

Action brief

# Experiences in the promotion of breastfeeding and complementary feeding in the first thousand days of life in Costa Rica

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**Country:** Costa Rica

**Date:** February 2023

**Topics:** Strengthening of the driving forces behind nutrition equity

**Sub-topics:** Adapting, adopting or enhancing policies to empower women and girls



## Overview



The experiences in the promotion of breastfeeding and complementary feeding in the first thousand days of life at the services of the National Directorate of CEN-CINAI

in Costa Rica are intended to foster the adoption of healthy feeding and nutrition practices among pregnant and breastfeeding women, including teenage mothers and mothers in situations of poverty or extreme poverty with low educational levels and at social risk. To this end, educational activities related to nutrition, diet and the promotion of breastfeeding are held in communities and complemented by other actions focused on health, hygiene, parenting and the socialization of children. This helps enhance the optimal growth and development of children, prevent malnutrition, and improve family living conditions.



## Objectives of the action brief

To encourage the adoption of good dietary practices among pregnant and breastfeeding women, including teenage mothers, in order to promote exclusive breastfeeding

up to 6 months of age and complementary feeding with breastfeeding up to 24 months of age.



## Period covered

Under the auspices of the Ministry of Health of Costa Rica, the National Directorate of CEN-CINAI contributes to the well-being of children through the provision of quality, accessible and equitable health services related to childcare, child protection, preventive nutrition, and the promotion of child growth and development. These services are aimed at boys and girls from before birth to 13 years of age, including their family circles and communities, in order to foster social participation and overall country development.

The National Directorate of CEN-CINAI dates back to 1951, following the creation of the Department of Nutrition of the Ministry of Public Health, with the implementation of nutrition-focused schemes aimed at pregnant and breastfeeding women in situations of economic, social and educational vulnerability. It now attends to these women by incorporating educational and skills development initiatives for the care of their children. In 2012, a cooperation project known as Salud Mesoamérica (Mesoamerica Health) was launched in three phases:

1. Phase I (2012–2015) was aimed at the promotion of sexual and reproductive rights among adolescents and the prevention of teenage pregnancy. As part of this strategy, breastfeeding and complementary feeding in the first thousand days of life were promoted. This first operation was carried out with the economic support of the Inter-American Development Bank. The initial scope included the

Brunca region, located in the south of the country, and the Huetar Caribe region, located on the Caribbean coast, with a goal aimed at teenage mothers. Educational materials on breastfeeding and kits for infant stimulation were designed and acquired, and breastfeeding spaces were made available at CEN-CINAI venues to be used by mothers.

2. Phase II (2016–2018) consisted of the preparation and formalization of institutional regulations and the consolidation of processes nationwide based on the lessons learned.
3. Phase III (2018–present) has consisted of an expansion of the strategy to the rest of the country. In 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, services were adapted to include an external strategy known as Creciendo Juntos (Growing Together) in which mothers were given stimulation kits for their children, monthly food assistance and distance education.

An evaluation of this strategy indicated that mothers “acquired new knowledge and skills” and “were able to share more time with their children” thanks to the materials in the stimulation kit, while the food assistance contributed to family food security.

With this, CEN-CINAI helped mothers cope with the pandemic. Starting in 2023, the institution is again focusing its work on teenage mothers.





## What action was taken?

CEN-CINAI has demonstrated its ability to respond to the needs of mothers and children and can now evolve towards integrated services, including:

- The implementation of breastfeeding spaces provided at CEN-CINAI venues for use by breastfeeding mothers. These are comfortable spaces with a friendly, warm and hygienic atmosphere, equipped with nursing chairs, trash bins and low tables. Printed material and educational activities aimed at mothers on issues such as benefits and advice on extended breastfeeding also are available.
- The design, production and distribution of educational materials based on scientific and up-to-date information and written in a friendly and practical tone, covering issues related to breastfeeding and nutrition in the first thousand days of life. This material has been reproduced and is available at CEN-CINAI venues as reference material and for use in educational activities.
- The creation of innovative strategies, such as the external “Growing Together Virtually” project, which promotes the development, optimal growth and prolongation of breastfeeding. This project focuses on mothers with children under 3 years of age and works with a stimulation kit that the mother or caregiver uses with the guidance of civil servants.
- Refresher courses and awareness-raising activities for civil servants by means of annual conferences or seminars with presentations from experts in the field of breastfeeding and dietary guidelines for the first thousand days.
- The systematization of educational actions and activities and of events such as promotional activities carried out at CEN-CINAI venues nationwide as part of National Nutrition Week and World Breastfeeding Week. A strategy has been implemented to document and systematize the activities carried out at each venue and to generate a national report.

