



PATH/Christine Demmelmaier

COUNTRY BRIEF: **MALAWI**

Strengthening nutrition support in Malawi's communities

Introduction to IYCN in Malawi

From 2010 through 2011, the Infant & Young Child Nutrition (IYCN) Project supported Malawi's Office of the President and Cabinet (OPC) to develop community-based nutrition services targeting mothers, infants, and young children, including HIV-positive populations. The project increased understanding of feeding behaviors, supported enhanced national policies, played a key role in shaping the country's Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) strategy, developed a package of training materials for a new cadre of community nutrition workers, and increased the capacity of community-based workers to improve infant and young child nutrition. We piloted capacity-building activities in Salima District, which will be scaled up nationally to improve the growth, nutritional status, health, and HIV-free survival of infants and young children.

Context for nutrition programming

More than 40 percent of Malawian children younger than five years of age are chronically malnourished,¹ a condition that is associated with inadequate feeding practices during the first two years of life. Mothers do not always practice exclusive breastfeeding, instead complementing their infants' diets with water or watery porridge, which puts babies at risk for malnutrition and illness. When they do breastfeed, breastfeeding sessions are sometimes too short, and children are only fed from one breast, a practice that leaves babies unsatisfied and compromises the mothers' breast milk supply.

When they begin complementary feeding, many mothers feed their children foods and drinks that are not nutritious, such as junk foods and soda. Children's diets lack diversity, and many are not fed frequently enough. The government of Malawi recognizes that mothers and other community-based caregivers have not had the needed support to improve their feeding practices.

Research conducted by IYCN confirmed this lack of community-based support and concluded that with improved social and behavior change interventions at the community level, it is feasible for mothers and other caregivers to change their feeding practices. IYCN found that although many caregivers did not know how to prepare inexpensive, nutritious meals with locally available foods and practice proper breastfeeding, when given practical solutions, they easily improved the way they fed their children. Through this research, the creation of relevant tools and guidelines, and support to community-based caregivers, IYCN has prepared the government of Malawi to design new programs that take into account the social, economic, and cultural contexts affecting feeding practices.

Project activities and accomplishments

IYCN worked with the Department of Nutrition, HIV and AIDS in the OPC; Ministries of Agriculture and Food Security, Health, and Gender, Children, and Community Development; and local government, nongovernmental, and international

¹ 2004 Malawi Demographic and Health Survey.



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partners, including the United Nations Children’s Fund, to improve the nutritional status of children less than two years of age and their mothers. We placed special emphasis on strengthening the capacity of community workers and local government structures and implementing activities that integrate nutrition into HIV services. By successfully piloting activities in Salima District, the project built the case for similar initiatives nationwide.

Examined caregivers’ feeding practices

IYCN conducted a joint research project with Bunda College of Agriculture and the World Bank to generate information that can be used to improve infant and young child nutrition activities within Malawi’s existing programs. The study was conducted in two phases: phase one was exploratory, and gathered information about feeding practices from 60 mothers with children 6 through 23 months of age and 18 key informants. In phase two, or the Trials of Improved Practices phase, counselors offered 100 mothers of children 0 through 23 months of age one to three improved feeding practices that they could try for about one week and gathered results from trying those practices.

The study increased understanding of current feeding practices among families with children younger than two



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Consulting with caregivers to identify practical infant feeding solutions

In a joint study with the World Bank, IYCN identified key infant feeding problems and tested practical solutions to inform new behavior change communication materials for community nutrition workers. Findings revealed that mothers could adopt new, improved practices, such as:

- Preparing less watery porridge.
- Substituting fruit for biscuits and sugary drinks.
- Emptying one breast and then offering the other when breastfeeding.
- Feeding animal-source foods.

years of age, and the social, cultural, and economic context influencing them. It also identified problems that impede adequate dietary intake and proposed changes in feeding practices that mothers tested to determine the practices that are most feasible and critical to improving children’s nutrition. Most importantly, the study demonstrated that it is feasible for mothers in Malawi to improve their feeding practices using locally available resources in ways that have the potential to positively impact their children’s health and nutrition.

The project collaborated with the OPC and the World Bank to disseminate results from the study, including recommendations for correcting feeding-related problems, during a workshop with 90 attendees, including nutrition program implementers, policymakers, and donors. Following the dissemination workshop, *The Nation*, Malawi’s national newspaper, published an article that focused on the results of the study, including that feeding junk food, such as tea, soda, and orange squash, to children contributes to chronic malnutrition. In the article, Mary Shawa, Malawi’s Secretary for Nutrition and HIV and AIDS, called for the government and other public-sector entities to work together to address information gaps that contribute to the problem of malnutrition.

“Indeed biscuits are expensive...and with the same amount of money, I can buy eight bananas.”

—Mother, Salima

Enhanced national strategies for improved nutrition

These study findings helped influence the World Bank’s investment strategy for nutrition in Malawi as well as the country’s SUN strategy. In addition, the findings created the basis for a national operational strategy promoting improvements in specific infant and young child feeding practices. IYCN led the development of the operational strategy and supported the government to build consensus

among various ministries and stakeholders that community-based activities should focus on prevention of undernutrition, primarily stunting, and that infants and young children and pregnant women and girls should be the primary target groups. Stakeholders agreed that investments should primarily go toward building the skills of community-based workers so that they can effectively counsel mothers on infant and young child feeding practices.

