

Nestle's formula for starving babies

Third-World abuses

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Reprinted from the *Sheaf*
by Canadian University Press

What was happening before Nestle came along? Women were breastfeeding, of course. Aside from providing vital immunization against disease, "breast milk is the original convenience food. No mixing, warming, or sterilising needed; no dirty pots and bottles to wash up afterwards; always on tap from its specially designed unbreakable containers. And it is genuinely the most nutritious and wholesome product on the market. A copy-writer's dream." (Mike Muller, *The Baby Killer*)

Nestle has been linked — through its products — to thousands of infant deaths in the Third World.

Lactogen is a product of Nestle, the second-largest food company in the world and the leading seller of baby-milk substitutes. Nestle products and practises have been linked to hundreds of thousands of infant deaths in the Third World. According to the executive director of UNICEF (the United Nations International Children's Fund), a million deaths could be prevented every year if mothers were not discouraged from breastfeeding their children.

Although not the only company selling baby formula in the Third World, Nestle is by far the largest.

It has been the target of the largest non-union boycott in history, started in 1973 when *New Internationalist* magazine first made public the company's activities. The publicity associated with the boycott resulted in the World Health Organization's passing of the International Code for the Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes. Despite promises to the contrary, Nestle has not conformed to the WHO regulations in any basic way. The boycott of all Nestle products continues around the world.

Cow's-milk based infant formula was invented in the 1860's by Henri Nestle, a Swiss laboratory assistant, and Nestle's products have always dominated the industry. When prepared and used properly, Nestle formula can be a good substitute for mother's milk if necessary.

Proper use of infant formula is complicated and requires a knowledge of proper preparation methods as well as germ-free facilities. Both are largely unavailable in the Third World. To properly prepare a germ-free solution for her baby, a typical Third World mother has

When Sara went to the hospital to have her baby, a nice woman in a nurse's uniform gave her a free tin of Lactogen, a powdered baby formula. The woman said that Lactogen would be good for her baby if her own breast-milk "wasn't enough". Sara was worried: she wanted to best food for her baby. She started feeding her baby Lactogen as soon as she got home.

Sara's own milk dried up before she had even finished the free sample, so when it did run out she had to buy more. It was very expensive. Sara diluted it with more water than the instructions said,

but she didn't know that — she couldn't read anyway. Within two weeks her baby was sick. Thinking the mixture too rich, Sara diluted it further with the dirty, rusty water from the pump in her neighborhood. It took a lot of time to mix the formula. It was more convenient to mix a whole tin of Lactogen and keep it in a pail on the floor. Then she could feed the baby whenever she wanted.

Her baby became very sick. He vomited and had diarrhea. He soon weighed even less than he had at birth. By the time Sara took him to the doctor, it was too late. He died of gastroenteritis and malnutrition at age six weeks.

to collect firewood or charcoal to make a fire, get water from a dirty, rusty, and almost certainly polluted source, and then boil the feeding paraphernalia for ten minutes minimum. Then, she has to figure out the instructions on the milk tin label — not easy for illiterate parents. After boiling more water to mix the formula and letting it cool, it is ready.

The chance is small that many Third World mothers will go to this much trouble several times a day. Even if a mother goes through the whole process *once* a day, she has no refrigerator, and leftovers are swarming with bacteria by the time they are used. Also, formula is expensive, often taking up nearly half of the income of a family with a six-month old child, and many mothers cannot resist the temptation to over-dilute.

Bottle-fed Third World babies will almost certainly be mentally and physically stunted.

If a bottle-fed Third World child survives its infancy, its physical and mental development will almost certainly be stunted.

Even malnourished women can adequately breastfeed. "The remarkable ability of poor women to breastfeed their babies for prolonged periods is the most redeeming feature of an otherwise bleak nutritional situation," says Dr. C. Gopalan, Director General and the Indian Council of Medical Research.

Despite the lack of a need for baby formula products (even industry estimates say that at most only five per cent of women are unable to breastfeed), Nestle and its counterparts have created a dangerous market in the Third World using aggressive sales and advertising tactics. With a shocking lack of concern for the consequences, Nestle has played on the ignorance of its Third World customers.

Formula advertising aims first of all to undermine (however subtly) its "compe-

titution," breastfeeding. Advertisers say that their products are for use "when breast milk fails" or "if mothers' milk is insufficient," for instance. By introducing the idea that mother's milk *could* fail, the likelihood of it happening increases — "fear and anxiety can actually stop lactation," says *New Internationalist* magazine.

THE MILK OF MOTHERHOOD



Free samples have only one purpose — to create a physical need for the product. By the time a mother has used up her free sample she is well on her way to being unable to breastfeed. If she buys more (it costs much less to feed a newborn than an older infant), she is hooked.

Many Nestle employees have worn uniforms that are indistinguishable from those of the actual employees of the clinics and hospitals where the babies are born. Since the Nestle workers never say that they are not health workers unless asked, it is likely that their words about infant formulas will be taken as absolute fact by intimidated and unquestioning mothers.

