

# PARTNERING WITH WOMEN'S ASSOCIATIONS TO ADVOCATE FOR STRONGER INFANT AND YOUNG CHILD FEEDING POLICIES AND PROGRAMS:

## Lessons Learned From Alive & Thrive



Tran Thi Huong, Vice Chairwoman of the Viet Nam Women's Union, gives a speech on the importance of IYCF.

## **Alive & Thrive is an initiative dedicated to reducing undernutrition and death caused by poor infant and young child feeding (IYCF) practices.**

The initiative's work includes a community component that integrates counseling on IYCF into existing health services and mass media campaigns that target mothers and the general public with information to promote optimal IYCF practices. Working alongside these interventions, the advocacy component aims to create a sustainable enabling environment for IYCF by increasing supportive national policies and the implementation and scale-up of IYCF programs.

## Overview and Introduction

Efforts to improve child nutrition policies and programs—including the global Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement—are increasingly focusing on approaches that engage a wide-range of stakeholders. Too often, critical groups are left out because they are considered unconventional, or not integral to decision-making processes. But, as actors and advocates work to scale-up nutrition, these groups must be considered for their potential to influence change within a multi-stakeholder strategy.

Optimal IYCF is an issue that has diverse impacts on women, with implications spanning family health, economics, and employment. In many countries throughout the developing world, women's associations can be influential advocacy and education organizations that represent the voices of mothers to government and legislative bodies, while also providing a key communications channel to reach mothers in local communities. Depending on the country and context, women's associations can be formal or informal, including their structure and type—which can range from independent civil society organizations to para-statal organizations.

When the capacity of women and mothers is leveraged through credible organizations that represent them, it can be a powerful tool to drive dialogue, awareness, and action on key policy issues that affect IYCF practices at the community level.

# Partnerships between Alive & Thrive, and the Viet Nam Women's Union and the Ethiopia Women's Association

Alive & Thrive's advocacy component aims to remove political and institutional barriers that make it difficult for mothers and families to adopt optimal feeding practices, e.g. not having enough paid maternity leave to exclusively breastfeed for six months, or receiving misleading information about the benefits of breastmilk substitutes due to unregulated marketing practices. One way that Alive & Thrive's advocacy component tackles these challenges is by partnering with influential organizations and champions that have a stake in improving child nutrition and IYCF.

The Viet Nam Women's Union (WU) is a mass organization of nearly 15 million members, with a network that operates throughout Viet Nam at the four administrative levels of government: central, provincial, district, and commune. The WU is also a member of the Viet Nam Fatherland Front, which has a mandate to protect women's rights, and strives for gender equality.

In Ethiopia, Women's Associations are region-based, non-governmental, and non-profit organizations striving for women's empowerment in all aspects of life and work, and working to end any form of discrimination against women in all regions. Each association is legally registered as an Ethiopian CBO, and has a membership that ranges between 700,000 and 1.5 million women. All associations share a similar mission "... to improve the political, socio- economic and socio-cultural situation and participation of women in all aspects of poverty reduction underway throughout the region."

## Partnership Goals and Activities

Alive & Thrive set out to partner with the women's associations with the following broad goals:

- **Publicly affirm the associations' commitments** to child nutrition, and related laws and policies that support optimal IYCF—like paid maternity leave, and tighter restrictions on the promotion of breastmilk substitutes.
- **Elevate the voice of the women's associations**, and key spokespeople in support of IYCF and related policies with both the media, and with policy-makers.
- **Leverage the associations' vast networks** of women and advocates to support adoption and implementation of IYCF policies.

Members of the Viet Nam Women's Union at an advocacy event.



Achieving these goals required a robust and sustained effort to build the capacity of the associations to conduct IYCF advocacy. Examples of activities included:

- **Public signing of an official Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)**

Under the terms of a MOU signed with Alive & Thrive, the Viet Nam Women's Union officially incorporated IYCF and Alive & Thrive goals into its broader work. The WU also committed to serve as a voice for Alive & Thrive in the media, and to leverage its own expertise and prominence to convene national and provincial leaders in support of IYCF policy changes. Prominent members of both the Women's Union and the Ministry of Health, including the National Institute of Nutrition, were in attendance.

