



World Breastfeeding Week

August 1-7, 2017

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In commemoration of the **2017 World Breastfeeding Week**, the Asian Forum of Parliamentarians on Population and Development (AFPPD) is pleased to share excerpts from an interview with **Hon. Dr. Jetn Sirathranont**, Member of the National Legislative Assembly of Thailand and AFPPD Secretary-General. This year marks the 25th celebration of World Breastfeeding Week since its inception in 1992 by the World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action (WABA).

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Funds (UNICEF), exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months was found to help infants achieve optimal growth, development and health. In this interview, Hon. Dr. Sirathranont, as Chairperson of Thailand's Public Health Committee, spoke to us about the situation of exclusive breastfeeding in Thailand and the recently passed Control of Marketing of Infant and Young Child Food Act. Hon. Dr. Sirathranont has served on the AFPPD Executive Committee as Secretary-General since 2014. Most recently, he participated in the G7/20 International Parliamentarians Conference in Rome as part of the AFPPD delegation.

According to UNICEF, breastfed children have at least **six times greater chance of survival** in the early months than non-breastfed children.

BACKGROUND



Hon. Dr. Jetn Sirathranont

Member of Parliament, Thailand and AFPPD Secretary-General

Hon. Dr. Jetn Sirathranont has been the Secretary-General of AFPPD since 2014. He is a medical doctor by profession, currently working on health issues as a legislator and the Chairperson of the Public Health Committee of the National Legislative Assembly of Thailand. Hon. Dr. Sirathranont has led the advocacy efforts to enact the Prevention and Remedial Measures for Adolescent Pregnancy Act in 2016. Hon. Dr. Sirathranont has served twice as Member of the Senate of Thailand from 2008 to 2011 and from 2011 to 2014.

INTERVIEW

July 28, 2017

According to UNICEF, Thailand is among the countries with the lowest exclusive breastfeeding rates in Asia. In 2014, about 12% of mothers exclusively breastfed for the first six months. Could you tell us a bit more about the reality behind this figure?

Studies found several reasons that deterred Thai mothers from breastfeeding exclusively for the first six months. The first reason concerns maternity leave. Globally, research has shown a positive relationship between the length of maternal leave and breastfeeding outcomes.

In the case of Thailand, mothers are allowed to stay at home for 90 days after childbirth which may not be sufficient to encourage exclusive breastfeeding, or even adequate breastfeeding.

Secondly, there is a common misperception or lack of knowledge among mothers about the value of breastfeeding. It is critical that mothers are well-informed to make the optimal choice for the health of their baby. Thirdly, Thailand has lacked strong legal measures against the aggressive marketing of breast-milk substitutes. However, I am proud to say that the National Legislative Assembly has passed the Control of Marketing of Infant and Young Child Food Act in April this year.

How has the government addressed the importance of exclusive breastfeeding over the recent years?

The Thai government prioritized breastfeeding as a national agenda. We have raised awareness on the benefits of exclusive breastfeeding among health professionals working in healthcare facilities.

We have also taken measures based on the recommendations made by WHO and UNICEF. The first measure was to implement the Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative in all public hospitals. Under this initiative, as part of the government efforts to support and promote breastfeeding among mothers, hospitals are not supposed to accept free or low-cost breast-milk substitutes. The government

has also promoted the establishment of breastfeeding corners in workplace, while supporting health professionals' capacity building to become lactation consultants. At the policymaking level, the government has advocated to legislate the code on breast-milk substitutes into a law. Also, major stakeholders such as the Thai Health Promotion Foundation and the Thai Breastfeeding Foundation embarked on national campaigns to promote breastfeeding.

You mentioned the Control of Marketing of Infant and Young Child Food Act, which was passed in April 2017. Could you tell us more about this law?

This is one of the most important laws to protect the health and well-being of both mothers and children. It aims to control the aggressive promotion of breast-milk substitutes for infants and young children, particularly through advertisement. The law is intended to ensure that mothers and families receive accurate information. The National Legislative Assembly has approved the concept of this law. However, some stakeholders still raised concerns on some points of the law. In this regard, the National Legislative Assembly has to provide opportunities for all related stakeholders to voice their opinions before making adjustments and passing to the parliament for the 2nd and 3rd reading.

As Chair of the Committee on Public Health of the National Legislative Assembly, could you share your expectations about this law? What are the ways forward?

It is my hope that this law will be effectively implemented, allowing all related stakeholders to follow the law in a practical way. Consequently, I expect the rate of exclusive breastfeeding to increase in Thailand. The government should continue to plan and implement any interventions that can help mothers overcome barriers or misinformation related to exclusive breastfeeding. The next steps include to enforce effectively this law and to advocate for extending maternity leave up to 180 days for Thai mothers.