



# FEED THE FUTURE

The U.S. Government's Global Hunger & Food Security Initiative



ABYI SOLOMON • SAVE THE CHILDREN

## Engaging Communities through Enhanced Community Conversations

**D**ata from the Empowering the New Generation to Improve Nutrition and Economic opportunities (ENGINE) project's baseline study and the results of 48 focus group discussions and 160 in-depth interviews with pregnant and lactating women, their husbands, their mothers and mothers-in-law, health extension workers, agriculture extension workers, and community leaders show that pregnant and lactating women in ENGINE-supported areas of Ethiopia consume mainly grains and pulses, and to a lesser extent, vegetables. Women generally do not increase their consumption of food when pregnant. They are motivated to eat nutritious food but socio-economic constraints and gender role disparities restrict their access to and control of household income and agricultural produce. Heavy workloads limit



## ENGINE TECHNICAL BRIEF 8

EMPOWERING NEW GENERATIONS WITH IMPROVED NUTRITION AND ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES



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time available to rest and cultural values make women reluctant to prepare food for themselves, eat differently from other family members, or eat outside of family meal times.

Nor are the diets of children in the region optimal. Quantitative and qualitative data showed that the children between the ages of 6 and 23 months had very low diversity in their diets, which lacked animal source and micronutrient-rich foods that are critical for growth. The water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) environments in their homes put them at high risk for stunting as well.

To address the barriers to healthy maternal, infant, and young child nutrition (MIYCN) practices identified in these studies, rather than simply disseminating informa-

tion, ENGINE used the information to develop an evidence-based social and behavior change communication (SBCC) strategy. ENGINE's SBCC activities focused on behavior-centered programming, which provides opportunities for families, health workers, and other community members to participate in formulating and testing proposed practices, strategies, activities, messages, and materials that support improved behaviors and relationships between couples. The strategy positioned nutrition as "A Family Affair" and promoted evidence-based behaviors to reduce chronic under-nutrition in children under two years of age through mass media, engagement with religious leaders, frontline health and agriculture workers, and community meetings.

## LEARNING BY DOING

From July to October 2013, ENGINE implemented the first phase of its SBCC program, which included a pilot of community conversations about nutrition. During this phase, ENGINE trained 225 women and 15 men as community change agents (CCAs) to facilitate the meetings and established 120 community conversation groups. More than 3,500 community members attended the sessions.

The CCAs gave nutrition talks, read stories aloud and used flipcharts with illustrations to facilitate learning. The community conversations increased participants' knowledge of nutrition but ENGINE encountered several

challenges in implementation:

- ◆ Mixed groups prevented discussion and made practicing behaviors and roles difficult. Men comprised only two percent of all CC participants.
- ◆ Facilitating conversations with 20 to 30 people was challenging.
- ◆ The majority of the CCAs had low-to-moderate literacy and had difficulty using the text-heavy job aids.
- ◆ Ninety-four percent of CCAs were young women; it can be challenging for young adults to facilitate conversations with elders.

## ENHANCED COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

Based on these and other observations ENGINE developed an approach to enhance the meetings. Enhanced community conversations (ECCs) go beyond raising awareness and knowledge to promote the adoption of nutrition-related skills, behaviors, and gender transformative roles. ECC groups were slightly smaller, with a maximum of 15 to 20 people and were homogenous, composed of either pregnant and lactating women, husbands of pregnant or lactating women and fathers of children under two years of age, or grandmothers of children under two years of age. All ECCs included information on nutrition, health care-seeking practices, and agriculture-nutrition topics (see box) and were held every week or every other week for ten consecutive meetings.

ECCs use interactive methods and activities to help adults learn. In addition to nutrition talks, discussions, and stories, ECCs include role plays, games, contests, and singing and at the end of each meeting participants received take-home materials or activities to spark

### First 1,000 Days of Maternal and Child Nutrition ECCs

1. Introduction and First 1,000 Days Overview
2. Early pregnancy
3. Late pregnancy
4. Nutrition for mama and baby from baby's birth to 6 months old and WASH family actions
5. WASH family actions to prepare for baby's turning 6 months old
6. Nutrition for mama and baby when baby is 6 to 7 months old
7. Nutrition for mama and baby when baby is 8 to 12 months old
8. Nutrition for mama and baby when baby is 12 to 24 months old
9. WASH, MIYCN, and agriculture
10. Wrap-up and commitments



The creative concept to promote dietary diversity presented a *gulicha* with three “pillars” of good nutrition: animal-source foods (red), leafy green and vitamin A-rich vegetables (green), and fruits, fats and oils (yellow).

discussion with their families and neighbors. To enhance skills-based learning, groups were occasionally sub-divided into smaller groups of two to five, which gave participants more time to practice skills and to have in-depth conversations about a specific issue. Highly-engaging audio recordings of virtual facilitators (VFs) supported the CCAs and provided a level of consistency across all ECC meetings.

