

# PROMOTING YOUNG CHILD FEEDING WITH THE ETHIOPIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

JULY 2017



PHOTO CREDIT | ALIVE & THRIVE

Amhara region is one of the more food secure regions in the country, largely due to food production and availability, yet has persistently high rates of malnutrition. Poor infant and young child feeding practices, critical to strong growth and development, contribute to these high rates of malnutrition. In 2014, only 10% of children under 2 were receiving animal source foods, compared to 14% nationally (EDHS 2011).<sup>1</sup> These factors suggest that social and behavior change communication interventions should be part of the solution for improving infant and young child feeding practices.

Eighty-five percent of the population in Amhara is Orthodox Christian. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) requires followers above the age of 7 to fast for over 180 days a year, which includes abstaining from all animal source foods and consuming their first meal of the day after noon.<sup>2</sup> In 2014, Alive & Thrive (A&T) explored whether religious cultural norms and traditions were preventing children from consuming animal source foods.

## Understanding the situation

Using data from the 2011 Ethiopia Demographic and Health Survey (EDHS), a secondary analysis of the determinants of dietary diversity showed that children less than 2 years of age in Orthodox Christian families were 50% less likely to consume animal source foods and had poorer infant and young child feeding practices.<sup>3</sup>

To assess whether religious fasting was affecting child feeding, A&T conducted formative research in Amhara during the longest fasting period: lent. This study found that, although families knew that children under the age of 7 were exempt from fasting, none of them fed their children before 10:30am and none were observed feeding animal source foods. Mothers were reluctant to cook animal source foods during the fasting season for fear of violating their own fasts

*“If only we knew about poor complementary feeding practices in our communities during fasting days, if there was this kind of awareness creation, we could have been there for children of several generations. I felt extremely sad; all the priests were very emotional when we learned about this. We felt like we failed. We only focused on the religion but we failed the community.” — A priest.*

through smells and contaminated cooking utensils. Mothers were also wary of judgment and objection from neighbors who would deem them nonreligious for cooking animal source foods during the holy season.

In addition to better understanding mothers' perception on how religious fasting affected child feeding practices, the study aimed to determine what changes mothers and priests were willing to make to improve child feeding. Findings showed that mothers were willing to try adding animal source foods into their child's diet, specifically eggs and milk, during the fasting season, if reassured that this would not break their own fast. Priests were willing to teach about proper child feeding practices during fasting, and work with health extension workers (HEWs) to reach the community as long as the instruction came from formal, authoritative religious channels.

<sup>1</sup> Ethiopia Demographic and Health Survey, 2011

<sup>2</sup> <http://aliveandthrive.org/resources/brief-fasting-study-in-ethiopia/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://aliveandthrive.org/resources/amhara-diagnostic-study-factors-associated-with-infant-and-young-child-feeding-practices-in-amhara-region-and-nationally-in-ethiopia/>



*"Even I was a culprit, if I see milk poured into the [child's] food during the fasting season, I would have considered it a violation. But after this training, after fully understanding the situation, I started telling others as well." — Christian Orthodox Priest in the Amhara region of Ethiopia.*

## Shaping a response

To tackle these misconceptions and to foster behavior change, A&T partnered with the EOC's Development and Inter-Church Aid Commission (DICAC), the wing of the EOC in charge of development projects and well-respected among clergy. A&T determined that using this structure would likely offer a rapid and highly influential platform to reach its target population.

Two sermon cards, which used Bible verses to make a case for optimal feeding practices during fasting, were utilized by priests during their Sunday sermons. DICAC and A&T trained priests at the parish church level in 14 woredas in four zones in Amhara. Training sessions were focused on skill building and were highly participatory, requiring priests to give mock sermons and have detailed debates on the specifics of fasting.

DICAC and A&T developed a comprehensive guide on conducting two-day orientations on IYCF with EOC clergy. DICAC, with technical and financial support from A&T, started by engaging senior church leaders. The trainings addressed the adverse effects that current nutrition practices were having on children in their communities, and provided them with information on the importance of IYCF. The trainings equipped them with the skills needed to mobilize other priests and catalyze change in their communities. Through priests, these trainings were cascaded to the local communities.

Starting in July 2016, priests incorporated messages about child feeding into their Sunday church services during fasting

## Increasing Support

Before beginning implementation, DICAC and A&T organized a national workshop with the Senior Scholastic Council of the EOC to highlight the problem of child feeding during fasting. The Council drafted an 8-point declaration stating the Church's official position on child feeding during fasting. This declaration was approved by the Holy Synod (the national authority of the EOC) and communicated to churches throughout the country.

periods. Between July and December 2016, priests delivered 15,479 sermons at church that included messages related to IYCF.

## Key takeaways

**Priests are highly influential.** In most areas, priests discussed the religious aspect of child feeding, and asked health extension workers to discuss the nutrition and behavioral components. Because the priests endorsed HEWs, the HEW visits and messages were better received by mothers in the community.

**Reaching consensus on sensitive issues is possible.** Using a credible platform such as DICAC, a group respected by priests, was essential to the success of the intervention. Some of the priests were hesitant to promote cooking animal source foods during fasting. However, because the trainings were conducted through DICAC, priests felt confident in the knowledge they obtained and were equipped with the skills to convince other priests harboring similar hesitations.

**Data are powerful.** Using targeted data—e.g., showing that children in the Orthodox Church were eating fewer animal source foods than children of other religions—helped generate behavior change. After seeing the statistics, priests were motivated to change feeding practices in their communities.

**Customized materials make a difference.** Short sermon guides that referred to Bible verses helped in Sunday sermons, and were also used to convince other priests of the importance of optimal feeding.