

# MEDIA ENGAGEMENT AND CAPACITY-BUILDING TO INCREASE COMMITMENT TO YCF POLICIES AND PROGRAMS:

## Lessons Learned From Alive & Thrive



Child nutrition stakeholders in Bangladesh discuss the importance of engaging the media on IYCF issues.

## **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

Today more than ever, health advocates struggle to find ways to raise awareness, build understanding, change perceptions, and motivate target audiences to act on nutrition and health issues. A tremendous amount of work goes into the development and creation of research reports, events, launches, and program interventions—but the opportunity to reach beyond health advocates and actors with compelling, actionable information is often missed. This has led to a limited understanding among opinion-leaders and decision-makers of the impact that issues like infant and young child feeding (IYCF) and child nutrition have on individuals, families, and an entire nation.

One pathway to quickly disseminate information, increase understanding, build momentum, and unify support for IYCF or other issues is to engage the news media. Information presented in the news often has a higher degree of credibility because it is perceived as coming from an independent and respected source. The news media reaches large audiences across vast geographic areas, and news stories can be tailored to reach specific target audiences through the use of different media channels, outlets, and programs.

There is no standard, one-size-fits-all approach to media engagement. Every organization and advocacy effort has unique priorities, approach, and resource capacity, and any media engagement effort must be tailored for impact. While activities can be conducted independently, building true media capacity requires long-term, sustained engagement with journalists and newsrooms to permanently shift the coverage, understanding, and prioritization of an issue.

Alive & Thrive worked from the position that with focused engagement in each of the three program countries, the media would be an effective and credible channel to elevate the importance of IYCF, build momentum through a steady drumbeat of information and focus on IYCF, and provide a clear advocacy call to action.

## Media Engagement Goals and Activities

Teams in each of the three Alive & Thrive program countries developed and executed media engagement programs. In Bangladesh specifically, engaging the media was the central focus of national-level advocacy work: research showed that IYCF and nutrition were not viewed by policy-makers, decision-makers, or opinion-leaders as an important issue. These key audiences were critical for implementing important IYCF policies and national programs, yet each demonstrated a lack of awareness of the impact that IYCF practices have on health outcomes and economic development. Similar findings resulted from research in Viet Nam and Ethiopia.

The central goal: to raise awareness of the impact of IYCF on the country's health and economic well-being. Alive & Thrive employed several tactics, including efforts to:

- Enhance capacity of health reporters to conduct in-depth reporting on IYCF and child nutrition through training, and ongoing journalist engagement.
- Increase the availability, and use of new data and information to create a steady drumbeat of information to drive coverage and deeper content.
- Increase news editor and news director commitment to covering IYCF and child nutrition.

Training & Assistance for Health & Nutrition Foundation (TAHN) Chairperson Dr. Rukhsana Haider presents IYCF best practices at a journalist training.



Alive & Thrive developed a long-term capacity-building program that was ultimately divided into two phases. To create the initial approach, Alive & Thrive conducted a media landscape analysis, and consulted with in-country partners and media experts. Findings shaped the development of the program, and a mid-point evaluation identified lessons learned, and informed the design of the program's second phase.

The key components of media engagement in Bangladesh included:

- **Media assessment** – Alive & Thrive engaged a local partner to conduct a media landscape assessment to determine the gaps in current media coverage, as well as journalist knowledge and capacity. A media content analysis of 10 national and 10 local newspapers, as well as four television channels, helped to determine what types of child nutrition issues received coverage, how each was covered, story placement to determine priority and importance, and coverage frequency.

In addition, one-on-one interviews were conducted with 20 reporters, 20 news editors and directors, five issue experts, five NGO senior staff, and 20 readers to identify gaps and opportunities in coverage, and to inform the design of a journalist training curriculum. These assessments provided an informal baseline against which future coverage could be anecdotally measured.

## Ethiopia Case Study: Journalist Training and Sensitization Workshop

In February 2011, Alive & Thrive hosted a two-day workshop in Addis Ababa to sensitize 25 journalists – from Addis Ababa, Tigray, Amhara, Oromia, and the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region – on IYCF issues, and to increase regional coverage. The Women's Association worked with the journalists following the training to ensure that media coverage commitments were met, and to organize quarterly roundtable discussions at the regional level to share new information.

- **Journalist training and sensitization workshop on IYCF** – Reporter knowledge contributed to a lack of consistent, quality news coverage on IYCF and nutrition. The program designed and convened a two-day residential training course for 23 health reporters from national print and electronic media, with sessions that provided technical IYCF evidence and information. Moderated by senior journalists, issue experts, and academics, the training provided journalists with hands-on experience through mock interview sessions, story development, and feedback by seasoned journalists.

