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Joint statement on breast milk substitutes in Cambodia

A recent study on the economic cost of malnutrition in Cambodia highlighted that approximately 1,387 of child deaths less than 6 months old every year are a consequence of sub-optimal breastfeeding behaviors – this is about 10% of all deaths of children less than 6 months old.

Despite Cambodia's significant progress in reducing child mortality since 2000, up to 40% of children in Cambodia are still undernourished and the growing promotion and use of breast milk substitutes in Cambodia is of increasing concern. The use of infant formula and other breast milk substitutes may not only prevent further progress on malnutrition, but could reverse progress already made through exclusive and continued breastfeeding rates (which increased from 11% to 74% between 2000 and 2010). This may then threaten progress made in reducing child mortality.

Developing economies like Cambodia are a significant source of income growth for the breast milk substitute industry, and the influence of foreign breast milk substitute companies is growing. Preliminary findings of research undertaken in Phnom Penh indicate that there are a staggering 113 different breast milk substitutes available on the market. Increasing availability has been accompanied by an increase in promotions and marketing that can undermine good nutritional information and practices. A recent survey of mothers with children under 2 showed that 86% had seen, heard or read commercial promotions for breast milk substitutes since their child was born.

A secondary analysis of the 2010 Cambodia Demographic and Health Survey showed that the use of breast milk substitute in urban areas and within private health facilities is also growing. One in five children in the urban or the wealthiest quintile are fed with breast milk substitutes, and 1 out of 4 women delivering in a private clinic use infant formula – this is 3 times more than women delivering in the public sector. It is vital that Cambodian families are better informed that breast milk is the best option for a child's optimal nutrition.

Recent surveys from civil society reveal that few companies, if any, follow the existing Cambodian legislation that was designed to protect the nutrition of newborn, infants and young children. Sub-Decree 133 (2005) protects and promotes breastfeeding by prohibiting commercial misinformation about breast milk substitutes. It is a thorough and well written regulatory framework that implements the *International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes* (adopted by the World Health Assembly in 1981) and is pioneering in the promotion of good infant and young child nutrition in Cambodia. Despite relevant government ministries endorsing the legislation and approving a Joint Prakas (No. 061 in 2007) for its strong enforcement, it is widely disregarded by many companies.

Breast milk substitute products only partially follow the labeling requirements, with some requirements consistently disregarded. This adds to poor understanding and misinformation about the best infant and young child feeding practices, and creates a genuine threat to child nutrition across the Kingdom. In addition to labeling violations, some companies adopt marketing practices that are explicitly banned in Sub-

