

Panel discussion: UN agencies response to challenges related to the management of MAM

Abstract from Ellen Muehlhoff (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations)

Promoting agriculture and food-based solutions to alleviate hunger and malnutrition is a major aim of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). Interventions that focus on optimal nutrition during the first two years of life are recognized as essential in order to capitalize on the window of opportunity for preventing undernutrition and building healthy and productive future lives.

FAO has been promoting improved complementary feeding for children 6-23 months by empowering rural families to enrich young children's diets using local foods. Working through government health and agricultural extension systems, FAO promotes practical hands-on learning approaches that aim at behavior change in family and young child feeding. The trials of improved practices (TIPs) method is used to provide a comprehensive assessment of current dietary practices and to test feasible culturally acceptable solutions and behaviours with caregivers in a real home environment.

Through farmer field schools and community-based demonstrations, households learn how to: 1) grow different nutrient dense crops; 2) raise small livestock to improve family and children's diets, and generate income; 3) select and prepare nutritious complementary food, including indigenous food, based on taste, seasonal availability and price; 4) incorporate fruit and other healthy snacks into children's diets; 5) feed age appropriate quantities of complementary food to children and continue breastfeeding; and 6) practice improved hygiene and sanitation. None of these actions are intuitive and frequently require learning of new knowledge and practical hands-on skills. Recognizing that good eating habits are learnt during the early years, good complementary feeding can form a basis for lifelong healthy eating patterns and may prevent the onset of diet-related diseases in the future.

Few studies have documented the impact of promoting locally available food on children's diets, nutritional status and growth. Even fewer have looked at the impact of combining targeted food security actions, aimed at increasing the production and availability of nutritious food with intensive nutrition education and behaviour change interventions.

Evidence from FAO programs in Cambodia and Malawi has demonstrated: 1) families' interest in using locally available foods to improve the nutritional content of young childrens' diets 2) the relevance of introducing such skills, and 3) the practical feasibility of using improved recipes in the family setting.

FAO is currently exploring how improvements in complementary feeding are most readily adopted on a larger scale and how health and agricultural extension workers and community nutrition promoters can be trained to assist in scaling up the process. Research is ongoing to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of this approach and results are expected to be available in 2015.

Key words: Complementary feeding, food security, nutrition education, research.