Because of its staying power and advocacy successes IBFAN has won considerable respect. Not many NGOs have a track record of more than 20 years of resisting corporate public relations, keeping track of company compliance with the agreed principles of the Code and building confidence among governments to draft laws. Yet, monitoring has also taught IBFAN that Code violations continue, that the increasing power of the large companies makes them more aggressive, and more likely to put pressure on both governments and the UN.

## The Third System

'Words are never innocent', wrote Marc Nerfin in 1987.[5] 'The phrase "non-governmental organisations" (NGOs) is politically unacceptable because it implies that government is the centre of society, and people its periphery.'

Similarly, one could argue that if people and their organisations are at the centre, governments could be called 'non-people's organisations', or NPOs. They would not be very happy with that, would they? Still, IBFAN prefers the familiar 'NGO' label to the most recent invention: CSO, or civil society organisation. Not so much because that term implies the incivility of government but because 'civil society' is a term used in international parlance to also cover the entire private sector, thus referring to both NGO public interest organisations, as well as to the corporate sector, whose profit motivations have very little in common with the aspirations and concerns of the majority of the people.

Lumping people's organisations and the private sector together as 'civil society' for convenience or for politics is, in my view, an error that will result in endless questioning and a backlash of protest. Several UN agencies, in particular WHO, have been struggling to deal with the problem by differentiating between Public Interest NGOs (PINGOs) and Business Interest NGOs (BINGOs). This is particularly important in obtaining accreditation so as to attend UN meetings and thereby have a voice in setting policy. Consumer organisations have long been accredited but have increasingly found themselves in the company of BINGOs and groups that receive much or most of their funding *and* their instructions from corporations. Of course, this makes it difficult to reach agreement on policies and strategies. It also makes it hard for government delegates to distinguish between groups that have the public interest at heart and those wearing the same colour identity labels but working for tobacco or baby food or other manufacturers.

## People power

Nothing better explains the power of people, once organised in some form, than the way Marc Nerfin defines the Third System:

> Contrasting with governmental power and economic power – the power of the Prince and the Merchant – there is an immediate and autonomous power, sometimes evident, sometimes latent: people's power. Some people develop an awareness of this, associate and act with others and thus become citizens. Citizens and their associations, when they do not seek either governmental or economic power, constitute the 'third system'. Helping to bring what is latent into the open, the third system is one expression of the autonomous power of the people.[6]

IBFAN does exactly that. It gives individuals and small organisations the possibility of expressing their innate urge to bring about change, of channelling local energies into a stream of global consciousness, of making small groups feel they are part of a larger body fighting for the same ideals.

Networking has a political value in that it can unite people, harness their ideas and energies and mobilise them for activities such as monitoring. It also provides an information channel that can assist local groups and individuals in sharing new findings and options with the community. Networking gives scope for solidarity and can provide the critical mass for effective advocacy. People feel supported in what they do, less lonely and more aware of the value of their collective activities. Here, as in 'IBFAN on the Cutting Edge', we shall continue to use Marc Nerfin's 'three systems' terminology.

There are many reasons for choosing to define ourselves. The 'civil society' terminology was probably deliberately introduced to blur the lines between non-profit NGOs and the private sector. The timing coincides with all the hype over public-private partnerships and suits the neo-liberal tendency to give companies a comfortable place in international and national policy setting. The 'three systems' terminology is useful for describing and analysing the shift in power – from governments and the UN system to undemocratic, unelected business power – that has become more and more apparent in the last ten years.

If the First System, government, is holding a central position in society, one can assume that the Third System – citizens' or people's organisations – is meant to have the least power. Often the Third System is tolerated at the fringes only and put down or ignored whenever there is a fear that it can


**Figure 2.** Mother/child and health worker are in the centre of IBFAN's campaign. Government and business systems affect their choices.

influence real decision-making. The Second System – business interests – has managed to acquire a much larger space for itself in the decision-making arena.

Using the Three Systems analytically allows us to place individual citizens within a kind of power grid, showing how the systems affect each other at different levels. It can also show graphically the huge increase in the power of the 'Second System'. The corporate sector, the market place, has made this jump to the detriment of both First and Third Systems. In many Third World countries the financial power of transnational corporations is in multiples of national budgets. In Malaysia, Nestlé dominates the food market and in 2001 its profits exceeded the country's GDP.[7] Little wonder the former Malaysian Prime Minister writes with concern:

> Of the 100 largest economic entities in the world, 51 are global corporations and 49 are countries. The combined sales of the world's top 200 corporations exceed the combined GDP of the world's nation states.[8] It is politically very convenient to blur the lines by creating a 'civil society' confusion so that this increase is not too blatantly evident.

