As a result of the illegal coup d’état by the military on February 1st, 2021, a humanitarian crisis is currently unfolding in Myanmar. With fuel and food prices increasing dramatically, millions of households are struggling to meet their basic food and healthcare needs. Severe interruptions further compound this crisis to health service delivery and a renewed outbreak of COVID-19. This brief shares the progress that Myanmar was making on improving maternal, infant, and young child nutrition (MIYCN) before the coup and proposes a way forward to ensure that mothers, families, and communities have access to the information and support that they need during the current emergency and beyond.

ALIVE & THRIVE IN MYANMAR

Alive & Thrive (A&T) is a global initiative to save lives, prevent illness, and ensure healthy growth of mothers and children. In its first phase (2009 –2014), A&T demonstrated that rapid improvements in infant and young child feeding (IYCF) are possible in settings as diverse as Ethiopia, Bangladesh, and Viet Nam. Building on the proven approach demonstrated in Viet Nam, A&T has established a strong network of committed champions and partners to replicate improvements in maternal, infant and young child nutrition (MIYCN) policies and programs throughout Southeast Asia. A&T, managed by FHI Solutions, is funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Irish Aid, and other donors.

Starting in 2014, A&T began providing an evidence-based package of technical assistance to support a more robust enabling environment for breastfeeding in Myanmar. Myanmar’s legitimate government, which was in place up to February 2021, demonstrated high-level commitment and political will for nutrition, as evidenced by increased government spending on nutrition and the adoption and implementation of policies that support breastfeeding, including paid maternity leave and the Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes. These changes likely contributed to a rapid improvement in exclusive breastfeeding in recent years. In contrast, the rate of early initiation of breastfeeding within the first hour of life has stagnated or even declined, often affecting the most vulnerable, at-risk newborns.
Using its hallmark multi-component and multi-stakeholder approach, A&T and partners have worked to:

1. Establish strategic partnerships with government representatives, businesses, and civil society actors;
2. Generate a strong evidence base to inform policy and program activities;
3. Develop messages and materials to reach key policy audiences;
4. Build consensus through advocacy events, consultations and cultivating champions.

The comprehensive, systematic, iterative four-pronged strategy has proven to be highly effective.

A SYSTEMATIC APPROACH ENSURES SUCCESS

MILESTONE ACHIEVEMENTS

A&T has worked closely with UNICEF, the Scaling Up Nutrition Civil Society Alliance (SUN CSA), and (before the coup) with the Ministry of Health and Sports (MOHS) to support the uptake of improved breastfeeding policies and programs in Myanmar. Through coordinated advocacy and strategic technical assistance, A&T and partners have achieved significant gains, including:

- A near doubling of the prevalence of exclusive breastfeeding among infants under six months of age: from about 26% in 2010 to nearly 50% in 2016;
- Endorsement and application of national guidelines and standard operating procedures on human milk banking (2019);
- Increased access to safe donor human milk by upgrading two existing human milk banks (HMBs) to international standards and scaling up HMB services to two new hospitals (2020), benefiting 1,200+ at-risk newborns each year;
- Development of a complete, branded package of materials to support the scale-up of workplace lactation support programs, including a toolkit, training manuals, and communications materials (2020);
- Development and endorsement of a costed, Implementation Plan on Maternal, Infant and Child Nutrition (2021-2025) that addresses both child undernutrition and overnutrition for the first time, as well as a comprehensive set of actions to improve the enabling environment for breastfeeding;
- Introduction of the coaching and monitoring approach to early essential newborn care (EENC) in the country’s leading maternity hospital, setting the foundation for designation of the country’s first Center of Excellence for Breastfeeding.
A&T’s success in Myanmar is based on strong partnerships with a wide range of traditional and non-traditional stakeholders. Amid the current political crisis and COVID-19 pandemic, A&T has forged a partnership with Healthy and Happy Families, a local group of nutritionists, to increase parents’ access to reliable breastfeeding information and support on social media.

Since 2014, A&T has worked closely with UNICEF Myanmar to advocate the effective implementation of MIYCN policies and programs, guided by joint work plans and regular information sharing. Within MOHS, A&T supported the National Nutrition Center to implement and monitor a variety of nutrition interventions under the Multi-Sectoral Plan of Action for Nutrition and Maternal, Infant and Child Nutrition Implementation Plan and with the Health Literacy Promotion Unit to ensure consistent and effective nutrition messaging. For quality improvement and scale-up of EENC and HMB services, A&T has engaged the nation’s leading breastfeeding champions and heads of the largest maternity hospitals to ensure buy-in and commitment.

Prior to the coup, A&T worked with the Ministry of Labor, Immigration and Population to support the scale-up of workplace lactation support programs, and with the Union Attorney General’s Office to promote the adoption of legislation that is more supportive of recommended nutrition practices. A partnership with the Myanmar Business Coalition for Gender Equality allowed A&T to engage with the private sector to increase the uptake of maternity leave and workplace breastfeeding support. Local champions, AYA Bank, KBZ Bank, and Shwe Taung Group of Companies, have also adopted company-wide policies to support breastfeeding mothers.