ENGINE engaged three local nongovernmental organizations to facilitate implementation of 1,872 ECCs in 30 *woredas*. A total of 37,440 fathers, mothers, and grandmothers (equal numbers of each) attended, 75 percent of whom graduated by having attended eight or more sessions.

### Creative Design: The SBCC Materials

ENGINE identified objects, places, events, rituals, roles, relationships, traditions, values, and people with special significance in the local context that had the potential to promote desired behaviors. Some examples include:

- ◆ To explain dietary diversity, ENGINE introduced an image of a *gulicha*, the large round plate used to cook *injera*, a flat bread that is a staple food in Ethiopia (see photos above). To properly bake *injera* the plate must be level, balanced by three clay pillars on the cooking fire. ENGINE used an image of a *gulicha* to explain how to balance a diet by using fats, vegetables and fruits, and meat as the three pillars. These three pillars must be consumed in balanced amounts to support the diet, which is completed with the addition of *injera*, represented by the plate, for energy.
- ◆ The sturdy, flat-surfaces of the interior walls of homes in Ethiopian rural farming communities and the custom of decorating homes with colorful posters, photographs, and décor were considered when making the decision to provide ECC participants with printed materials to take home.

Creative concepts used in ENGINE’s SBCC materials and messaging included:

- ◆ **The Sunflower Stages concept**, which supports communication about MIYCN by dividing the First 1,000 Days into four main stages of child development and nutritional needs: Seed (child in the womb/pregnancy); Sprout (0 to 6 months); Bud (6 to 11 months); and Flower (12 to 24 months).
- ◆ **The Star Foods concept**, which supports communication about nutrient-rich foods necessary for pregnant or lactating women and children 6 to 24 months old.
  - **3-Star Foods are animal-source foods**, including eggs, milk, cottage cheese, organ meats, flesh meat, chicken, and fish. ENGINE promoted eating at least one serving of animal-source foods per day.
  - **2-Star Foods are nutrient dense fruits and vegetables**. ENGINE promoted the addition of 2-STAR vegetables to every meal and the addition of 2-STAR fruits to each meal or consumption as daily snacks.
  - **1-Star Foods are fats and oils**, including oil, butter, sesame (*selyit*), niger seed (*nug*), linseed or flaxseed (*telba*). ENGINE promoted adding 1-Star Foods to every meal for children under the age of two.

Materials used during ECCs included:

- ◆ **VF recording:** Professional voice actors played the roles of husband and wife, Aya Mulat and Ete Birtukan. Ete Birtukan is a nurse and an expert in maternal and child nutrition. Aya Mulat is a retired agriculture extension worker who is knowledgeable on nutrition and nutrition-sensitive agriculture. The two characters help the CCA facilitate the group activities, tell stories and jokes, and give advice.

Forty-one percent of men and 29 percent of women reported that they made positive changes in their relationship with their spouse as a result of listening to the VFs and 38 percent of men and 31 percent of women reported changes in their relationship with their family.



◆ **The Queen Bee Maternal Menu Planning Game and the Buds & Flowers Menu Planning Game:**

These games helped participants practice planning nutritious menus using Star Foods.

◆ **The Earn & Buy Game:** This game helped participants improve decision-making regarding household spending to prioritize income for the purchase of nutrient-rich foods.

◆ **The Discuss & Decide Together Role Plays:** This set of short scenarios helped participants practice safe family dialogue about nutrition, nutrition-sensitive farming, and household spending using skills that safely improve women's assertiveness and improve men's affirmative listening and interpersonal communication skills.