- **Media and champion training for Women's Union leadership**

Alive & Thrive convened members of the Women's Union for a champion training to equip them with information and tools to become stronger advocates for IYCF. Participants were provided with information and background on the importance of IYCF, the current state of IYCF and child nutrition in Viet Nam, and specific national policies and programs that influence how infants and young children are fed. Practical interactive sessions were delivered on giving effective presentations and interviews with the media. Several participants later appeared in national TV news segments featuring IYCF topics.

- **Article placements in the Women's Union newspaper**

The WU newspaper is one of the leading newspapers in Viet Nam that covers women, gender, and family issues. It is read by audiences ranging from national leaders to commune-level staff in the WU network. Over three years, multiple articles were placed in the WU newspaper, focusing on topics of stunting, investment in child nutrition, the national maternity leave policy, and the law on the advertisement of breastmilk substitutes.

- **Prominent media appearances in support of IYCF and related policies**

Working closely with the Women's Union, Alive & Thrive developed two signature media segments on each of the major policy issues affecting IYCF in Viet Nam: paid maternity leave, and the International

Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes. The two news items were:

- **Maternity leave talk show** – This televised talk show panel included key speakers from the National Institute of Nutrition, the Women’s Union, and the Association of Child Rights Protection. It also included pre-recorded interviews with representatives from the Ministry of Labour, Invalids, and Social Affairs; the General Federation of Labor; UNICEF; and Alive & Thrive. The show was broadcast numerous times during World Breastfeeding Week 2011, and several articles appeared in various mainstream print and online newspapers.
- **Decree 21 documentary** – Decree 21 is Viet Nam’s version of the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes. This documentary film, developed in partnership with a news station, was designed to build awareness of Decree 21, and challenges related to its implementation. The film highlighted varied and widespread violations by multiple domestic and multinational companies in the promotion, advertising, and labeling of breastmilk substitutes. Representatives from the MOH and UNICEF were interviewed about the Decree’s importance, and legislative revisions needed to strengthen it.
- **Training and execution of BMS Code (Decree 21) monitoring**

Alive & Thrive worked with the Women’s Union to develop and implement Decree 21 monitoring trainings for violations in healthcare and commercial settings. The two-day training, presented by the Alive & Thrive team and a specialist from the Maternal and Child Health Department, included site visits to hospitals and supermarkets where participants practiced identifying and recording violations. Afterward, groups developed provincial monitoring plans for the coming year.

- **Knowledge-sharing meeting between country Women’s Associations**

During a regional Association of Southeast Nations (ASEAN) workshop to share Viet Nam’s successful experience advocating for six months paid maternity leave and a stronger Advertisement Law, the Lao Women’s Union met with the Viet Nam WU to learn how to effectively contribute to, and lead, IYCF advocacy activities. The two organizations will continue to collaborate as Lao pursues similar successes.

Members of the Viet Nam Women’s Union being trained on monitoring for BMS Code violations.



# Challenges and Lessons Learned

- **Partnerships should be established with realistic and adaptable goals**

As with all partnerships, the success of working with women's associations depends largely on:

- Capacity of the organization to make meaningful contributions to the advocacy partnership.
- Dedicated time and resources of Alive & Thrive (or like organization) to strengthen the advocacy capacity of the association.
- Commitment of the association's leadership to both the issue and the collaboration.
- Personal commitment and effectiveness of key staff people involved in designing and implementing specific activities.

Early activities should be attainable, and designed to assess the potential for more robust activities that require greater commitment and management. This will help prevent the allocation of resources to activities that may not meet expectations.

- **Women's associations can have critical relationships and representation in government bodies**

The Viet Nam Women's Union has members in nearly all government agencies in order to represent and give voice to women's rights and issues. During the legislation development process—and specifically legislation that affects women—consulting the Women's Union is a compulsory step. For example, during the policy change process, the Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs and the National Assembly organized two advocacy workshops for maternity leave and the Advertisement Law. The WU was invited to participate, and their opinions were carefully considered; WU representatives gave strong and emotional testimony to the importance of the two laws.

