



UNITED NATIONS IN THE PHILIPPINES
STATEMENT ON THE IMPORTANCE OF “UNANG YAKAP” AND BREASTFEEDING
AMID COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and World Food Programme (WFP) call on everyone involved in the COVID-19 response to emphasize that the most effective way to save newborn lives is still through the practice of Essential Intrapartum and Newborn Care (EINC, or “Unang Yakap”) and the promotion and protection of breastfeeding while strictly following precautions for infection prevention and control.

The estimated 142,000 babies to be born in the country this month need to be with their mothers and start breastfeeding within the first hour of birth. Placing babies in immediate skin-to-skin contact with their mothers keeps babies warm, prevents exposure to diseases, and helps establish breastfeeding. Babies who drink only their mother’s breastmilk receive antibodies from their mothers, protecting them from potentially deadly infections like pneumonia, diarrhoea and sepsis. In fact, Unang Yakap and exclusive breastfeeding are vital to Infection Prevention and Control (IPC) measures. With proper IPC, protection from infection becomes stronger, especially in challenging circumstances and in emergencies.

UNICEF, WHO, UNFPA, and WFP prioritize the protection, promotion and support of breastfeeding as a life-saving measure for babies everywhere, especially during emergencies, including the COVID-19 outbreak.

As with all confirmed or suspected COVID-19 cases, symptomatic mothers who are breastfeeding or practicing skin-to-skin contact or kangaroo mother care should observe hand hygiene and basic IPC measures. When performing skin-to-skin contact, breastfeeding, and any activities involving touching or being close to the baby, infected mothers must use a medical mask, wash their hands properly before and after contact with the child, and routinely clean and disinfect surfaces which the mother has touched.

Every mother needs to be with her baby so she can immediately breastfeed and provide her baby the optimum nutrition to protect him or her from potential deadly infections. We must ensure that the mother receives the right support and guidance on proper infection and prevention control measures.

During emergency situations, the rates of disease and death among babies and children are higher than for any other age group. The younger the child, the higher the risk, leaving babies

under six months most vulnerable. Babies who drink formula from an unsterile bottle or teat, or made with unclean water, can become very sick with diarrhoea and die within a few hours. Mortality is particularly high when there is a prevalence of communicable diseases and diarrhoea combined with high rates of undernutrition.

Appropriate infant and young child feeding - both breastfeeding and complementary feeding - and care are fundamental in preventing malnutrition and mortality among infants and young children. The practice of IPC does not have to conflict with EINC and breastfeeding. In fact, EINC and breastfeeding protect against infection as long as mothers observe the basic steps to prevent the spread of coronavirus and other pathogens.

Maternal, Infant and Young Child Feeding counselling, basic psychosocial support, and practical feeding support should be provided to all pregnant women and mothers with infants and young children, whether they or their infants and young children have suspected or confirmed COVID-19. In addition, all pregnant mothers should have access to a safe birth, antenatal and postnatal care including postpartum family planning, and screening tests according to national guidelines, especially in areas with high numbers of COVID-19 confirmed cases where access to services for pregnant women, women in labour and delivery, and lactating women is negatively impacted.

The UN Agencies strongly urge the Department of Health, public health and clinical experts, professional societies, and all involved in guidelines and policy development, funding, planning, and implementing the emergency response in the Philippines to avoid unnecessary illness and death by ensuring that EINC and breastfeeding are not sacrificed while preventing the spread of infection. Community leaders are called upon to practice IPC in all settings and recognize the benefits of Unang Yakap and breastfeeding.

Further, the UN Agencies call on community leaders to create or strengthen networks for mothers to receive safe delivery care, and to monitor and report any donations by all breastmilk substitute or infant formula manufacturers and all groups that may undermine breastfeeding.

Signed on 6 April 2020 by the Representatives in the Philippines:


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