ENGINE provided take-home materials to remind ECC participants about the information and behaviors discussed during the meetings. They were designed to be attractive and to communicate information through colorful visuals and low-literacy text, so as to elicit questions and prompt dialogue among family members and visitors. Take-home materials included:

◆ **Five posters:** One about the First 1000 Days of nutrition; one using the Queen Bee concept to explain maternal nutrition; two about infant and young child feeding, emphasizing thick enriched porridges, Star Foods, quantity and frequency of feeding; and one about handwashing and sanitation practices.

◆ **A series of "how to" accordion fold leaflets** that provide instructions on early initiation of breastfeeding, preparing enriched thick porridge and feeding babies using responsive child feeding practices, raising cows for milk, building a chicken coop to keep infants and young children separated from livestock and poultry, raising chickens and increasing their egg production, and making a tippy tap and washing hands with soap or ash.

◆ **A series of good role model personal testimony cards** with photographs and stories of real-life people who practice healthy MIYCN practices and transformative gender roles. The topics included improved eating practices for mothers, family support for proper child feeding, husbands helping their wives with chores, family support to give mothers more time to rest and eat, and improved couple communication.

## RESULTS

To assess the impact of the ECCs, ENGINE conducted quantitative baseline and endline surveys of 120 ECC participants, conducted focus group discussions with mothers, fathers, and grandmothers, observed mothers preparing *genfo* (thick porridge for infants) in their homes, and interviewed the mothers after the observations.

The ECCs have contributed to significant improvement in MIYCN and WASH behaviors and family relationships within ENGINE-supported communities. Respondents reported changing their spending practices to purchase more nutrient-dense foods and also reported producing and saving more of these foods at home for family consumption. Men who participated in the ECCs have become more supportive of their wives, especially when the women are pregnant or breastfeeding, so that they have more time to rest and eat.

### Changes in Maternal Infant and Young Child Nutrition Practices

Observation of six mothers of children between the ages of six and eight months found that all six properly prepared thick porridge enriched with nutrient-dense foods, which in most cases included an animal source food (milk or egg) and oil, along with a mixture of grains. Some mothers also included small bits of vegetables or fruit.

The proportion of children between 6 and 24 months of age who consumed food from four or more food groups each day increased from 27 to 52 percent. The most dramatic improvement in children's diets was seen in the consumption meat, with an increase from 2 percent at baseline to 21 percent at endline.

Similarly, the proportion of pregnant or lactating women who consumed five or more types of food per day increased from 8 to 17 percent. Data show dramatic

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Table 1. Changes in handwashing behavior

HANDWASHING PRACTICE	MALE		FEMALE	
	BASELINE	ENDLINE	BASELINE	ENDLINE
Not at all	10%	0	6%	1%
When dirt is visible	46%	59%	56%	64%
After toilet use, defecation/urination	53%	79%	58%	79%
After cleaning child following defecation	7%	34%	30%	56%
Before preparing food	2%	34%	77%	85%
Before serving a meal	12%	38%	76%	89%
Before eating	98%	98%	88%	95%
After eating	88%	79%	86%	90%
Before feeding a child	5%	34%	35%	64%
After feeding a child	56%	62%	34%	46%
After tending the field/crops	71%	60%	17%	31%
After handling farm equipment	51%	60%	11%	38%
When I am reminded to	5%	13%	8%	7%

increases in mothers' consumption of meat, yoghurt, milk, cheese, eggs, and many fruits and vegetables.

Alongside these important improvements are two shortcomings. Mothers' consumption of Vitamin-A rich foods and lentils decreased between baseline and endline. An explanation for the decrease in the consumption of lentils could be tied to the decision to position lentils as a staple food rather than as a Star Food.

### Changes in WASH Practices

Data show significant improvement in handwashing practices at most critical times (Table 1). However, the proportion of men who reported washing their hands after tending fields decreased from 71 to 60 percent.

### Changes in Relationships

ECC participants enjoyed the relationship between VFs, Aya Mulat and Ete Birtukan. They noticed and admired the friendship, affection, and respect that the fictional characters showed each other, and frequently remarked that the couple was "blessed by God" because of their happy and harmonious relationship. Figure 1, right, shows the changes in behavior respondents attribute to listening to the VFs.

Displays of affection and emotional intimacy are uncommon among married couples in rural Ethiopia. Husbands and wives in all nine focus group discussions, in all three regions, noticed the affectionate dialogue between Ete Birtukan and Aya Mulat and reported trying to emulate their relationship at home with their own spouses.

