

Stories of CHANGE

Raising CHANGE Babies

Through a combination of interactive nutrition education and improved agricultural production, HKI's CHANGE project made a lasting impact on nutrition in northern Côte d'Ivoire



Project participant, Kpafono village

"Ah, yes," with a knowing nod, "He's a CHANGE Baby." One often hears this explanation for rapid growth and good health in some villages of northern Côte d'Ivoire, where the so-called "CHANGE babies" totter around their proud parents' verdant gardens. Their bizarre nickname comes not from local tradition or the name of a popular celebrity but rather a nutrition-sensitive agriculture project, CHANGE, implemented by Helen Keller International (HKI) with the support of Global Affairs Canada. Even over a year after the end of the project, the difference is striking: those children born during or after the project are taller, stronger, and rarely fall ill, according to their mothers.

Many of these women credit CHANGE, which used multiple channels to improve nutrition and health, giving parents the knowledge needed to raise healthier kids. As Fatoumata Yeo Gboklé, project

participant from Tiangakaha village, explains, "Today, thanks to HKI, we know the times when one must wash one's hands, that children need to consume only breastmilk until they're 6 months old ... that we have to vary our food choices. We also learned to make dishes using orange-fleshed sweet potato [a tuber rich in Vitamin A] and other garden crops. When you see the kids born during the project, the difference is clear: they are chubby, healthy, and don't have diarrhea all the time."

CHANGE, implemented from 2013 to 2016, aimed to improve a chronically precarious nutritional situation for young children in northern and north-eastern Côte d'Ivoire. Acute malnutrition affected more than 10% of young children in some regions; half of all school-aged children suffered from anemia, and many were at risk of vitamin A deficiency. These deficiencies

can have negative consequences that last a lifetime; as a project participant in Komborodougou village neatly explained, "A malnourished child does not develop well and therefore is not a very productive adult."

CHANGE thus sought to improve the nutritional status of women and young children through improved access to nutrient-rich crops and animal-source foods, better nutrition and hygiene practices, and greater gender equity and women's empowerment. HKI and partners worked with existing women's groups, providing training on gardening of nutrient-rich crops and chicken raising to augment both collective and household production. In addition to crops chosen for their nutritional value, some profitable market crops were included, with the goal of women's groups collectively selling the surplus production. Such revenues, which reached as high as \$500 a season, greatly amplified women's access to income, which is normally very limited in this zone, and could be highly empowering. Such was the case for Fatoumata Yeo Gboklé. "My family members encouraged me when I worked in the community garden," she explained, "because the money I earned allowed me to help my husband with our household expenses." Through the project, she was thus able to play a more equal role in household decisions—including those related to nutrition and health. Increasing production and incomes can improve access to food, but this is unlikely

to impact nutrition without a simultaneous improvement in knowledge of best nutrition practices. HKI thus collaborated with local NGOs to educate project participants on the nutritional values of different crops and their role in children's diets. Cooking demonstrations introduced new nutritious recipes, made with the crops and eggs harvested from the village garden and henhouse. These sessions also helped dissolve harmful taboos related to nutrition. For example, one deeply rooted belief stated that a child who ate eggs while young would become a thief later, and tradition held that only the chicken's head and feet were reserved for children. Children were thus rarely given eggs and only small bits of (bony) meat. The project was able to change this, as Nassaran Coulibaly of Zonwakaha village explains: "Before, we said that a child who ate eggs would become a thief. But HKI explained that eggs are rich in nutrients and help children grow. They also taught us how to prepare porridge for kids using eggs. So now when our chickens lay eggs, we take some of the

eggs for the kids to eat." Parents also learned about key feeding practices for young children, like exclusive breastfeeding and how to feed sick kids. In addition to group discussions, trained local volunteers organized home visits, with the support of health workers, to whom any serious malnutrition cases were referred. This not only helped spread information on nutrition and ensure best practices were being put into practice but also reinforced the links between the local population and the health system. Indeed, to ensure sustainable impact, HKI worked in partnership with the Ivorian government and built local actors' capacity across all project-related areas.

Recognizing that an Ivorian baby is raised not only by her parents but by her whole extended family, the project reached out to other community members, providing grandmothers and elders with information on proper nutrition. These respected leaders then became a network for reinforcing best practices. In the words of one older man from Zonwakaha village: "Every person, even when determined,





A group gathers for a cooking demonstration (Credit: Bartay)



"Behavior change does not arise from what I want but rather what is useful for me and for the community in general" - a young man in Kouolo

needs to be supported to achieve a goal; we elders will support mothers of young children to make sure they practice exclusive breastfeeding." An older woman in Kokaha village agreed and saw it as her duty to educate new parents: "Mothers who do not put their child to the breast immediately after delivery do not know what they are losing!"

According to Koutanhan Soro, this strategy of community-wide education and support helped transform attitudes in her village. "We used to think a young baby couldn't live without drinking water. Everyone would always give him water, either before or after breastfeeding. And anyone who didn't give their baby water would be criticized! But now, thanks to the project, everyone knows that a child should have only breastmilk until age 6 months. Even if not everyone does it all the time yet, no one would think of reproaching a mother who refused to give her baby water; instead, we all encourage one another to

breastfeed. And the fathers fully agree, because the babies of those who do it are always in good health and don't have swollen bellies. Those who still give their babies water now have to hide to do it!"

Another remarkable difference since the coming of CHANGE is the presence of racks for dishes and firewood, made locally from interlaced wood, standing outside of houses. Traditionally, dishes and pots were left on the ground in the outdoor cooking area: chickens, sheep, and dogs would scavenge in them during the day, and children might play with them. This could lead to contaminated food when they were next used. Moreover, cooking wood was usually stacked on the ground, where it would collect stagnant water, attracting mosquitos, and might hide snakes, a hazard when children came to play. The racks promoted by the project lift the dishes and firewood off the ground, creating neater (and safer) households. Handwashing stations are also now visible in many courtyards, reflecting CHANGE's

emphasis on the importance of hygiene for good health. Poor hygiene, such as feeding children with unwashed hands, can bring on diarrheal diseases, which reduce appetite and impinge on nutrient absorption while increasing nutrient requirements, fostering a vicious cycle of malnutrition.

The project thus sought to tackle malnutrition by not only improving agricultural production and incomes but also using nutrition education to maximize the impact of a healthy harvest. It simultaneously addressed other factors influencing nutrition, like hygiene and equitable division of household labor. With this comprehensive approach, supported by the implication of all members of the household and community, HKI and partners succeeded at improving the health, nutrition, and developmental potential of the "CHANGE babies"—which will endure long after they become "CHANGE kids," "CHANGE teens," and even "CHANGE parents."



Yeo Gbokle, Tiangakaha village

What is Enhanced Homestead Food Production?

- A communal garden or 'village model farm' is established in each village, including infrastructure such as a well.
- On this garden, women learn improved gardening and animal husbandry practices.
- Interactive nutrition education improves their understanding of the causes of malnutrition, including low dietary diversity and poor sanitation, and potential solutions.
- Women are encouraged to establish their own gardens and apply improved infant and young child feeding and hygiene practices.
- Women's empowerment activities support more equitable intra-household decision-making and workload and resource sharing.
- With more varied agricultural products, potentially greater earnings from selling surplus production, and new knowledge, participants are better able to feed their children and families diverse diets rich in micronutrients, combatting malnutrition and improving child health and growth.

FIGHTING MALNUTRITION AT ITS ROOTS.

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