## The Three Systems make One World

Mothers and babies are at the centre of IBFAN's single-issue campaign to protect breastfeeding. How do her everyday surroundings affect a mother in her decision-making about infant feeding? Not only her background and her family but also health workers have a profound influence. Hence, on the chart, we have placed health workers in a symbiotic relationship to mother and child, and both at the centre. Three systems affect their actions.

Public opinion, local consumer habits, family and social influences are just one segment of the spectrum that shape the mother's choice. This is the people's system or citizens' system. On the business side, the Second System, there is advertising, subtler forms of promotion and hospital practices. Hospitals may have a set number of strict routines; they usually have a long-standing relationship with specialised commercial suppliers; and

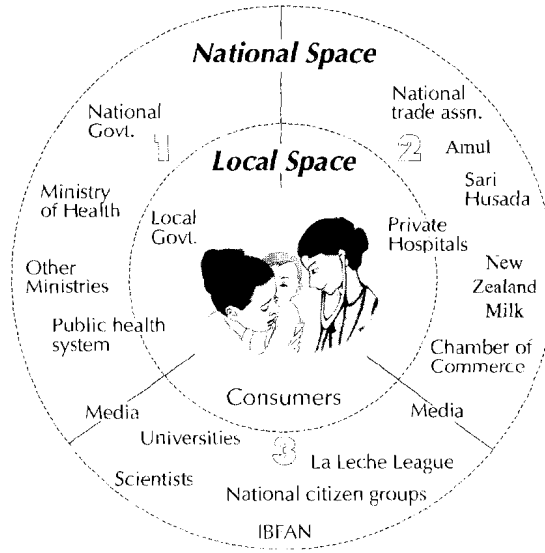


**Figure 3.** Government, business and citizen 'systems' influence behaviour patterns. If we want change, we must find out where the power lies: in what System and in what Space.

many hospitals and clinics, including pediatricians, are of course in the private sector themselves. Pharmacies, shops, direct mail, media appeals and promotions all reach out to the young mother. Health workers are also subject to different pressures, temptations and routines.

The First System produces government policies, which also have their bearing on mothers' choices. The public health system may be 'baby friendly' or may not at all encourage breastfeeding. Medical school curricula in nearly all countries make totally inadequate provisions for training in the proper management of lactation. There may be restrictions on advertising, sometimes even on other forms of promotion, or the government may be committed to 'free trade', with no restrictions on the commercial sector.

From the theoretical centre, we now draw concentric circles around our mother and baby, representing the local and the national space.

At the national level, the same influences from these three systems have their impact on the central subjects. These influences include company marketing policies, Ministry of Health directives and the influence (or lack of it) of national IBFAN groups, mothers' support groups, academic, religious groups and media opinion-makers.

Transnational marketing practices have, of course, a direct bearing on the national sphere but, barring effective legal restrictions, decisions tend to be made in the international sphere at company headquarters. Just as national

