



COUNTRY BRIEF: SOUTH AFRICA

Empowering communities to influence local planning for nutrition activities

Introduction to IYCN in South Africa

South Africa's HIV burden is the greatest in the world. From 2009 to 2011, the US Agency for International Development's (USAID) Infant & Young Child Nutrition Project worked to prevent HIV from reaching the next generation and to improve the nutritional status of mothers and children. The project informed a new set of national guidelines on infant and young child feeding in the context of HIV, and with national and international partners, identified opportunities for integrating nutrition assessment, counseling, and support services into programs focusing on prevention of mother-to-child transmission (PMTCT) of HIV. The project also worked in one district to mobilize communities and local government to integrate nutrition activities into community development plans. All of the project's efforts have contributed to strengthening programs that seek to improve the nutrition of infants and young children, pregnant and lactating women, and orphans and vulnerable children (OVC), particularly populations at risk of contracting HIV.

Context for nutrition programming

Twenty-nine percent of pregnant women in South Africa are HIV-positive, and the national transmission rate of HIV from mother to child is 11 percent, a situation that can result from unsafe breastfeeding practices.¹ Inadequate infant and young child feeding practices also

contribute to childhood malnutrition: an estimated 27.4 percent of children under five are stunted.² A study from the Eastern Cape Province revealed that 38 percent of feeding bottle samples collected from PMTCT clinics and home visits were contaminated with fecal bacteria, indicating unsafe replacement feeding practices.³ Additionally, many mothers practice poor complementary feeding for infants and young children between the ages of 6 and 24 months. A national landscape analysis revealed a low level of knowledge among health workers, inadequate protocols and guidelines, and a lack of community involvement as impediments to improving these practices.

Project activities and accomplishments

Strengthened national policies and programs

IYCN collaborated with partners to align national nutrition guidelines with the World Health Organization's 2010 recommendations on HIV and infant feeding. Notably, as a member of the National Breastfeeding Committee, the project played a key role in the country's August 2011 move to promote an exclusive breastfeeding

- 1 2008 antenatal HIV seroprevalence survey, Department of Health, South Africa.
- 2 Department of Health, Medical Research Council, OrcMacro. *South Africa Demographic and Health Survey 2003*. Pretoria: Department of Health.
- 3 Andersen E, et al. *Journal of Tropical Medicine*. 2007; 53:409-414.

strategy for all mothers, including those who are HIV positive. The project also contributed to a new national nutrition strategy, adapted job aids for use by lay counselors and community health workers, and collaborated with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to identify opportunities for integrating nutrition assessment, counseling, and support into PMTCT services and nutrition projects led by partners funded by the US President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief.

Built the capacity of community health workers

In Eastern Cape Province, IYCN supported PATH's efforts to improve the quality, availability, and uptake of PMTCT services by strengthening under-resourced PMTCT sites and mobilizing communities to increase the uptake of those services. To prevent malnutrition and ensure HIV-free survival of children, IYCN contributed to integrating infant and young child feeding activities into PMTCT interventions. Specifically, the project helped develop a training package for lay counselors and community health workers and supported the training of 100 community health workers on infant and young child feeding. In addition, the project assisted the provincial health department to develop tools for surveying facility-based nutrition services.

Integrated nutrition into local government structures

By adapting a regional, community-based planning tool for use locally, IYCN worked with private-sector partner, J & J Trust, South Africa's Ekurhuleni Municipality, and Ward 86 within the municipality's Nigel District to conduct a pilot program that integrated nutrition interventions into economic and community development planning. This model approach can be scaled up throughout the district and beyond to enhance awareness of the nutritional status of young children and dietary and feeding practices that can improve their health.

Through this approach, IYCN trained community volunteers to engage the community in nutrition activities. The community response was overwhelming, and community leaders included nutrition activities in development plans. These new activities included establishing a support group for pregnant and lactating mothers and

their parents and initiating an awareness campaign on available structures to support lactation.

"I have seen the level of interest in nutrition in the community increase, and now ward members are empowered to influence the development plans of the municipality and the district to prioritize support for nutrition."

— Benny Sikhakhane, IYCN Project consultant

Lessons learned

The use of existing structures and processes made planning community nutrition activities and allocating resources feasible. The community in Ward 86 continues to implement nutrition activities based on their community development plans. Although the project did not fund the implementation of these activities, community leaders were able to leverage existing structures and resources.

Engagement with communities revealed that people are aware of nutrition and related issues, but that technical support is needed to develop creative behavior change interventions. It is possible to build better linkages between the community and health services by engaging the municipal planning system.

Looking ahead

PATH and other partners will continue to provide technical assistance and mobilize resources in support of government plans and strategies to improve nutrition in South Africa. IYCN conducted follow-up meetings with Ekurhuleni municipality to discuss ways of expanding the project to other communities, and PATH has incorporated aspects of the project into a new "Window of Opportunity Project," which will cover selected districts in Gauteng Province.

Learn more at www.iycn.org/south-africa

ABOUT THE INFANT & YOUNG CHILD NUTRITION PROJECT

The Infant & Young Child Nutrition Project is funded by the United States Agency for International Development. The project is led by PATH and includes three partners: CARE, The Manoff Group, and University Research Co., LLC. For more information, please contact info@iycn.org or visit www.iycn.org.