The operational strategy aims to:

- Develop counseling materials and orient community workers on the materials.
- Re-introduce the “home craft worker” cadre, who once offered nutrition support in communities, as a community agent focusing on nutrition.
- Strengthen monitoring of health worker promotion of immediate initiation and exclusive breastfeeding.
- Expand coverage of peer support groups to ensure that all mothers have access and support.
- Ensure that special attention is given to counseling mothers of sick children to support optimal feeding during illness.

IYCN also played a key role in shaping the country’s SUN strategy by advocating for civil society participation in the SUN movement; leading a working group on monitoring and evaluation to develop strategy indicators; and heading a working group to create new information, education, and communication materials in support of the strategy. In 2011, Janet Guta, IYCN Country Coordinator, represented the country at two international SUN meetings in Washington, DC, and New York, where she joined other national stakeholders in sharing Malawi’s experiences as an early adopter of the global SUN movement.

The project team provided technical assistance to the government of Malawi to develop several other key national strategies and guidelines, including the *National Micronutrient Strategy*, the *Community-based Management of Acute Malnutrition Guidelines*, and the *National Education and Communications Strategy*.

Built the capacity of community-based workers to prevent malnutrition

To improve nutrition service provider performance at the community level, the project used findings from its formative research to develop a package of materials to support the OPC’s plan to identify and train a new cadre of community workers focused on improving nutrition. The *Community*

Nutrition Workers Training Package includes a training curriculum, counseling cards, a booklet of key messages, a recipe book to help community nutrition workers conduct cooking demonstrations, and supervision guidelines. The project helped to introduce the materials to key stakeholders during a national SUN launch event in July 2011.

During a three-month pilot intervention in Salima District, IYCN used the training package to train 20 national trainers, 20 district trainers, and 153 community workers. Following the training, the district trainers conducted monthly mentoring and supportive supervision visits for 90 trained community workers. Trained community workers reached more than 1,000 households with nutrition counseling in 77 villages.

Because new community-level workers had not yet been identified, IYCN collaborated with the OPC to select community workers through the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security and the Ministry of Gender, Children, and Community Development to integrate nutrition counseling and support into their existing activities.

To further improve support at the community level, the project also assisted local government authorities to develop mentoring and supportive supervision plans, create a district nutrition database, and initiate a nutrition coordination meeting forum—all of which will continue beyond the pilot intervention.

Lessons learned

Formative research findings can help motivate stakeholders to take action. The project’s formative research demonstrated that it is feasible for mothers in Malawi to make small changes in feeding practices that go a long way toward preventing malnutrition. These powerful findings influenced



Royce's story: Small changes, big growth

When Gladys, a community health worker trained by IYCN, first met Linnes during a home visit, the young mother was concerned that her nine-month-old baby, Royce, had remained the same weight for the past three months. Sitting in the shade outside of Linnes' mudbrick home in Nthiwatiwa village, Gladys asked her how she had been feeding her baby and used a set of illustrated counseling cards to suggest feeding changes. She advised that increasing the frequency of breastfeeding, making thicker porridge, and diversifying Royce's meals could improve her growth and health.

During several more home visits, Gladys found that Linnes was able to make these small feeding improvements; and after just two months, the baby's growth improved significantly. Now, Linnes proudly shares her story with other mothers in the village.



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several national strategies and contributed to the country's focus on prevention of stunting.

Training materials should meet the needs of community-based workers. Because community-based workers selected for IYCN's trainings lacked knowledge about the basic principles of nutrition, adapting the training materials to include this basic information, along with building counseling skills, led to the development of more effective tools for counseling caregivers.

Mentoring and supportive supervision are a great way to reinforce concepts learned during a training session. We found that community workers were motivated to do the work when they received regular supervision and mentoring.

Looking ahead

District trainers will continue to provide supportive supervision to trained community workers, and Salima's District Health Officer has committed to allocate funds to train more community nutrition workers. To expand its efforts across Malawi, the project developed a national plan for scaling up community-based activities. As part of the scale-up plan, the government aims to recruit 8,000 new community nutrition workers across the country who

will be trained using the package of materials developed by IYCN. Some nongovernmental organizations, including Save the Children, Millennium Villages, and Concern Worldwide, have already adopted the package for use in their programs. IYCN encourages a wide range of organizations to adapt and translate the materials into local languages—based on their own formative research—to meet programmatic goals and objectives.

Available resources

- Maternal, Infant, and Young Child Nutrition in Malawi: Community Nutrition Workers Training Package (2011)
 - ✓ Curriculum
 - ✓ Counseling cards
 - ✓ Key messages booklet
 - ✓ Recipe book
 - ✓ Supervision guidelines
 - ✓ National and district-level supervision checklists
- Consulting with Caregivers (report and handout): Formative Research to Determine the Barriers and Facilitators to Optimal Infant and Young Child Feeding in Three Regions of Malawi (2011)

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.