

# The Prohibitive Cost of Milk

*Ingrid le Roux*

Breast milk is the ideal food for babies. It should be a national health and nutrition priority to encourage mothers to breast feed. Nevertheless, there is still an important role for breast milk substitutes, namely feeding babies less than six months of age where there is no alternative.

## Breast Feeding Not Always Possible

The reality in many poverty stricken areas in South Africa is that many infants are not being breast fed. For example, 25% of children admitted to Philani Nutrition Centres and 12% of children in Site B Township in Khayelitsha have never been breast fed, according to a survey done in 1988. There are many social and economic reasons for this. For instance, mothers have to go back to work, or children are admitted to hospital and are separated from their mothers. Mothers themselves might be hungry and may even be starving and, as a result, do not produce breast milk. In these circumstances, infant formulas may be their only option, yet their children are often denied access to adequate breast milk substitutes by prohibitive cost.

Over the age of six months, children are no longer dependent on the more expensive specially processed infant formulas, but can drink ordinary milk, fresh or powdered. However, many children are denied access to ordinary milk as well, again due to its high cost.

## Milk or Cereals and Ground Nuts

Few people deny the value of milk as a nutritious, well balanced component of a child's diet. There are, however, different opinions in the international literature about the suitability of milk as part of nutrition intervention programmes. Many fear that the availability of milk will interfere with breast feeding practices. These concerns are indeed valid. Nutrition experts suggest that cereal based products or ground nuts with oil and peanut butter are more cost effective alternatives for intervention programmes. It is important to realise, however, that any nutrition intervention programme which offers a product which the receiver feels is of low quality, second rate or only for the poor, is bound to fail. The product distributed must be of excellent quality and must be perceived as

such.

In summary, milk products do have an important role to play in child nutrition. For many infants and children, infant formulas and ordinary milk are essential components of their diet. It is, therefore, crucial that formulas and ordinary milk should be available to those needing them at an affordable price.

## Milk for Profit

Today, more than enough milk is produced in this country. Its quality is acceptable and it is distributed by means of a far reaching network. It is, however, priced out of reach of the majority of South African families.

Prices are maintained at unacceptably high levels by removing surpluses from the market. Milk powder and butter surpluses were exported at a loss of R108 million during the 1991/92 financial year. Offers from companies within South Africa to purchase these surpluses for sale at a lower price inside the country were refused. The press reported that hundreds of tons of milk have been dumped in the sea.

Decisions on what to do with surpluses were taken by the Dairy Board. The majority of positions on the board were occupied by representatives of the four largest milk producers, Dairy Belle, NCD, Bonnita and Nestle. The



Working mothers can't be expected to breastfeed. *Photo: Afrapix*

government subsidised the dairy industry to the amount of R288 million in 1991. In the same year, the government only made R220 million available for the state food aid programme. It is clear that the size of the subsidy to the dairy industry and the way in which this subsidy is used serves vested interests at the expense of the poor.

The Dairy Board has been stripped of its powers, but the largest milk producers continue to dominate the industry. Today, surpluses are still removed from the market and artificially high prices are maintained. There can be no justification for this in a country in which at least 30% of children under the age of five show marked signs of nutritional deficiency.

## **The Progressive Health Sector Must Act**

It is unfortunate that we do not have a sufficient base of knowledge to make appropriate policies with regard to the distribution of milk. The progressive health sector should commission research to clarify in more detail how milk and other agricultural products are produced and priced in this country. Food aid programmes by the state and nutrition programmes supported by milk manufacturers are token gestures without credibility and it is important that the progressive health sector challenges the current status quo.

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