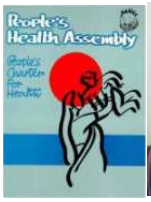
WN *Inspiration*

World Nutrition **Volume 5, Number 5, May 2014**

Journal of the World Public Health Nutrition Association
Published monthly at www.wphna.org/worldnutrition/

Annelies Allain on Halfdan Mahler

The master builder of health for all

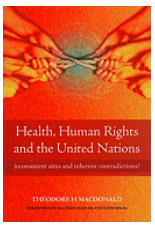


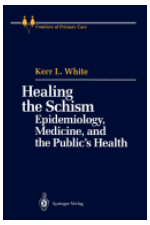





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One head of one United Nations agency has inspired two social movements. This is Halfdan Mahler, director-general of the World Health Organization from 1973 to 1988. He is in the black-and-white pictures above, and also (bottom right) addressing the 2008 World Health Assembly as invited by current WHO director-general Margaret Chan. He was the master-builder of *Health for All.* Above (lower row of pictures, second to left), he is speaking at Alma Ata in 1978 with Senator Edward Kennedy by his side. After the *Alma Ata Declaration*, the vision and mission of universal primary health care has been championed by the People's Health Movement, one of whose many leaders is David Sanders (upper row of pictures, left).

The second movement he has inspired is a series of global networks committed to the protection and promotion of breastfeeding. One is the International Baby Food Action Network, of which Annelies Allain (embracing Halfdan Mahler), Patti Rundall (next to them) and Lida Llotska (left at right, with Patti Rundall and current WHO senior officials in 2014) are leading members. One of Halfdan Mahler's messages to civil society is that UN agencies and the governments they represent, act to protect the public interest usually only when constantly pressed to do so. He also knows that to be effective, above all what's needed are social movements with limitless energy and perseverance, who in the spirit of Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi are prepared to be tough and to take direct action when this is needed.

The International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes was adopted in an historic vote at the WHO World Health Assembly in May 1981. A total of 118 nations voted in favour, three abstained, and one voted against. With hindsight, we can call it an amazing achievement. It could probably never happen again. Nowadays, the USA (the only nation to vote against) would not even allow the issue to come to a vote. It would put infinitely greater pressure on dependent nations to cast a negative vote too, so it would not be isolated, the way it was in 1981.

Conservative elements within the World Trade Organization probably would have rubbished the document long before it got anywhere near adoption. Corporate power has increased to such an extent that its veto would be heard through well-prepared government delegations at international meetings. Back in 1980, here were WHO and UNICEF facilitating a long process of genuine consultation not just with the member states but with non-government organisations, experts, and industry, all on an equal footing. Four drafts were circulated, torn apart, commented on and lobbied over, and the final version voted on. This all happened within 18 hectic months.

What we owe to Halfdan Mahler

Halfdan Mahler, then the WHO director-general, has said that without us, the non-government organisations, the Code would never have been born. A similar compliment can be paid to him, and also to James Grant, then executive director of the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), for tolerating and even inviting the active participation of NGOs, from the very first meeting in 1979 to the dramatic vote in 1981. There was politicking, there were threats, but on the whole, truth, science, and a sense of justice prevailed.

During this process Halfdan Mahler said he would meet with everybody and anybody, as long as it would contribute to better health for infants. And he did. He would have long meetings with the infant food manufacturers, respond to all their grievances, and then call the NGOs to seek their views. He was an early morning person and liked to call meetings at 7 in the morning. How we IBFANers hated those early morning meetings, where we had to be dressed in our best WHO outfits and be wide awake and ready with arguments for this tall, stern Danish director-general who did not like to waste time. He did listen to us.

An hour later, we would troop off to the cafeteria to have coffee and assess how well we had done, and what had to be done next. Göran Sterky, chief of the maternal and child health at WHO, would sometimes join us there, to give his interpretation of the situation. Sometimes we had access to secret memos from the US State Department, showing the pressure put on Halfdan Mahler from across the Atlantic. Although the USA was already not paying its full dues to WHO, any threat to kill the organisation's budget by withholding more payments or by delaying payment, was a powerful tool.

Box 1

Halfdan Mahler on protecting babies

Extracted from Fighting an Old Battle in a New World (1)

During my 15 years as director-general at the World Health Organization, its member states set into motion many strategies and programmes. When US Senator Edward Kennedy suggested that WHO look for an international solution of the infant feeding scandal, I was happy to do so. Little did we suspect that this first step would lead to a long battle. What we did know was that all parties needed to be involved, for any outcome to be viable.

Our background study showed 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 invited to our October 1979 meeting on Infant and Young Child Feeding governments, scientists, the baby food industry, and the non-governmental organisations that campaigned for breastfeeding. At the end of the meeting it was clear that 'normal' marketing practices could not continue and that it was necessary to regulate these practices through an international code applicable to all manufacturers.

Companies jumped on me for having invited the non-government organisations, but I told them that we were being even-handed. 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.

