approach by highlighting good examples of linkages.

We need to understand that antenatal and postnatal counseling is more effective than those that only target one phase. We need to support maternity leave policies as it will help to increase exclusive breastfeeding.

To support breastfeeding more effectively, strict legal procedures must be implemented as per the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes and pertinent to the World Health Assembly resolutions. We should also implement policies for family leave and nursing at work, building on ILO's recommendations for maternity protection as a minimum standard, as well as including measures for the informal sector.

To support continued breastfeeding up to two years of age or beyond, we must implement policies that are in line with the "Guidance on Ending the Inappropriate Promotion of Foods for Infants and Young Children" to forbid the inappropriate promotion of commercially produced foods or beverages that are marketed as being appropriate for children under the age of three. Child nutrition programmes should include early childhood development activities that stimulate and support responsive feeding. We need a clear understanding of the importance of adequate nutrition in early life for future success in changing this narrative and leading to more funding for infant and young child nutrition.

In conclusion, I wish to once again thank UNICEF ROSA for organizing this event and commend the exemplary role played by UNICEF. We stand together with UNICEF to address the inequalities that stand in the way of sustainable development. Together, we participate in this Warm Chain campaign to ensure breastfeeding-friendly healthcare facilities, supportive communities, and workplaces through education and the development of the existing systems.

I thank you.

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