

A growing number of African countries are fighting back against the unethical marketing of breast-milk substitutes by tightening laws to protect the health of mothers and children.

According to the 2022 report on the International Code of Marketing of Breast-Milk Substitutes, the exercise is misleading marketing practices.

In the past two years, six African countries have reinforced measures against inappropriate marketing of breast-milk substitutes.

This brings to 34 the number of countries in the region that have adopted legal measures to implement at least some of the provisions of the Code.

The International Baby Food Action Network, UNICEF and the World Health Organization (WHO), continuously monitor its implementation and publish biennial reports.

“Marketers have been trying for decades to divert mothers from their own power to nourish their babies,” said Dr Adelheid Onyango, Director, Universal Health Coverage/Healthier Populations, WHO Regional Office for Africa.

“The tactics have become more insidious as communication channels expand. It’s reassuring to see that more African governments are taking the threat seriously and erecting barriers to these misleading marketing techniques.” He adds

Three countries in the African region that previously had no legislation related to the Code—Mauritania, Sao Tome & Principe and Sierra Leone—have now passed new measures.

Ethiopia has enacted a strong new directive to replace older legislation that covered only a few provisions of the code.

A new decree in Côte d’Ivoire and regulations in Kenya have clarified several issues in existing legislation to make additional provisions enforceable.

According to the report, the COVID-19 pandemic created new opportunities for manufacturers of breast-milk substitutes in some countries to promote their brands and products.

Among the marketing tactics cited in the report was the distribution of free supplies

of commercial formula milk in communities experiencing lockdowns, online content positioning the manufacturer as an expert on protection against COVID-19 in babies and claims that formula provides immunity against COVID-19.

Marketers also released videos advising against breastfeeding for women infected with COVID-19, despite WHO and UNICEF guidelines for national governments as well as communications reassuring mothers of the safety of breastfeeding with COVID-19.

Experts have said that marketing of breast-milk substitutes diminishes the perceived value of breastfeeding and undermines women's confidence in their ability to breastfeed.

It plays on expectations and anxieties around nourishing babies and positions formula milk as a better alternative to breast milk.

One of the constraints cited by the report is the lack of politics at the highest levels, to try and find solutions; the report is calling for greater investment in human and financial resources to accelerate progress in protecting the health of mothers and babies through breastfeeding.