- **Journalism fellowships** – A fellowship program provided journalists with specific and regular opportunities to create more in-depth and frequent IYCF news coverage. Following training, three- and six-month fellowships were awarded to a select group of reporters, and each was paired with a newsroom mentor to troubleshoot ideas, and to shape and improve reporting.

Between 2010 and 2013, 23 fellowships resulted in more than 100 television, print, online, and radio news stories—including news magazine cover stories, feature series, and breaking news. A number of activities were built into the fellowship program to ensure ongoing capacity-building of journalists to both effectively, and more deeply, cover the issue:

- **Study circles** – Alive & Thrive hosted nine study circles to provide in-depth information to reporters on specific IYCF issues. Topics ranged from issues related to IYCF behaviors—such as common myths about child feeding, and the role that family members have in supporting mothers—to national policies and programs that support IYCF, and the release of new data.
- **Field visits** – Each journalist was encouraged to build at least one field visit into their individual work. Field visits were key to illustrating the problem, and creating a closer connection between journalists and the issue of IYCF. They introduced journalists to community-level programs that were working to address everyday barriers to feeding practices, and demonstrated both the rural and urban aspects of the issue, identified the success stories from recent programs, and introduced journalists to local health services and contacts.

Journalists attend field visits to gain first-hand experience of community-level IYCF programs.



- **Division-level correspondents training** – Once the training curriculum for national-level journalists was developed, Alive & Thrive convened a two-day training for national media correspondents working in Sylhet and Khulna, two of Bangladesh’s geographic areas with high levels of malnutrition. Attended by more than 20 participants each, the trainings expanded the network of reporters working on child nutrition and IYCF, and created a link between reporters at national news outlets and other information and news sources.

## Ethiopia Case Study: Regional Journalist Roundtable Discussions to Increase Awareness of Stunting

In collaboration with regional Women's Associations, Alive & Thrive hosted roundtable discussions in May 2012 for 14 journalists and media officials from the Oromia Region, and 24 journalists and representatives of partner organizations and government bureaus in the Amhara Region. The discussions presented information on why stunting matters, and provided background on the community-based interventions and materials that Alive & Thrive was producing to raise awareness. Attendees communicated that prior to the discussions, the issue of stunting was unfamiliar to them.

- **TV producers workshop** – In Bangladesh, policy-makers and opinion-leaders rely on news talk shows to discuss important issues of the day. Alive & Thrive designed a program to build knowledge and awareness of the impact of IYCF and nutrition among TV talk show producers to motivate increased discussion and coverage. More than 20 participants representing six television stations and numerous print outlets attended the workshop. As a result, IYCF and nutrition were included in eight TV talk shows following the workshop.
- **News editor and director workshop** – For reporters, a lack of support from editors in the newsroom can be a significant barrier to increasing coverage on IYCF and nutrition. To break down this barrier, Alive & Thrive hosted a workshop to sensitize 20 news editors and directors from national media houses.

Alive & Thrive's "How to Guide" on media engagement debuts at the Connecting Media with Child Nutrition and IYCF knowledge-sharing workshop.



- **Spokesperson and issue expert orientation** – To address the lack of spokespeople in Bangladesh willing to speak with the media, Alive & Thrive hosted a spokesperson and issue expert media training for 19 medical professionals. In this first-of-its-kind training, medical professionals discussed their reluctance to act as a media spokesperson, including a fear of being misquoted or challenges with responding to a reporter’s short deadline. The orientation included mock interview sessions with senior newsroom experts.
- **Editorial roundtable discussions** – *The Daily Star* is the widest circulation English-language newspaper in Bangladesh. After sustained work with their journalists and gatekeepers, *The Daily Star* leadership agreed to host a roundtable discussion in their own offices on multi-sectoral approaches to nutrition. The roundtable brought together more than 30 representatives from multi-sectoral government ministries and departments, NGOs, and the media. The conversation started an important conversation that is being sustained among partners. Resulting media coverage highlighted key actions government ministries need to take to become more nutrition-sensitive.

IYCF stakeholders discuss multi-sectoral approaches to address nutrition.