- Based on the lessons learned, giving sustainability to the Growing Together project among mothers and their children.

As for the results, the standout achievements are:

- 237 breastfeeding spaces implemented nationwide
- 630 venues providing educational material
- 270 civil servants present at 2022 virtual webinar on food-based dietary guidelines for the first thousand days of life

Participating in nationwide educational actions as part of World Breastfeeding Week in 2021 and 2022 were:

- ✓ 68 per cent of CEN-CINAI venues (426)
- ✓ 928 civil servants
- ✓ 467 members of CEN-CINAI committees
- ✓ 17,224 children
- ✓ 15,078 families

The “Growing Together Virtually” project for 2022 centred around children under 2 years of age, with a focus on teenage mothers:

- ✓ 53 per cent of CEN-CINAI venues (332)
- ✓ 3,548 mothers (10 per cent of them teenagers)
- ✓ 78 per cent of mothers attended five or more educational sessions in 2021

The strategy of differential care for teenage mothers became official in 2022.



## What would the country do differently?

In terms of challenges, the following deserve a mention:

- Limited funding to implement breastfeeding spaces at all CEN-CINAI venues
- Limited funding to reproduce educational material on a consistent basis
- Limited funding to implement strategies to promote breastfeeding and complementary feeding in the first thousand days.
- The need for research into knowledge, attitudes and practices on breastfeeding and complementary feeding among pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers currently receiving services at CEN-CINAI.
- Implementing the CEN-CINAI communication strategy to promote breastfeeding and nutrition in the first thousand days, which was designed taking into account socioeconomic aspects, the realities of CEN-CINAI venues and the availability of resources, resulting in knowledge, attitudes and practices related to breastfeeding and nutrition in the first thousand days and in the rights of women during pregnancy and breastfeeding.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has affected not just the health of countries, but also their economies. -Budget cuts are planned in Costa Rica that could affect programmes such as CEN-CINAI.
- The operational capacity of the National Directorate of CEN-CINAI to fulfil all its functions with the resources allocated to it.

Solutions included:

- Managing technical assistance with international cooperation agencies.
- Implementing innovative strategies for the provision of services during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Efforts to provide ongoing education to staff members virtually during the COVID-19 pandemic on issues related to breastfeeding and complementary feeding in the first thousand days.



## Adaptation and applicability

Recommendations that can be extrapolated to other countries include:

- **Justify the budget with national legislation and set up technical cooperation agreements with national and international institutions or organizations within the framework of the technical cooperation agreements signed.**
- **Design and refresh educational material based on the latest scientific data and provide key messages according to the needs of the population.**
- **Identify innovative and differentiated strategies according to national needs.**
- **Provide ongoing education to civil servants.**
- **Systematize the documentation of educational activities.**
- **Have an updated and official regulation for use in all territories.**
- **Keep authorities informed of progress in the implementation of the measures.**





## What is the role of the SUN Movement in this good practice?

The SUN Movement in Costa Rica provided technical support and funding for the preparation of dietary guidelines for the first thousand days in

Costa Rica through the SUN Multi-Sectoral Platform and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.



## Next steps

The next steps that can be taken to make progress in this good practice at CEN-CINAI include:

- Continuing to count on existing and updated national legislation to justify budget allocations.
- Implementing and following up on the CEN-CINAI communication strategy for the promotion of breastfeeding and complementary feeding in the first thousand days.
- Carrying out a review and update of educational messages based on scientific information and tailored to national realities and culture and current dietary guidelines.
- Continuing with the systematized practice of documenting the educational actions carried out.
- Continuing with regular refresher and awareness-raising activities among civil servants.
- Fostering innovative and differentiated care strategies according to national needs.
- Continuing to manage technical assistance and cooperation.
- Monitoring and evaluating the actions.



## Further information

References:

Costa Rica, National Directorate of CEN-CINAI, Unit for Research and Monitoring of Growth and Development.

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<https://www.cen-cinai.go.cr/>

Educational material designed:



[https://www.cen-cinai.go.cr/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Catalogo-materiales-promocion-crecimiento-y-desarrollo\\_CEN-CINAI-06.01.23.pdf](https://www.cen-cinai.go.cr/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Catalogo-materiales-promocion-crecimiento-y-desarrollo_CEN-CINAI-06.01.23.pdf)



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