

# Editorial Note

In October 2004, the International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN) celebrated its 25th anniversary. From a tiny group it has grown to an impressive network of 200 affiliates in 90 countries. But more important than numbers are the dedication and efficiency that characterise the high-quality work of its members. They continuously monitor the ability and willingness of governments and companies to comply with the substance of the International Code of Marketing of Breast Milk Substitutes, adopted by the World Health Assembly in May 1981. Some may think it naïve to believe that resolutions and agreements adopted in international fora should be respected and kept, but for those of us who hold that view, IBFAN provides a splendid example.

The present contribution to *Development Dialogue* expands on Annelies Allain's article 'IBFAN: On the Cutting Edge', published in the 1989 edition of this journal, and adds 15 years of activity and experience. She gives us her reflections on the unique struggle by IBFAN to uphold international agreements. Her story is a tribute to not just the survival, but the flourishing of a people's network over the past 25 years. Despite the failures in persuading governments to live up to their commitments and the difficulty of forcing giant corporations to abide by their promises, Annelies still believes in the Third System – the combined strength of ordinary citizens, organised in groups and networks, supporting a common cause.

That cause is simple and straightforward: to protect breastfeeding! It can save millions of innocent lives. Two and a half decades of IBFAN action shows that while manufacturers of baby foods no longer openly dispute the benefits of breastfeeding, they continue to compete with it so as to expand their markets and increase their profits. 'Our monitoring reports show that today's well-publicised corporate social responsibility is most often a sham, mere lip service', notes Annelies Allain. She gives vivid descriptions of the network's struggles locally, nationally and internationally and insights into the obstacles encountered while trying to move an apathetic international bureaucracy to uphold the spirit of decisions made by its own governing body in the face of persistent corporate lobbying.

The example of IBFAN invites reflections on what NGOs are capable of doing and what governments and international organisations apparently are not capable of, or interested in, doing. What inspires a small number of people around the world to devote their skills, creativity, efforts, knowledge and courage to manage and sustain a movement over a long time with very limited resources? How is it possible for an organisation such as IBFAN to build up a monitoring methodology and rally groups who collect and analyse the data needed and present it in a persuasive form for politicians and health authorities? And why, in international fora, are NGOs such as IBFAN usually allowed to make their statements only at the very end of long days of debate, frequently in the last hours of a meeting. Is the message less important when it comes from an NGO? Or is it more threatening because of the openness and directness that characterises many NGOs?

The role of NGOs has been thoroughly discussed in several recent books and reports and new ideas have emerged. However, the prevailing conventional picture is that NGOs should

be part of international negotiations to secure a broad participation but should not be directly involved in decision-making. Thus, NGOs may become hostages rather than full members of the international processes. On this theme Pat Roy Mooney of the ETC Group (Action Group on Erosion, Technology and Concentration), Canada, has written an interesting essay, 'The Stockholm Syndrome'. It argues that it is time for NGOs not to follow in the footsteps of governments any longer, but to choose independently and boldly their own areas of work where governments for various reasons are not active, and to develop these issues as equal and autonomous partners in development.

It is time to acknowledge fully the work of organisations and networks such as IBFAN, the ETC Group or the PCIJ (Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism) – to mention a few examples – and to realise their unique contribution over the past 25 years. It is time to give organisations such as IBFAN the right and the opportunities to make their voices heard in national and international conferences, but just as important to listen to them in their own contexts, whether it be the World Social Forum or the People's Health Assembly or other fora of that kind. Surely they have unique experiences of the world and its people that governments and corporations are not aware of.

Every two or three years IBFAN publishes a summary of how the Code has been implemented by countries and by companies. The latest edition (2004) shows that out of 192 countries, 24 have acted thoroughly on the Code and made it into strong national legislation; 31 have enacted many but not all of the provisions; another 30 have draft laws, while others are still 'studying' the Code or have done nothing at all. The company chart examines how 16 corporations have not complied with more than a few of the Code's provisions, although they claim full compliance. Nestlé is, not unexpectedly, shown to violate almost all Code provisions. These are facts revealed by careful monitoring in all member countries of WHO and cannot be ignored as irrelevant. It seems almost unbelievable that both governments and companies are prepared to compromise on the health of babies, the future of humankind. Yet, change for the better remains painfully slow and difficult to obtain.

The Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation has followed this issue almost as long as IBFAN, albeit at a more modest level. The 1980:1 issue of *Development Dialogue* contained the documents that a year later were transformed into the Code, as well as a discussion of what should characterise true cooperation between UN agencies on the one hand and NGOs on the other. *Development Dialogue* 1989:2 presented Annelies Allain's article entitled 'IBFAN: On the Cutting Edge', mentioned above. Now, 15 years later, new experiences and wisdom have been gathered, but the world has become only marginally better.

Thus, the struggle continues. While the outcome is not at all clear, IBFAN provides an excellent example of what an NGO can do and offers hope for the future. Let it be an inspiration for people's organisations around the world battling for justice and solutions to long-standing problems.