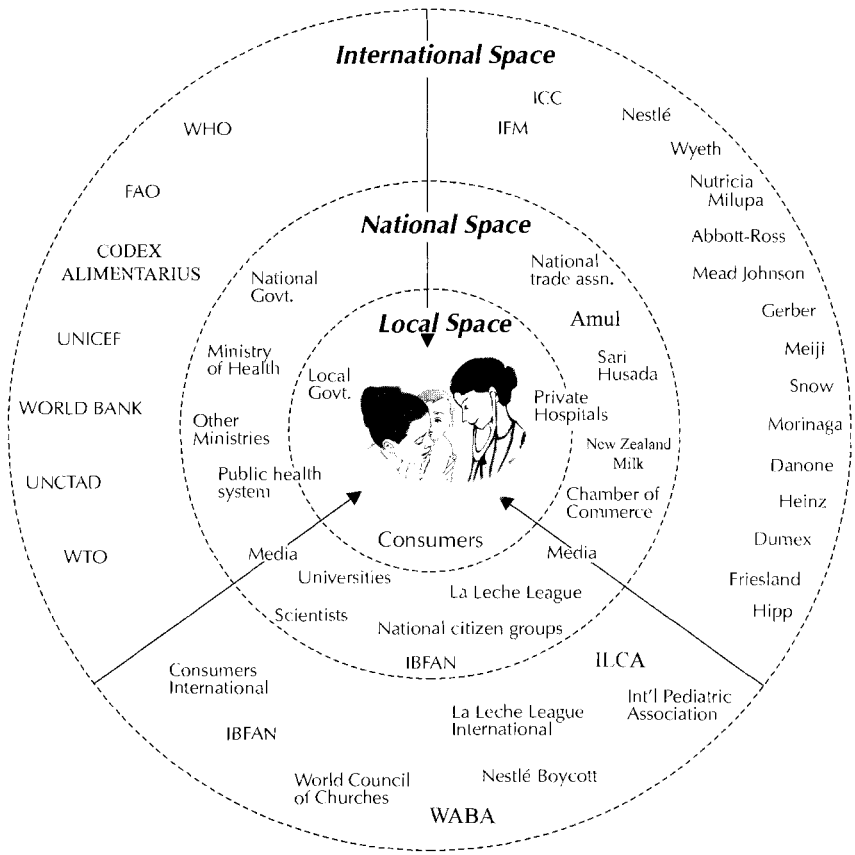


**Figure 4.** International actors affect happenings in both National and Local Space.

companies or subsidiaries may be grouped in national chambers of commerce or trade associations, the baby food companies have their international representative: the Infant Food Manufacturers association (IFM). IFM is in the third concentric circle, the international space.

In one way or another all these players – health workers, consumers, religious leaders, scientists and baby food activists – have their vertical international linking systems: consumer unions, professional associations, baby food networks. The media fall between the cracks of the systems; sometimes they sing the tune of national governments or are owned by a large company that sets editorial policy. In other cases, the media are ferociously independent. But here again, while journalists may have independent judgement, if the advertising department has giant clients to humour, it is a forgone conclusion that certain critical articles will *not* get published.

The international space harbours not only transnational corporations and people's networks but also the UN family. Ideally, it is 'we, the people'

who are represented by the UN system but, in practice, power is exercised through the collective will of national governments, autocratic and democratic alike. That statement needs qualifying, too, because some governments are very much 'more equal than others'. Companies influence government decisions in many ways, for example in international standard setting in Codex Alimentarius (FAO/WHO Food Standards). In the 60 years of the UN's existence, international bureaucrats have developed crafty ways of pre-shaping decisions by governments. In other words, the secretariats of the various UN agencies have become actors themselves for better or for worse.

**Links, lobbying and leverage**

None of the systems in any of the spaces operates in a vacuum. There are innumerable links, pressures and dependencies between them. These vary from system to system, from country to country and from space to space. Political contributions or pledges of investment may reduce a government's enthusiasm for legislative control. Monitoring results are effective tools in lobbying for policy change. Citizens' pressure on government may be lessened by promises of grants or by threats of restrictions on their activities. In some cases pressure on companies may result in direct or indirect retaliation against the activist leader or even her family. On the other hand it may lead shareholders to say it is time the company changed its marketing strategy. (It is too complicated to draw all the links on the chart but the reader can imagine how direct and indirect pressure may be exercised via the government, a local institution, the media – or the UN for that matter – on a particular group or an outspoken citizens' organisation.)

We may not like it but this is what happens in the world of politics, power and people. The analysis of systems and spaces can be applied to all issues, not just baby food. One could easily draw a similar chart for pesticides, or landfills, or medicines. Some people will shy away from it; others will tackle it with gusto. Many still ignore it. For international networks like IBFAN, it is indispensable to analyse the whole picture, to identify allies and build strategies, to seek maximum leverage and help the like-minded to construct their own analysis of how politics affect their own particular vital issue at local, national and international levels.

**The increase in the power of the Second System**

Corporate accountability in general and holding baby food corporations accountable for Code compliance, as IBFAN has been doing for the past 25 years, is rapidly being relegated to the UN's back burner; instead, importance is being given to 'free trade' and self-regulation, and 'partnerships'.