Nestle Courts the health profession, subsidizing research and good-will.

Nestle spends a lot of money courting the health care profession, subsidizing office furnishing, research, gifts, conferences, publications, travel — anything to create good will or a feeling of obligation within the profession.

"In developing countries babies who are not breast-fed die," according to Dr. Samuel J. Fomon, Vice-President for the 12th International Congress on Nutrition. "It's hard enough for these babies to survive under the best circumstances; *exploitative marketing and merchandising is tantamount to mass infanticide*" (emphasis added).

After the first exposé of infant formula-related deaths in *The Third World* in 1973, research by church, consumer, and development groups piled up more

and more evidence against the baby-milk companies. Nestle and the rest of the industry denied that anything unethical was happening. In 1977 a group formed the Infact Formula Action Coalition (INFAC), and launched the Nestle Boycott.

Prompted by United States' Senate hearings on baby-milk sale in the Third World, WHO and UNICEF met, in 1979, with government and industry representatives. The industry agreed to stop promoting its products to the public, but before the end of the year the International Baby Food Action Network documented over 1,000 violations of the agreement.

The World Health Assembly, governing body of WHO, met again in May, 1981, and after hearing evidence from both sides voted by a 118 to 1 margin to accept the International Code for the Marketing of Breastmilk substitutes (the United States was the lone dissenter).

In 1980 a Nestle influenced article in *Fortune* magazine called the boycotters "Marxists marching under the banner of Christ." When the WHO code was passed, Nestle said it was not bound by the code because it was not a law, but then in March of this year Nestle said it would abide by the code.

The apparent purpose of this was to stop public criticism and the Nestle boycott.

The WHO code asks governments to:

- 1) Stop all public advertising and promotion of artificial baby-milks.
- 2) Stop the distribution of free milk samples.
- 3) Prohibit the use of health care systems to promote breastmilk substitutes and to prohibit the use of company

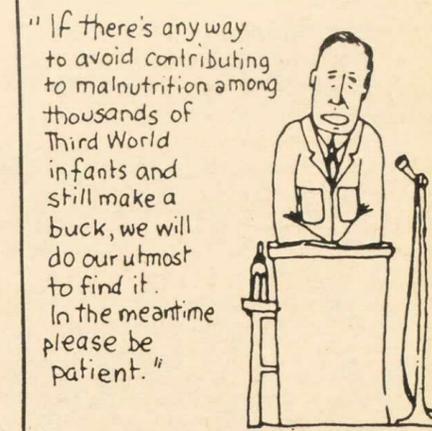
List of products now under boycott.

Although some progress has been made, Nestle's behavior is still not satisfactory, and until the company shapes up in its promotion of breastmilk substitutes in the Third World, the *boycott is still on*. It covers the following products of Nestle and its subsidiaries:

- Coffee and Tea:
 - Decaf
 - Encore
 - Nescafe
 - Nestea
 - Taster's Choice
- Beverages:
 - Montclair Bottled Water
 - Nestle's Quik
 - Crosse and Blackwell
- Cheese:
 - Cherry Hill
 - Old Fort
 - Swiss Knight
 - Wispride
- Cosmetics:

- Lancome
- L'Oreal
- Confectionery:
 - Nestle's Crunch
 - Nestle's Puddings
 - McFeeter's Honey Butter
- Frozen Foods:
 - Stouffer's
 - Gusto Pizza
- Packaged Soups, Vegetables, Fruits:
 - Libby's
 - Maggi
 - McNeill and Libby
 - Souptime
- Miscellaneous:
 - Beech-Nut Baby Foods

The effectiveness of boycotts and of this one in particular is undeniable. In the words of a Canadian Nestle marketing manager, "Every time a consumer comes into a store and makes a conscious decision not to buy one of our products, it hurts us."



"If there's any way to avoid contributing to malnutrition among thousands of Third World infants and still make a buck, we will do our utmost to find it. In the meantime please be patient."

employees acting as health educators.

4) Restrict industry gifts to health workers.

5) Require improved labelling to emphasize the importance of breastfeeding and the hazards of artificial feeding.

But violations continued. In Nairobi, Kenya, Nestle was still giving out free samples in April. In Brazil, the Nestle president said that the Nestle interpretation of the code would require only "minimal adjustments" to their practices.

The WHO code does not have the force of law. While certain countries like Algeria, Guinea-Bissau, Lesotho, Sri-Lanka, and Sweden have practically eliminated unnecessary bottlefeeding, some countries don't seem very concerned about their children. Pakistan has adopted an eight-page infant formula marketing code, six pages of it written by the industry. Mexico has done nothing, but recently received an offer of research money from Nestle and other baby-milk producers. In India, Nestle has helped to prevent the Legislature from considering the strong code which it initially favoured. Everywhere Nestle is pushing its own interpretation of the code.

