

# Tackling Malnutrition in South Sudan

October 2020



## UKAM in South Sudan

South Sudan has some of the highest malnutrition rates in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Our UK Aid Match funded project takes a holistic approach to tackling malnutrition in Aweil North and Jur River regions of the country.

Working with our partners SPEDP and HARD we aim to reach just over 28,000 women and girls of child-bearing age and their children, with a focus on children under five.

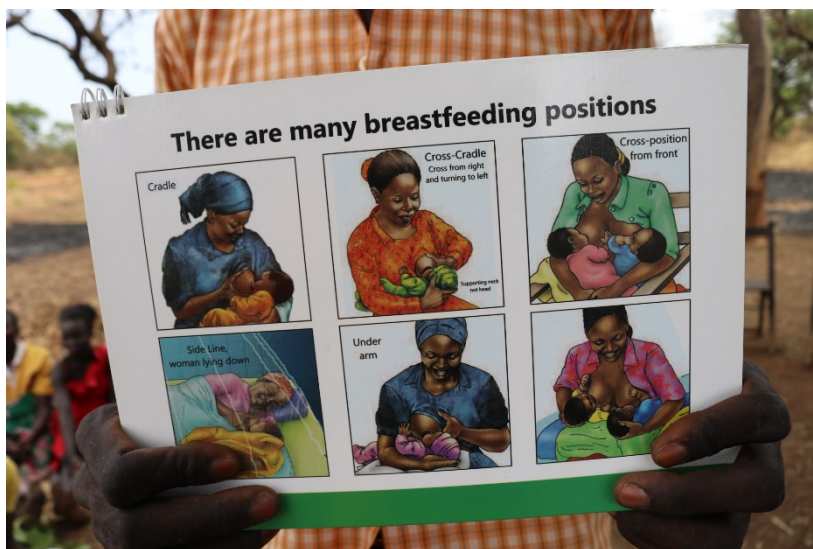
### Our approach

#### Learning about nutrition

We are working with mothers, who tend to hold the most influence in household matters, equipping them with practical knowledge around nutrition – for example the importance of breastfeeding during and after child illness.

The project has established 40 Mother to Mother support groups, which are at the heart of the project. These groups meet regularly and are provided with in-depth nutrition and health education. In feedback sessions, the women have told us that they also share this information with others in the community, for example through songs that they have created themselves.

Three in 10 children under five have suffered from stunting, limiting both their physical and cognitive growth, and often causing chronic diseases in adult life (UNICEF Global Nutrition Report 2016)



Cards used by health facilitators to explain the importance of breastfeeding. Christian Aid/Silvano Yokwe

In addition, the project has trained community-based health facilitators who have reached over 3000 women with nutrition messaging and counselling sessions.

Traditional birth attendants (TBAs) are also key to the project as they are influential in the community, particularly with regards to women's health.

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TBAs now demonstrate excellent knowledge on nutrition and report that their role is shifting from conducting child delivery at home to accompanying pregnant women to deliver in a health centre.

Together these activities have ensured that 15,000 women have been screened for malnutrition, as well as more than 10,600 children under 5 years old. The project has established 8 malnutrition screening centres for these activities. By providing screening services cases of malnutrition are detected and referred to the appropriate health service providers for further support.

**Below:** Rebecca, a TBA has received training to look after mothers and support the delivery of more complex births. Christian Aid/Silvano Yokwe



Radio programmes about nutrition broadcasted locally are estimated to have reached over 11,000 people.

Since the beginning of the project, there has been a substantial increase in knowledge on nutrition among the women involved. There has been a significant increase in breastfeeding and now 100% of women who are of childbearing age recognise the importance of breastfeeding for up to 36 months

#### Improving access to nutritious foods

To date, over 3,300 farmers (over 80% of them are women) have been supported with seeds, tools and training to improve the quality and quantity of their crops. The project has also established 'demonstration plots', where community members can see first-hand the impact of the improved agricultural practices.

The 2019 planting season did have its challenges, and the farmers supported in Aweil North were affected by torrential rains and floods that resulted in significant crop loss. However, farmers in Jur River country reported an increase in cereal production due to the support received.

In addition to crops, fish is an important source of nutrition in the region, and the project seeks to increase the consumption of fish in the target communities. About 650 fisherfolk (including 150 women) were supported with fishing inputs, including hooks and twines, and 120 fisherfolk were trained to share further information with fellow fisherfolk. These participants reported that the training enabled them to increase their catch, improve their preservation skills and increase fish availability within their households and in the market.

