

Example from Gambia

An excellent example of an innovative approach to this problem and its solution is found in the “*The Baby Friendly Community Initiative (BFHI) – An Expanded Vision for Integrated Early Childhood Development in the Gambia*”. The full text of this document will be available on the UNICEF website.

In summary, BFHI was used as the model for the development of the Baby-friendly Community Initiative (BFHI). The BFHI includes 10 steps to successful infant feeding incorporating maternal nutrition, infant nutrition, environmental sanitation and personal hygiene. In other settings, safe delivery or child and maternity protection might have greater relevance. In Gambia, communities identified 5 women and 2 men each, to be trained and certified “Village Support Groups on Infant Feeding”. When the 10 steps developed by the community are implemented, the community is designated a “Baby-friendly Community”.

Training of community representatives as Village Support Groups on infant feeding was considered the most important element of the BFHI. Men’s involvement in the BFHI both as members of the Support Groups and as part of the target population may also be a crucial element for success and sustainability of the intervention. Their involvement in an area, which in the past targeted only women, sent out a clear and strong message that maternal and infant nutrition concerned both men (fathers) and women (mothers).

World Breastfeeding Week may be used as an entry point to bring together targeted politicians, Senior Government and NGO officials, as well as international Agencies for sensitization to create better understanding of the importance of breastfeeding, what has already occurred in country, and what may be possible, and create a cadre of high level support.

In Gambia, such a meeting led to recommendations:

1. intensified information, education and communication (IEC) activities to eradicate taboos and other traditional practices, which affect the practice of optimal breastfeeding;
2. inclusion of breastfeeding in the curricula of schools and training institutions;
3. setting up of support groups on breastfeeding;
4. extended maternity leave for working mothers;
5. development of breastfeeding policies;
6. similar seminars at the regional and community levels;
7. the implementation of the Baby-friendly Hospital Initiative; and
8. ensuring community involvement.

The results of this approach in Gambia were an increase from 60% to 100% in initiation of breastfeeding in the first day of life, and a decline in introduction of complementary feeding at four months of age from 90% to nearly 0%.

In Gambia, the BFHI also helped introduce other community based services that meet the needs of infants and young children are vital to many health, growth and development intervention approaches, including bed nets, HIV/AIDS awareness, immunization support, and reproductive health care. The approach promotes and protects the rights of the child to survival, growth and development.