A&T is an active steering committee member of the SUN CSA Myanmar, supporting activities that strengthen the network’s governance and functioning, as well as advocacy activities.
A&T works closely with partners to generate and disseminate evidence to inform scale up of effective interventions to improve infant and young child nutrition in Myanmar. Together with UNICEF, A&T conducted a secondary analysis of nutrition data from the Myanmar Demographic and Health Survey to understand the drivers of child undernutrition better. With support from the Yale School of Public Health, A&T supported Myanmar’s implementation of the Becoming Breastfeeding Friendly initiative – an evidence-based framework and model that serves as a guide for countries to assess their readiness to scale up breastfeeding protection, promotion, and support. Through the Becoming Breastfeeding Friendly process, MOHS convened a variety of stakeholders to assess Myanmar’s existing policies and programs and formulate nine strategic interventions to better support breastfeeding.

Through external assessments of health facilities and provider behavior, A&T supports improvements to breastfeeding services for healthy, term babies and vulnerable, pre-term or low birth weight babies. HMB facility-readiness assessments in large maternity hospitals in Yangon, Mandalay, and Taunggyi paved the way for the development of national guidelines and standard operating procedures as well as upgrades to existing HMBs in 2019 and 2020. Routine monitoring of EENC practices for vaginal births, instituted for the first time through support from A&T to Central Women’s Hospital Yangon, increased access to data for decision-making by hospital leaders. Routine monitoring and reporting of Code violations, together with the SUN CSA Myanmar, revealed BMS company promotion activities on social media and contributed to a policy change whereby violations on social media were monitored by a national level Technical Working Group chaired by National Nutrition Center and the Food and Drug Administration, prior to the coup.
CREATING COMPELLING MESSAGES AND MATERIALS

A&T works closely with partners in Myanmar to develop messages that effectively communicate with parents and community members to change their nutrition behaviors. Myanmar’s #6la or 6 Months: Mother’s milk is all you need campaign reached almost 20 million people on social media and engaged directly with one in four birthing mothers in Yangon, Mandalay and Nay Pyi Taw over three months. Resonant communication highlights the importance of the community in building an empowering message to support mothers and their close circles to exclusively breastfeed for the first six months. Implementation of workplace lactation support programs is enhanced through communication materials that effectively target female employees, managers, and policy and decision-makers, recognizing each stakeholder’s individual needs and interests. A&T has also developed impactful policy briefs on breastfeeding and human milk bank services and a compelling photo essay for the nutrition community and policymakers.

BUILDING CONSENSUS AND CULTIVATING CHAMPIONS

Using global and regionally contextualized data, A&T builds consensus on the need to scale up effective MIYCN interventions. Regional knowledge exchange is a proven, effective tool for supporting the delivery of improved breastfeeding services in Myanmar’s health system. A visit by the leaders of Myanmar’s largest maternity hospitals to Da Nang Hospital for Women and Children in 2018 sparked a commitment to scale up EENC and HMB services by the MOHS and facilitated an ongoing knowledge exchange that has continued virtually during the COVID-19 pandemic. Within hospitals, A&T has supported the development of multi-disciplinary teams, composed of doctors, nurses, and administrators, to monitor and support the implementation of EENC, HMB, and kangaroo mother care services.

Furthermore, to strengthen the nutrition behaviors, A&T worked with the SUN CSA and other civil groups to orient local media on nutrition and increase media coverage. For instance, A&T has facilitated regional knowledge exchange between Healthy and Happy Families and Betibuti, the successful online breastfeeding support community in Viet Nam to promote cross-country experience sharing on community engagement in promoting recommended child feeding breastfeeding practices.
During this ongoing emergency, A&T will continue to work with its partners to ensure that mothers and families can access evidence-based nutrition information and support, online and in-person. As a member of the Myanmar Nutrition in Emergencies group, A&T is providing technical assistance to ensure that MIYCN services are appropriately prioritized in humanitarian assistance programs and exploring new approaches to essential service provision, through community-based and ethnic health organizations.

**WAY FORWARD**

Once the political situation improves and COVID-19 restrictions are lifted, A&T will prioritize the following actions:

- Re-building of the health system and resumption of MIYCN services
- Resuming the scale-up of workplace lactation support programs and establishment of family-friendly workplaces in the private sector, together with partners
- Continuing to support the formation of multi-disciplinary EENC Core Teams at maternity hospitals to ensure consistent provision of quality EENC services
- Scaling-up routine monitoring of EENC and breastfeeding services to additional maternity hospitals
- Assessing and designating the first Centers of Excellence for breastfeeding

The coup d’état in Myanmar has thrown the lives of millions into crisis, particularly the most vulnerable populations, and jeopardized progress on nutrition gained over years of effort – testing the resilience of families. Against this backdrop, A&T stays grounded and committed to the mission “to save lives, prevent illness, and ensure healthy growth and development through improving maternal, infant, and young child nutrition”, despite the social instability.