**Below:** Achoya has been given training on planting crops, and given seeds for maize, sorghum and groundnuts. This is the first time she has ever seen such a big harvest. Christian Aid/Silvano Yokwe



## School nutrition clubs

The clubs have established vegetable gardens in schools, to encourage pupils to take part in school-based farming. The 12 new nutrition clubs in 12 schools are supported by 30 trained teachers. The nutrition club members, with support from the project extension workers, organise weekly awareness raising activities on health and nutrition for other children, including using drama and poems, reaching over 2500 children and nearby community members.

**Below:** Working in the school gardens, the children have learned how to grow tomatoes, onions, aubergine and kale. The clubs have made them aware of how to prevent diseases such as diarrhoea and cholera.



## Supporting savings and income generation

Village savings and loans associations (VSLAs) are another mechanism through which families are supported to improve their income, which will in turn enable their access to nutritious foods. The VSLAs support members to access loans to start businesses or to use the funds for emergency expenses. Since the start of the project, 49 VSLAs were established with a total of 1,334 members.

The VSLA members that have borrowed funds are using this to establish businesses at the market, to buy livestock such as goats and cows or to pay school fees. There is also a Social Fund that has been developed. VSLA members can take interest free loans from this fund for emergencies, such as feeding their families or buying medicine.

## Access to safe water and hygiene promotion

Access to safe water is another area the project is addressing, considering the critical role of clean water in preventing illnesses. To date the project has repaired and rehabilitated 49 boreholes, and trained 40 water pump mechanics to maintain them. This is improving the access to clean water for an estimated 19,200 people living near these waterpoints.

**Below:** The VSLAs save their money in case boxes which are monitored by the group. To date the VSLAs have net savings of SSP 3,555,500 (equal GBP 22,005) Christian Aid/Silvano Yokwe.



Hygiene promotion is a key aspect of the awareness raising activities across the various groups that the project is reaching. The mid-term evaluation showed that the women, men, school children, traditional birth attendants and others reached all had a better understanding of key aspects of hygiene that help to prevent illness, including critical handwashing practices.

### Addressing gender norms

A key focus of the project is changing the culture around nutrition, particularly with regards to gender norms and values. This can involve dispelling misguided beliefs. For example, it is often seen as unhealthy for women to eat meat during lactation.

The project is also trying to change attitudes that prevent women from accessing information about nutrition. For this purpose, the project has to date trained 112 traditional leaders and 63 religious leaders on nutrition and related gender and social norms. These trainings aimed to empower the religious leaders with knowledge and skills needed in fighting negative cultural beliefs and taboos that impact on the nutritional status of women and children under 5. As a result, some of the religious leaders actively participate in the project's community meetings and are advocating for the wife – husband relations in families to positively change.

The project has also engaged over 1000 men on the same topic, and provided training for over 300 of these men to enable them to become nutrition champions. The trainings have improved men's understanding and skills in food preparation, planting nutritious crops, food hygiene, food taboos, and gender and social norms.

### Improving local government capacity to address nutrition

For a sustained change, the role of the Ministry of Health and more specifically the Country Nutrition Departments in Jur River and Aweil North is critical. Therefore, the project is supporting the Country Nutrition Department with planning, coordination and supervision of nutrition activities in the counties.

The project also aims to facilitate better collaboration between the county, state and national level with regards to nutrition. The project supports four national volunteers who are seconded to the County Nutrition Department to work directly with the various groups supported by the project as well as the malnutrition screening centres.

### Adapting to COVID

The project has integrated awareness raising and passing on correct COVID-19 messaging to tackle misinformation and promote behaviors consistent with COVID-19 guidelines in all its activities. For example, during community engagement such as Mother to Member group training, Christian Aid applies WHO and Ministry of health recommended community engagement guidelines, for example physical distancing, handwashing and/or use of hand sanitizers and temperature checks to minimize community transmission.

To further maintain hygiene and cleanliness around rehabilitated water points, the project has identified and trained water management committees who have the responsibility of enforcing locally established by-laws regarding the use of water points.

Since the project began we have seen a significant shift in the beliefs held around nutrition, with women and children now accessing a wider range of food choices. 82% of the women who participate in the project report that they now have access to control over their time, labour and food choices, nearly a 50% increase from the outset of the project.