Grandmothers also admired the relationship between the two VFs, and said they encourage their sons and daughters-in-law to be like Ete Birtukan and Aya Mulat. *"They are committed to each other. The husband consults his wife and the wife consults her husband. The husband says, please Ete Birtukan, let me talk a little and by turn she also says, Aya Mulat, please let me talk."* (Grandmother, Amhara)

Forty-one percent of men and 29 percent of women reported that they made positive changes in their relationship with their spouse as a result of listening to the VFs and 38 percent of men and 31 percent of women reported changes in their relationship with their

Figure 1. Reported changes in behavior from listening to VFs

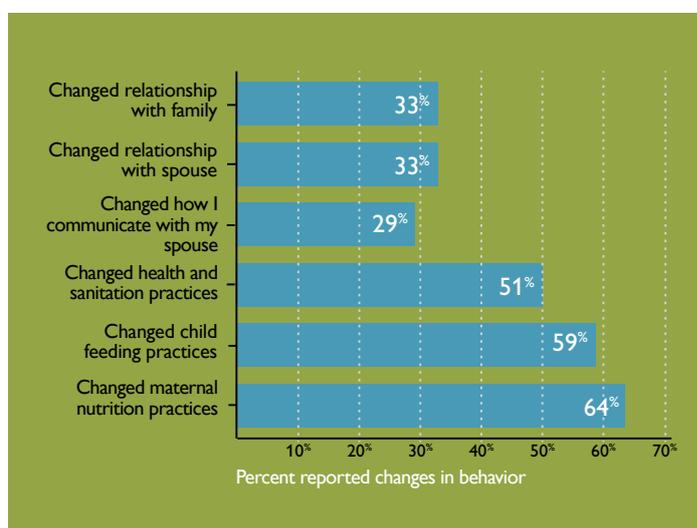


Table 2. Behavior change influences by posters and stickers

BEHAVIOR CHANGE DUE TO TAKE-HOME MATERIALS	POSTER				STICKER			
	SELF		VISITOR		SELF		VISITOR	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Did something different after seeing poster/sticker	114	97.4	-	-	103	91.2	59	52.2
Changed maternal nutrition practices	76	66.7	14	14.7	60	58.3	21	36.2
Changed breastfeeding practices	39	34.2	6	6.3	33	32.0	5	8.6
Changed child feeding/complementary feeding practices	47	41.2	14	14.7	45	43.7	9	15.5
Started paying more attention to nutrition of mother and child	58	50.9	25	26.3	53	51.5	21	36.2
Started buying more nutritious food for mother and child	50	43.9	9	9.5	30	29.1	4	6.9
Talked more about nutrition with my spouse	39	34.2	7	7.4	29	28.2	2	3.4
Talked more about nutrition with my family members	36	31.6	10	10.5	23	22.3	8	13.8

family. “Yes, I want my relationship (with my husband) to be like theirs. Helping each other is blessing from God; it brings household growth; life will be good; the child will [be intelligent].” (Mother, Amhara). “As a farmer, my wife calls me by saying ‘you (ante)’ and similarly I call her by saying ‘you (anchi).’ But the virtual facilitators, Ete Birtukan calls her husband by (his name) ... and Aya Mulat calls his wife by (her name). This has influenced me and I am happy to be like them.” (Father, Amhara)

Men’s maternal nutrition practices, which include supportive actions to help women have more time to rest, eat larger quantities and more diversity of foods, reduce their workloads, and take iron folate supplements during pregnancy, changed even more than women’s (69 percent of men, 62 percent of women). The only areas in which women changed more than men as a result of listening to the VFs were their child feeding and health and sanitation practices.

Women in Amhara described how they had stopped following the traditional practice of “eating down” after hearing Ete Birtukan’s reassurances that increasing the quantity and diversity of food consumed during pregnancy is good for the mother and child. “The audio recordings taught us about [a woman] who was not eating food due to the fear that the fetus will be large and

become difficult during labor, but Ete Birtukan told the woman that she should eat food since it will give strength to her. Then, she did not face any difficulty in labor since she had eaten food.” (Mother, Amhara)

Both male and female participants explained that small acts of affection, such as calling one another by their first names, eating food from the same plate, making coffee for one another, and men hugging and holding their children improved their relationships with their spouses. These changes in family dynamics appear to have been important facilitators of the improved nutrition and WASH practices.

