

## **Baby Friendly Communities in Gambia**

In Sukuta, a rural community in the Gambia, the Baby-Friendly Community Initiative (BFCI) has led community members to acknowledge the need to care for mothers, instituting a local law relieving women of heavy work for three months before and six months following delivery. In this country where women take on the care of their children and their husbands, men are now more supportive, and make sure that pregnant women have a more varied diet and attend prescribed prenatal appointments.

When conducting assessments of infant feeding practices, the National Nutrition Agency of the Gambia found that most deliveries took place at home with the assistance of traditional birth attendants. Also, feeding practices were influenced by traditional beliefs, which included feeding infants liquids other than breastmilk. It was noted that healthy feeding practices required attention to sanitation and hygiene practices. It became clear that the best approach to infant feeding was one that integrated many of these factors – and drew on the resources of the entire community.

The Gambia's BFCI integrates all aspects of infant feeding and care into its 'Ten Steps to Successful Infant Feeding'. Along with support for exclusive breastfeeding, the Gambia's 'Ten Steps' (inspired by the 'Ten Steps to Successful Breastfeeding') include attention to maternal nutrition, environmental sanitation and personal hygiene. BFCI has been adopted as a national strategy in the Gambia's nutrition and health policies. To date, the programme has been expanded to 200 communities throughout the country, with further plans to reach more than 400 primary health care communities.

In fact, BFCI has been so successful in getting the entire community involved that it is being used as a model – and entry point – for the Gambia's newly formulated national early childhood development (ECD) policy framework. The BFCI training manual has been adapted as an ECD manual, with additional emphasis on psychosocial care and early learning and stimulation for children aged 0-8 years.

To become 'baby-friendly' a community must appoint eight people – a village health worker, a traditional birth attendant and six elected members, three of them men – to serve as a Village Support Group. They are trained in the BFCI Ten Steps, which they then pass along to pregnant and lactating women and their spouses.

BFCI was launched in 12 pilot communities in October 1995, and after 10 months, an evaluation revealed that 100 per cent of mothers initiated breastfeeding within 24 hours of delivery (94 per cent within the first hour). Evaluations further indicated the crucial role played by men's involvement, establishing a strong and clear message that maternal and infant nutrition is everybody's business.

While breastfeeding is almost universally practised in the Gambia, optimal breast-feeding is not, according to national surveys. An effort to improve breastfeeding practices has now blossomed into the current BFCI, where communities are constantly building on the original approach.

Isatou Jallow Semega-Janneh, Executive Director of the National Nutrition Agency, is National BFCI Coordinator. "An integrated approach is really the only way to meet the nutritional and developmental needs of all young children," she said, "using breastfeeding as the entry point." The aim: "To make families and communities key actors." BFCI, she said, "empowers and supports them."

The community training is undertaken with great care, and takes into consideration traditional beliefs and practices as well as local knowledge. Community elders form an integral part of the process.

Singing and dancing, a Gambian tradition, is used in the dissemination of BFCI messages by translating the 'Ten Steps' into musical performances. In this way, the whole community, young and old, can sing and dance in celebration of successful infant feeding while absorbing information on all the BFCI components.

Some of the communities have reestablished the maaka, a traditional shelter, where mothers who return to work in the fields can be with their babies. And recognizing the importance of good nutrition beyond the breastfeeding years, many communities are establishing community gardens with foods rich in micronutrients for everyone.

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