



Photo: WHO/Ismael Taxta

Mogadishu, 3 August 2021 – While marking World Breastfeeding Week this year, the Federal Ministry of Health in Somalia, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and World Health Organization (WHO) called for a concerted effort to create an enabling environment for Somali mothers to breastfeed their babies to improve their health, nutritional status and overall well-being.

“We are calling on all actors from household level through community leadership up to policy-makers and development partners to actively take breastfeeding as everyone’s responsibility,” said Dr Abdinasir Mukhtar Ibrahim, the Director General, Somalia’s Federal Minister of Health and Human Services. “Together, through commitment, concerted action and collaboration, we can build strong collaborative systems for provision of appropriate and skilled breastfeeding counselling to mothers and ensure that our children are fed in the appropriate way for a healthy nation.”

This call to action comes as Somalia witnesses an increase in child malnutrition, including reduction in infant and young child feeding practices, due to steep declines in household incomes among other challenges posed by shocks such as drought, flooding and the COVID-19 pandemic. The advice is also in line with the global theme for the week: ‘Protect Breastfeeding: A Shared Responsibility.’

The Federal Ministry of Health, WHO and UNICEF recommend early initiation of breastfeeding within the first hour of birth, feeding the child only breast milk for the first 6 months (exclusive breastfeeding), and continuing to breastfeed for up to 24 months or beyond, with the introduction of nutritionally adequate and safe complementary (solid) foods at 6 months.

“Breastfeeding provides children the best start in life,” said Nejmudin Bilal, Acting UNICEF Representative in Somalia. “It is a baby’s best source of nutrition, bolstering brain development with lifelong benefits. Early initiation of breastfeeding offers a powerful line of defense against all forms of childhood malnutrition including wasting.”

During World Breastfeeding Week, the Federal Ministry of Health will launch breastfeeding awareness campaigns throughout the country and skilled breastfeeding counselling will be provided in a variety of settings, including health facilities and clinics and through home visits by community health workers. The campaign will also stress that it is still safe to breastfeed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Even in the context of COVID-19, WHO recommends that mothers with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 should be encouraged to initiate and continue breastfeeding, while implementing appropriate hygiene measures, such as wearing a medical mask, if available, to reduce the chances of droplets with COVID-19 being spread to her infant. The benefits of breastfeeding substantially outweigh the potential risks of COVID-19 transmission,” said Dr Mamunur Malik, WHO Representative to Somalia. “So far, active COVID-19 (virus that can cause infection) has not been detected in breast milk of any mother with confirmed/suspected COVID-19.”

In addition, as part of the Federal Ministry of Health’s national nutrition strategy 2020-2025, countrywide efforts will be scaled up with the primary goal to increase the number of babies aged 0-6 months old who are exclusively breastfed to above 50% by 2025. According to the latest government data, only 34% of babies under 6 months are exclusive breastfeeding.

World Breastfeeding Week in Somalia will focus on how breastfeeding contributes to the survival, health and well-being of all, and the imperative to protect breastfeeding worldwide. The 2021 theme is: Protect Breastfeeding: A Shared Responsibility and it is aligned with thematic area 2 of the World Breast Feeding Week/SDGs 2030 campaign which highlights the links between breastfeeding and survival, health and well-being of women, children and nations.

Improving breastfeeding rates and practices requires action on the part of multiple actors including governments, health care institutions, health care workers and businesses. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Federal Ministry of Health will continue to ensure that access to these essential services is not disrupted and that families continue to receive the breastfeeding counselling they need.

The importance of breastfeeding is mentioned in the Holy Quran 233rd verse of Sura Al-Baqarah in which it is stated that: "mothers [should] breastfeed their children for a total of two years".

“Breastfeeding must be considered a public health issue that requires supportive interventions at all levels. Together, we can ensure that every mother has access to skilled breastfeeding counselling, empowering her to give her baby the best possible start in life,” added the Director General.

## Note to editors

In 2018, a [World Health Assembly](#) resolution endorsed World Breastfeeding Week as an important breastfeeding promotion strategy.

- The theme for World Breastfeeding Week in 2021 is aligned with [thematic area 2](#) of the [WBW-SDG 2030 campaign](#) which highlights the links between breastfeeding and survival, health and well-being of women, children and nations.

- The Federal Minister of Health and Human Services, UNICEF and partners will continue advocating for signing and full implementation of the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes and subsequent WHA resolutions (the Code).

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