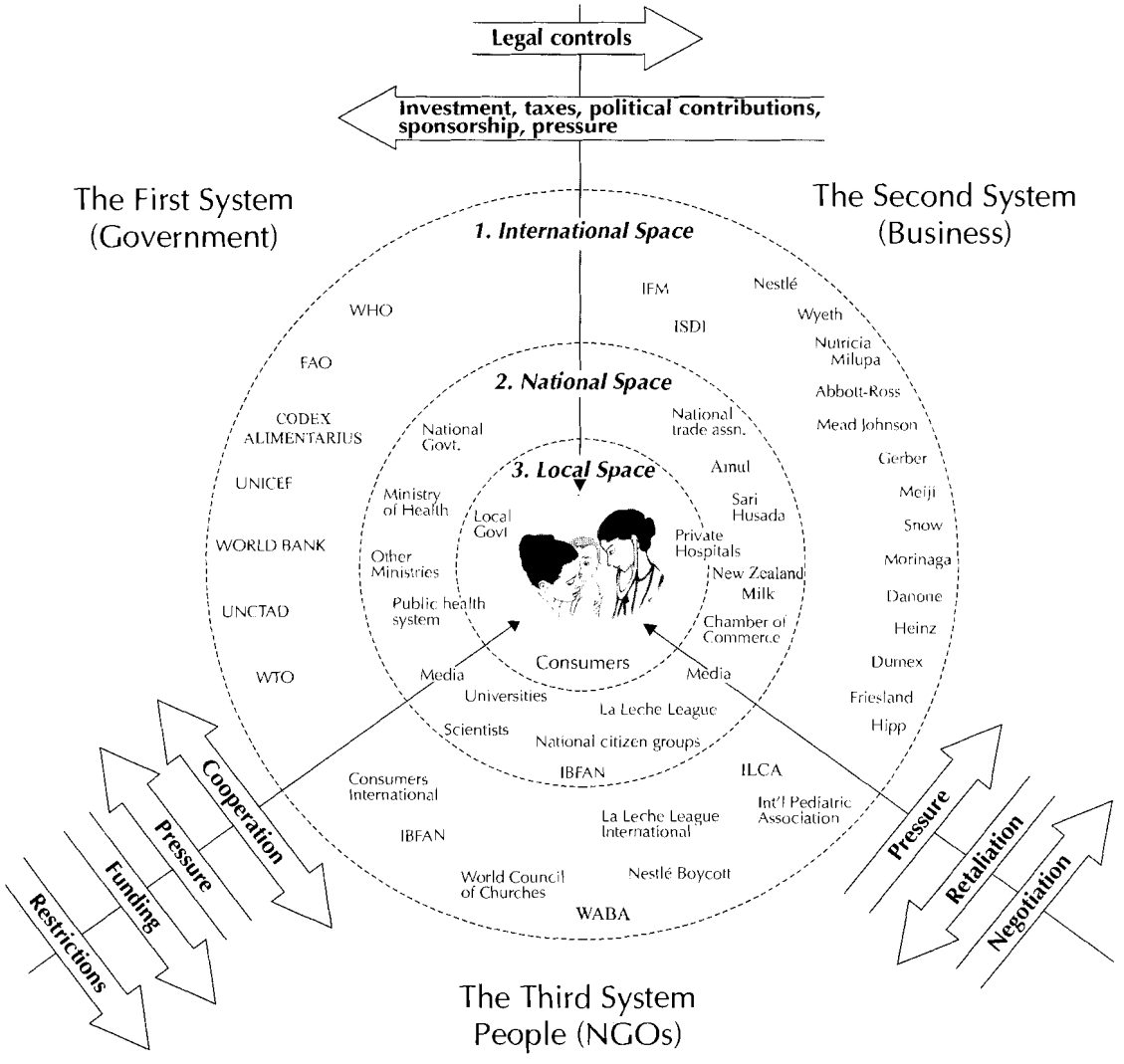


**Figure 5. The World of Politics, Power and People**

Links, lobbying and leverage – not usually in the public interest. For international networks such as IBFAN, it is indispensable to analyse the whole picture, to identify allies and build strategies, to seek maximum leverage and construct their own analysis of how politics affect their issue at local, national and international levels.

At the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002, trade language, some of it directly from WTO texts, mysteriously found its way into the draft negotiating text on environmental protection. According to this scenario, water, health, climate and biodiversity are to be ruled by public-private partnerships and voluntary agreements. From there, it is but a small step to expanding the marketplace into the realm of what used to be called basic human rights such as access to water and health care.

Anything that would inhibit market expansion, such as a ban on product promotion, as required by the Code, is likely to be ignored, rejected or disputed. As size and numbers of corporations have increased so has competition. Which means: more promotion and less compliance with the Code and related Resolutions.

UNCTAD estimates 'that there are now over 60,000 transnational corporations (TNCs), compared to 37,000 in 1990. These TNCs have around 800,000 foreign affiliates, compared to some 170,000 foreign affiliates in 1990, and millions of suppliers and distributors operating along their value chains.'[9]

The tendency of governments and international organisations to push for more liberalisation, free trade, open markets and privatisation as a means to solve economic and social problems has put a damper on efforts to protect breastfeeding. And yet, the belief that 'markets' can help to solve economic and social problems is quite unfounded. 'The assumption that markets will regulate themselves is contrary to logic or human nature. The market is about maximising profits. It is not a social organisation intended to cure social ills. It is not even about fairness, justice or good governance.'[10]

**The International Code***

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 the 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 the correct use of infant formula and the risks of misuse.
- Requires labels to NOT discourage breastfeeding.

* The International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes is in its entirety available as Appendix 1 on pp. 101–108.