### Impact of Stickers, Posters, Leaflets, and Personal Testimony Cards

The majority of interview respondents reported that they had discussed the stickers (66 percent) and posters (71 percent) with other people and both the stickers and posters prompted ECC participants, friends, neighbors, and visitors to adopt new MIYCN practices (Table 2). Participants also used the accordion-fold leaflets and role model personal testimony cards to engage friends, family members, and neighbors in discussions about nutrition.

“Yes, we talk (about the materials with neighbors and family members). People who come to our house see the poster. When they ask me what it means, I tell them. I tell my family it is important, it is about food, about hygiene and sanitation.” (Grandmother, East Oromia).

## LESSONS LEARNED

- ◆ **Participants admired the respectful, kind, and loving relationship modeled by the VFs and strove to emulate their behaviors.** The VFs were a powerful motivator for positive change for husbands, wives, and grandmothers alike. The changes the fictional characters inspired in family relationships paved the way for improved MIYCN and WASH behaviors as well.
- ◆ **Both quantitative and qualitative data showed that women with older children (7 to 24 months old) perceived the VFs to be the least useful SBCC materials.** Pregnant women and mothers with infants, as well as men, found the VFs to be most useful. It is likely that mothers with children in the older age group are more likely to be distracted and pay less attention to the VFs.
- ◆ **The diversity of SBCC materials created challenges for their procurement, warehousing, packing and distribution.** A mix of SBCC materials designed to support the CCA's facilitation of the meetings enhances outcomes though the large number of materials posed some logistical challenges. Take-home effectively reminded participants about the topics covered during ECCs and added credibility to the information participants relayed to their friends and family members. While using multiple materials to promote the same behaviors in different ways appears to have been effective, some materials, such as door stickers, could most likely be eliminated without diminishing the results.
- ◆ **Care must be taken to ensure SBCC materials are distributed appropriately.** In some cases, respondents took materials that did not correspond to the ages of their children at home. Redistributing materials from one ECC group to another did not work as planned, resulting in some groups not receiving group materials.
- ◆ **The use of multiple creative concepts in the materials may have been unnecessary.** Research suggests that the Star Foods concept was better understood than the *gulicha* concept but the data were not statistically significant.
- ◆ **It may be useful to shorten the length of ECC sessions.** Though the VF dialogues were well-liked by the respondents in general, the VF recordings were often too long. The lessons could be shortened and still retain their effectiveness. Focus group discussions also revealed that CCAs deliberately skipped or rushed through some of the some of the group activities to reduce the duration of the sessions. Other respondents reported attending several ECC sessions in one single meeting, listening to two, three, or even four VF recordings on the same day. ◆



## ABOUT ENGINE

The Empowering the New Generation to Improve Nutrition and Economic opportunities (ENGINE) project was the U.S. Agency for International Development Ethiopia Mission's flagship multisector nutrition project. ENGINE, which was implemented from September 2011 to September 2016, built on the Government of Ethiopia's National Nutrition Program and the U.S. Government's Feed the Future initiatives to prevent undernutrition during the first 1,000 days of life, from the start of pregnancy until the child is two years of age. The project was led by Save the Children in partnership with Tufts University, Jhpiego, Land o' Lakes, the Manoff Group, Valid International, and Jimma University and worked in 116 *woredas* across the Amhara, Tigray, Oromia, SNNPR, and Somali regions of Ethiopia.

ENGINE partnered with Ethiopian ministries to strength existing multisector coordination and support the development and revision of nutrition policies, guidelines, and standards. It integrated instruction on nutrition into the pre-service curriculum for health and agriculture workers and built the capacity of frontline

health and agriculture workers to provide high quality nutrition services. The project's social and behavior change communication activities promoted optimal maternal, infant, and young child feeding practices and dietary diversity at the community level. Work with vulnerable households educated participants about nutrition-sensitive agriculture techniques and livestock management to increase consumption of nutrient-dense foods and augment household income. ENGINE promoted improved water, sanitation, and hygiene practices to prevent diarrhea in children and improve nutritional status, mainstreamed gender in all its activities, and implemented a rigorous research strategy to support and guide effective nutrition policies and practices.

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