

Civil Society Platform in Sierra Leone commemorates World Breastfeeding Week

Background: In Sierra Leone, child mortality rates are high but have declined from 214/1000 live births in 2005 to 200/1000 in 2008 and to 185/1000 in 2011.¹ The rates of breastfeeding are still low, only 32%² of infants 0-6 months are exclusively breastfed. As Sierra Leone moves towards reducing under nutrition in its Scaling up Nutrition (SUN) initiative, the Ministry of Health and Sanitation (MoHS) and its partners seek to improve child survival by embarking on high impact and cost effective interventions: promoting exclusive breastfeeding, timely and approximate complementary feeding practices, and uptake of micronutrients among many others.

The recent launching of the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) initiative in 2012 underscores the importance of nutrition in the first 1000 days. The formation of the Civil Society Platform (CSP) is part of the SUN initiative to promote nutrition actions and coordinate nutrition interventions among civil society organizations (CSOs) in Sierra Leone.

As part of its support to the MoHS in commemoration of World Breastfeeding Week (WBW), the CSP in Sierra Leone supported community sensitization activities, the national launch of WBW as well as interactive radio discussions.

Community sensitizations: The CSP worked in collaboration with the Food and Nutrition Directorate of the MoHS and the chairladies of six major markets in the Western Area to raise awareness amongst women about the importance of breastfeeding. In line with this year's theme: 'Breastfeeding Support: Close To Mothers' which underscores the importance of breastfeeding peer counselling, the CSP engaged market women on breastfeeding norms, perceived barriers and how to provide counselling support to peers.

As local women came to the market, they joined in by sharing their personal experience on exclusive breastfeeding. Sex during breastfeeding was the most contested topic during the sensitization. Interestingly, it was openly discussed and the women gave meaningful contributions. Songs on exclusive breastfeeding were prepared and by the time the CSP members left the market places the market women were singing the breastfeeding songs. UNICEF Infant and Young Child Feeding Counselling Cards were used during the sensitization as illustration materials and were very much appreciated by the women. Banners were prepared with the SUN logo added to the national emblem and the 2013 theme.

Launching of the WBW: The CSP members travelled to the provincial city of Bo to participate in the national launching of WBW. There was high level representation at the launch including government officials from MoHS and other line ministries, UN agencies, donors and

representatives of mother support groups. This launch focussed on the integration of mother-to-mother support and community wellness advocacy Groups. All speakers reiterated their commitment and total support to WBW especially in the fight to eliminate misconception and increase coverage nationwide.

During the launching the CSP committed their continued support to promote SUN and called on the government to:

- Promote collaboration with civil society working for children and for communities to work together in supporting nutrition
- Support the promotion of behavior change interventions through supporting community structures such as Mother-to-Mother support groups, peer counseling and other channels
- Increased budgetary allocation to nutrition by government and all development partners to support SUN

Radio discussions: The CSP also engaged in radio advocacy with Star Radio which has national coverage and a local radio station (Citizen Radio) that has more extensive audience in the Urban Western Area. The radio advocacy sessions were conducted in collaboration with nutrition directorate in the MoHS. The discussions were aimed to increase awareness on the importance of early initiation of breastfeeding, exclusive breastfeeding and myths and misconceptions by responding to frequently asked questions. The interactive radio discussions allowed time for the public to provide their feedback and questions by phone and text message.

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1. Childinfo: Monitoring the situation of children and women [Internet]. New York: UN Inter-agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation (IGME).1970 - . Under-five mortality dashboard; [cited 2013 Jan 29]. Available from: http://www.childinfo.org/mortality_underfive_dashboard.html
 2. UNICEF, MOHS, WFP, Statistics Sierra Leone, 2010. Report on the Nutritional Situation of Sierra Leone: Nutrition Survey Using SMART Methods.