How the Code was born and why it lives

Without the NGOs, without their constant lobbying, reminding us of our duty as public health officers, even harassing us for months on end, there would have never been a Code. WHO would simply not have had the courage to get on with it. They constantly provided us with up-to-date samples of current labels, booklets, calendars and lots of other promotional items from different countries. Without this ammunition, the Code would never have had the amount of clout and detail it had in the drafts. It became a negotiated compromise. Many in public health would have liked it to have been stronger, but in the consultation process, producer countries had substantial impact on the final wording and legal status of the Code.

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. But there are raw economic and political nerves behind an apparently tranquil picture. The International Baby Food Action Network 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 did not wither away, because 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 restrain 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 learn from IBFAN's energy, the moral energy of public interest NGOs. You 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 transnational corporations as creators of wealth that can, through their own codes of conduct, nicely 'regulate' their own practices. We need to dispel such illusions.

The threat to withdraw funding is such an effective tool, that it is still being used today whenever US interests appear to be threatened. Even within WHO, and even nowadays, there are stories of some WHO staff from the US reminding their colleagues about which country pays a quarter of their salaries.

So what threat did saving babies pose? What was this Code all about? The actual contents of the Code – no more advertising, no more samples, no promotion in health care facilities, better labelling, only factual information to health professionals, and so on – none of that was really objectionable.

What made Washington nervous was that WHO, as part of the UN system, was embarking on a possible process of regulating industry. Allowing that to happen would mean setting a precedent, and WHO, or other UN agencies, such as the UN Centre on Transnational Corporations (UNCTC), might be tempted to do the same with the pharmaceutical transnationals, or the tobacco giants, or the food and agriculture corporations, oil corporations, anything! The panic at the prospect was pervasive. The baby food corporations did all they could to fan the flames.

And thus, the innocent baby food issue became a hot potato in international politics. It was very much of a polarised, 'either/or' situation. Either people felt that action on the issue was needed, that it was the right thing to save innocent young lives, or they thought the whole idea of regulation was an intrusion into national sovereignty and an attack on commercial freedom of expression. Now, 35 years later, we can add 'free trade', backed by the World Trade Organization, to that so-called corporate right of free speech.

Box 2

International Code on Marketing of Breastfeeding Substitutes

The International Code aims to promote safe and adequate nutrition for infants, by protecting breastfeeding and ensuring appropriate marketing of breastmilk substitutes. The Code applies to all products marketed as partial or total replacement for breastmilk, such as infant formula, follow-up formula, special formula, cereals, juices, vegetable mixes and baby teas. It also applies to feeding bottles and teats. The Code

- Bans all advertising and promotion of these products to the general public
- Bans samples and gifts to mothers and health workers
- Requires information materials to advocate for breastfeeding, warn against bottle feeding and not to contain pictures of babies or text that idealise use of breastmilk substitutes
- Bans the use of the health care system to promote breastmilk substitutes
- Bans free or low-cost supplies of breastmilk substitutes
- Allows health professionals to receive samples but only for research purposes
- Demands that product information be factual and scientific
- Bans sales incentives for breastmilk substitutes and contact with mothers
- Requires that labels inform fully about correct use of infant formula and risks of misuse
- Requires labels to not discourage breastfeeding

The birth of IBFAN

Tiny people's organisations can make head-way against corporate heavyweights, even when as so often these influence and are backed by governments and international organisations. There were just six groups that came together at a UN meeting in 1979. They all realised that without follow-up, such meetings would not solve the problem. They pooled some resources, convictions and visions, and created IBFAN, a very loose and disparate network of activists from different backgrounds and with differing experience. IBFAN became the first international single-issue network.

No one, not even within IBFAN, expected the network to last more than a few years. By 1989, when it celebrated its 10th anniversary with 140 groups in some 70 countries, IBFAN knew it had to survive and grow even wider, because it had realised the strength of community organisation, shown its muscle, and achieved some successes – but the problem had not disappeared. It would take a generation or more to effect a change of practice. Fewer babies were being breastfed, not more.

The impact of commercial promotion lasts far beyond the initial advertising campaigns. Subtle new marketing techniques were tried out and new products launched. The baby food industry seems to be sure that the IBFAN watchdogs would lose stamina, interest or funding, and go away. It was simply a matter of time for the companies. They could wait it out and then it would be business as usual again. They are still waiting. They are also flexing bigger muscles.

IBFAN is now 35 years old. It has 200 affiliates in 90 countries. It has not changed its structure, because the flat, flexible and non-hierarchical system serves it well. There is no head office and no boss, no central funding pot, no trickle-down of orders. But there *is* solidarity and common purpose and these are the lubricants for the links between the many different parts of the network. The links, in fact, are the most important parts of the network's 'structure'. Its members have grown. Its members have grown in numbers; its outreach has grown, and its power has grown.

References

1 Allain A. *Fighting an Old Battle in a New World. How IBFAN Monitors the Baby Food Market.* *Access pdf here*

Editor's note

In *Inspiration* we link to key documents that help explain the reasons to be inspired. Here, this is the full text of *Fighting an Old Battle in a New World*., from which this *Inspiration* has been extracted. Contributors are invited to celebrate a person who has greatly impressed them. The choice can from any time in history. It need not be about nutrition or public health, but it should be offered as inspiration to *WN* readers. Please also include one or more supporting documents in pdf form. Send suggestions for *Inspiration* to wn.network@gmail.com.