

# WORLDLY JEREMIADS

## Formula for the Third World

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As one who has constantly criticized the intellectual slothfulness of business élites in the Western world, especially relative to problems in developing countries, I have nevertheless an intense respect for the operating executives of multinational companies who live and work in the developing world. This is why I have watched with particular alarm the brutal assault by leftist Americans on those who manufacture and sell infant formulas to developing nations—manufacturers such as Nestlé, Abbott, and Wyeth. As a former executive of a pharmaceutical company in Asia, although not in the infant formula business, I have monitored the behavior of these companies for years and find the current campaign against them a travesty.

In the developing world the problems of health care are extraordinary. Even without direct malnutrition due to inadequate food or unemployment, most children and adults suffer from a plague of parasites, and nearly half of the people suffer from serious infectious diseases like amebiasis or bronchitis. Infant mortality from foul water or infectious wounds is rampant.

Regulated by local government, faced with cultural and traditional barriers, and harassed by reformers at home, multinational companies try to bring some relief. In South Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, and Malaysia their efforts have helped to bring about developed societies. In other nations of Asia, Africa, and Latin America the effort is under way, though far from completed. Nevertheless, in every country significant "modern sectors" of the economy are expanding.

What is a modern sector? Nearly all of the developing world has two sectors in each economy. The modern sector is one in which there is true economic development: paved roads, good water, medical care, proper housing, education, and most of all jobs and incomes. Most of the people in the major ports, capital cities, and provincial capitals live in the modern sector. They may represent anywhere from 20 to 50 per cent of the population. The remaining market is the "developing sector," where the health problems are overwhelming.

This dual-market structure is where the assault on infant formula-makers begins. For it is argued that by their advertising and promotion they encourage poor mothers in the developing sector to give up breast-feeding in exchange for infant formula. The critics charge that poor women stop breast-feeding, yet they cannot afford to give their babies sufficient formula; thus the children suffer malnutrition. Moreover, as mothers must mix the formula with water, often polluted, children may get infections; or the formula will spoil from lack of refrigeration. Finally, critics charge that the infant formulas are used to replace local weaning foods that are cheaper and therefore better.

First of all Nestlé and other companies agree that breast milk should be the first food where possible. Second, the industry agrees that care should be taken in the mixing of the formula and its storage. And third,

the industry agrees that certain local weaning foods can and should be used where possible. Indeed, in the modern sectors of developing countries all these points are clear because medical care is close by. Where the whole case becomes critical is in the rural areas and slums near cities. Here there are undoubtedly people who use these products in the wrong way. But to blame this upon the formula industry is to blame the industry for underdevelopment, a lack of clean water, and a dual economy.

Yet advertising is one area in which Nestlé and other companies could do more. Because mass media in developing countries, especially radio and billboard advertising, reach both the modern sector and the developing sector, it is important that advertising messages stress both the health and cost advantages of breast-feeding and even local weaning foods. The industry, which has always acknowledged the importance of breast-feeding, has agreed to emphasize these points more in the future. Still, the issue is not closed. For the truth is that many mothers, either because they work or for reasons of health, cannot breast-feed. In these cases infant formulas are universally respected as the best substitute for mother's milk. Moreover, infant supplements may need to be given to some children even while breast-feeding or as supplements during weaning.

The WHO draft resolution, opposed by the U.S. alone, calls for governments to regulate all education relating to maternity and demands that such education stress "the superiority of breast-feeding," maternal nutrition preparatory to breast-feeding, the negative effects of partial bottle feeding, the difficulty of reversing a decision not to breast-feed, and—where needed—the "proper use of infant formula." Where infant formulas are used, the government in its educational programs shall stress the "social and financial" implications and the hazards of "unnecessary or improper" use of infant formulas.

In addition, the WHO regulations specify that there "shall be no advertising or other form of promotion to the general public" of infant formulas. The manufacturers of infant formulas "shall not provide, directly or indirectly, to pregnant woman, mothers or members of their families, samples" of infant formulas.

To ban only formula advertising, however, leaves the field to powdered and fresh milk advertising. Surely WHO knows that if infant formula is not available, mothers can and will use less nutritious milk products. Thus the problem is not solved, only transferred.

Yet there exists an even more serious misapplication of law and reason in this matter. Most prescription drugs cannot be advertised because the product itself is dangerous: e.g., addicting drugs, birth control pills, and antibiotics. But in the case of infant formulas, WHO is banning advertising because of conditions in the Third World that need to be changed. WHO, by ignoring these conditions, fails to get to the nub of the question, as do many who support the formula industry. If those who have spun wheels on the formula controversy were to expend the same energy in developing programs of international aid through the IMF or World Bank, we would witness far greater results far sooner.

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