*Olle Nordberg*

# Fighting an Old Battle in a New World

## How IBFAN Monitors the Baby Food Market

By Annelies Allain

### Foreword

By Halfdan Mahler

During my 15 years as Director General at the World Health Organization, its Member States set into motion many strategies and programmes, sometimes prompted by the Organization's Secretariat, sometimes by outside sources. When Senator Edward Kennedy suggested that WHO look into an international solution of the infant feeding scandal, I was happy to do so and asked UNICEF to join in. Little did we suspect that this first step would lead to a long battle. What we did know was that all parties should be involved in the process for any outcome to be viable.

Our background study indicated that there was 'excessive and inappropriate' use of artificial infant feeding products and that without intervention 'even larger numbers of infants and young children would be placed at risk of infection, malnutrition and death'. We needed to hear all the voices and invited all to the October 1979 Meeting on Infant and Young Child Feeding: governments, scientists, the baby food industry and the NGOs who had been campaigning for breastfeeding. Taking action in order to reduce infant mortality and morbidity was a logical follow-up to the commitment to 'Health for All' enshrined at Alma Ata the year before. At the end of the October Meeting it was very clear that 'normal' marketing practices could not continue and that it was necessary to regulate those practices through an international code applicable to all manufacturers.

I applaud the way Annelies Allain has written up the continuation of the battle. Indeed, even to get started on this issue was a battle. Companies jumped on me for having invited the NGOs in the first place, but I told them it was *quid pro quo*. The drafting was another set of hurdles; there were threats that I had overstepped my mandate, defections from within the staff, last-minute amendments and endless pressure from the baby food industry. It is true that 'without the NGOs, without their constant lobbying, reminding us of our duty as public health officers, even harassing us for months on end, without all that, there would have never been a Code. WHO would simply not have had the courage to get on with it.'

One of the most helpful things the NGOs did was to constantly provide us with up-to-date samples of current labels, booklets, calendars and lots of other promotional items from different countries and particularly from developing countries. Without this ammunition, the Code would never have had the amount of clout and detail it had in the drafts. It still became a negotiated compromise. Many in public health circles would have liked to see it stronger but in the consultation process, producer countries had substantial impact on the final wording and on the final legal status of the Code.

The monitoring that Annelies describes in her article is still necessary. These practices should have disappeared 20 years ago but without the NGOs highlighting and advocating them, then and now, WHO would be blindfolded. Her awareness of the bigger political picture is extremely useful and deserves to be recorded as such. You might not believe the kind of pressures we were under at WHO in the 1980s, and it is perhaps worse now.

The way an infant is fed can be a matter of life and death. Breastfeeding can save millions of lives. Breastfeeding seems such an innocent, peaceful matter that all of us should support and fight for its protection and promotion. But, believe me, it is not at all simple. There are raw economic and political nerves behind an apparently peaceful picture.

IBFAN has been a key player in the movement for greater – and more transparent – corporate responsibility and accountability, by continuing to keep the Code alive, by pushing WHO to keep it visible on its agenda. The Code is a reasonably sensitive and specific instrument to regulate a particular sector of industry, which has ‘survived’ the clarion call for putting *Health First* in the late 1970s and early 1980s. I believe that the only reason it did not wither away like many other splendid ideas of those days, is that it was adopted by IBFAN and nursed by them ever since. I am convinced that millions of babies have been saved by IBFAN’s efforts to keep a watchful eye on corporate promotion. The threat of exposure as baby killers did cause some restraint in marketing practices and it did lead to greater awareness of the value of breastfeeding.

In the complexity of today’s globalised inequities, we need to hear about IBFAN’s energy, the moral energy of public interest NGOs. You



Meeting again in 2003: The author of this issue of *Development Dialogue*, Annelies Allain with Halfdan Mahler, Director-General of WHO from 1973 to 1988.

do have power! Don't get discouraged. The notion that corporations need to be regulated flies in the face of neo-liberal thinking that sees TNCs as creators of wealth that can, through their own codes of conduct, nicely 'regulate' their own practices. This major contribution by Annelies should help to dispel such illusions.

I heartily recommend this reading in the spirit of a 'Grook' by Piet Hein:

'We who are fighting  
To realize dreams  
Ask for the task  
Of uniting  
Extremes.'

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*Annelies Allain was one of the founders of IBFAN in 1979 and started the Geneva office of the network. In 1990, a Dutch foundation, the International Code Documentation Centre (ICDC) was set up with a project office in Penang, Malaysia. ICDC, coordinated by Annelies, leads the network's activities toward full implementation of the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes, adopted by the World Health Assembly in 1981. ICDC has organised many training courses on Code Implementation for government officials and NGOs in all parts of the world and acts as a reference centre on legislation and regulation of baby food marketing.*

*Annelies Allain, who is Dutch, graduated in languages and development studies from Universities in the USA and Switzerland, and, after working in Africa for four years, devoted her energies to public advocacy for fair trade and sustainable development. Her experience with the UN and her knowledge of languages were useful skills for the start of IBFAN. She may not have anticipated that her work with IBFAN would last a generation. Celebrating IBFAN's 25th anniversary, she is still passionate about the network's ability to constantly monitor, lobby, and cajole for the ultimate wellbeing of babies and their mothers.*

*In this contribution to Development Dialogue Annelies Allain looks back over 25 years of campaigning, at the achievements and defeats, the challenges ahead and the lessons to be learnt and shared. Her impressive work may be summarised in her own words, 'with minimal structure and optimal reliance on the strength of diversity, we have built a movement, not an empire! And movements don't die, they live as long as they have to.'*

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