At the central level, the WU also has members in the National Assembly—and the voice of the WU was highly influential here as well. The Chairwoman of the Viet Nam WU, Mdm. Nguyen Thi Binh, served as a vocal champion for extending maternity leave, and supporting breastfeeding as a right of women and children. She gave influential speeches in meetings with the National Assembly's Standing Committee, the female members of the National Assembly, and an additional exclusive meeting with the leaders of the National Assembly.

In Ethiopia, the Office of Women, Youth, and Child Affairs is a government office and ministry that is directly influenced by the Women's Association. This created a clear advocacy link for association members to engage a government agency about the country's National Nutrition Program. The Government of Ethiopia also considers the Women's Association a key stakeholder in the economic, social, and political transformation of the country at all levels.

- **Effective engagement requires continuous support and follow-up**

In both Viet Nam and Ethiopia, working effectively with the women’s associations required regular and day-to-day collaboration. Simply establishing the terms of a MOU, or providing trainings does not lead to effective implementation of strategies; building long-term capacity and changing the norms of an organization takes time. Likewise, developing funding and reporting processes for collaboration activities requires that strong reporting and communications systems are in place.

His Excellency,  
Ato Molla Tonna,  
Chairperson of  
the Social Affairs  
Standing Committee  
of Ethiopia’s SNNPR  
Regional Parliament,  
closing an advocacy  
workshop hosted  
by the Women’s  
Association.



- **Women’s associations should be considered for their influence respective to other major national associations**

In Ethiopia, there is a clear hierarchy of influence among national associations. For example, while the Farmer’s Association and Youth Association are both significant, the Women’s Association is more influential. This is because the Association has close relationships with the government, and the ability to influence specific policies and priorities. It is also due to the fact that influential members of the Women’s Association are farmers and also represent youth, and because they play a strong role in mobilizing the community. Because gender inequity is a significant focus of the Government of Ethiopia, the Women’s Association is an essential force in a government that is working to involve women at all levels.

- **The comparative advantages of sub-national chapters should be leveraged**

In Ethiopia, regional Women’s Associations have varying influence—typically measured by their leadership capabilities, the level of engagement among their members, and their respective influence with the community, and with their parliamentarians. Some chapters already have the ability, and experience necessary, to advocate effectively within the political system, while others need more instruction and guidance.

- **Effective training and capacity-building for association members is needed at both the national and provincial levels**

Alive & Thrive and WU partnership focused primarily on advocacy activities at the national level. Many local WU leaders have opportunities to work and connect with relevant policy- and decision-makers—yet these individuals may not be equipped with the skills they need to advocate with local leaders, or to actively participate in local discussions and nutrition planning. Rather than organizing a training at a fixed time and location, one recommendation is to develop additional tools and materials (such as a training video, or more informal trainings in different regions) that can be quickly shared throughout the national WU network.

- **Developing advocacy partnerships with mass organizations like women’s associations can also support community-level and behavior change interventions**

The WU maintains a “Breastfeeding Club” at commune levels where WU community staff meet with local women every month. Alive & Thrive was able to share promotional breastfeeding materials that were tested and developed for its own community interventions, and have now been duplicated for WU meetings. WU also invited health staff trained by Alive & Thrive to speak at monthly Breastfeeding Club meetings. From this, the Women’s Union was able to help generate demand for IYCF services. In IYCF Support Groups, many WU members even served as facilitators.

In Ethiopia, IYCF messages and materials have been integrated into the programs of the Women’s Association—a change that will last for years to come. In addition, Ethiopia has a Women’s Development Army that aims to reach every woman throughout the country with increased access to development opportunities. The army now supports efforts to reach every household with IYCF promotional messages and materials.

## Conclusion

Women’s associations can leverage unique relationships and resources to advocate for IYCF at all levels. However, like most partnerships, success depends on strong and committed champions at the organizations’ leadership and implementation levels. Partnership investments should be evaluated critically, and re-assessed after a reasonable period of time. Advocates should aim to capitalize on direct and specific assets of associations in order to ensure specific outcomes. As a unique and large-scale voice for mothers, women’s associations should be a key consideration in any IYCF advocacy effort at national and sub-national levels.