## **Viet Nam Case Study: Media Engagement in Support of Paid Maternity Leave and Stronger Regulations on the Advertisement of Breastmilk Substitutes**

Leading up to the Viet Nam National Assembly's vote in June 2012 to extend paid maternity leave to six months, and strengthen the regulation on the advertisement of breastmilk substitutes, Alive & Thrive consistently engaged the media to tell the story of how IYCF impacts the health, social, and economic development outcomes for individuals and the country. Two unique policy-related media outreach activities included:

- **Decree 21 documentary with O2TV:** Through a partnership with the Viet Nam Women's Union, a 15-minute documentary on Decree 21—Viet Nam's version of the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes—was developed in collaboration with the country's leading national television station O2TV. The documentary showed the difficult choices that mothers and families must make about how to feed their children, amid compelling—and sometimes inaccurate—advertising by formula companies. The documentary included interviews with International Code expert David Clark of UNICEF, and government representatives like the Vice Director of the Ministry of Health Legislation Department. The documentary aired more than three times on national TV.
- **Maternity leave talk show with VTV:** Also in partnership with the Women's Union, a TV talk show was developed, and aired on national television station VTV. The talk show featured the head of the National Institute of Nutrition, a Department Manager of Family Education at the Women's Union, and the Vice Chairwoman of the Viet Nam Association for the Protection of Child Rights. Discussions focused on the benefits of breastfeeding for children and mothers, and the role of maternity leave in supporting mothers in breastfeeding exclusively for six months. The talk show aired more than seven times on national TV during 2011 World Breastfeeding Week.



# Lessons Learned and Recommendations for Action

- **Media engagement is an effective way to reach and involve government partners** – Because the Alive & Thrive program was the first effort of its kind to deeply engage the media on IYCF, it was an attractive place for many partners—both government and non-government—to engage. Throughout the program, representatives from various government ministries and departments were involved in programming and workshops. In both Bangladesh and Viet Nam, ministry representatives attended media engagement events, and in Bangladesh the Institute of Public Health Nutrition has used Alive & Thrive’s media engagement work as a model for other organizations. Throughout the program, government partners became less skeptical about engaging the media—and gained confidence and appreciation for the program’s effort to raise awareness of the work undertaken by the government and partners.
- **Spokesperson hesitancy is a barrier to more and better coverage** – Early in the process, journalists highlighted a lack of willing and available spokespeople as a barrier to improving their coverage of IYCF. Likewise, spokespeople often cited the concern of being misquoted or represented as a barrier for them individually, or on behalf of their organizations. This dynamic can create a standstill—where spokespeople don’t reach out to the media, and reporters lack information and on-the-record quotes to enhance the quality of their reporting.

Spokespeople should be trained on how to effectively communicate key messages. Spokespeople can provide rich detail, a first-person perspective, and can often reference important data and research. But a spokesperson that is too technical, or provides incorrect information, can also hinder results. It’s important to identify and invite a select group of well-respected issue experts—from the government, civil society, academia, or partner organizations—to serve as effective spokespeople.

- **Newsroom support is essential to coverage** – Because news editors and directors were not sensitized to the importance and relevance of IYCF—and because it constitutes ‘soft news’— there was limited commitment to increasing coverage. When journalists don’t have newsroom support for the topics they cover, they are not likely to be published. Engaging key editors as fellowship mentors, and building knowledge through workshops and meetings, can increase awareness and generate additional news coverage.
- **New data and information is lacking** – Even with the readiness and desire to report on IYCF issues, new information and data is required to dramatically increase both the frequency and quality of coverage over a long period of time. In Bangladesh, journalists reported that a lack of new data contributed to challenges in placing stories on IYCF. Organizations should always be looking for new research, information, and newsworthy angles to present to the media.

- **Journalists can be turned into IYCF and child nutrition champions** – After seeing firsthand the impact that child nutrition can have on a child’s health and development – journalists can become champions for IYCF. They can serve as watchdogs to the government to ensure that policies are updated and properly enforced, and can take a vested interest in raising awareness at both the national and community level for proper practices. In an independent evaluation of the program in Bangladesh, several journalists that participated in the Alive & Thrive training were highlighted for taking personal initiative to address the lack of IYCF promotion by local health centers and NGOs while they were researching stories on other topics; some even placed phone calls to local civil surgeon’s and NGO offices to report poor IYCF promotion.

“The support I’ve received through the fellowship program has been exceedingly important. It has really opened up my horizons, and helped me write more nutrition stories in six months than I might have done in six years... I feel nutrition now has become a lifelong passion. I will continue to cover this issue as long as I work as a reporter.”

-IYCF Fellowship Journalist,  
Bangladesh

- **Coordinate efforts to maximize IYCF coverage**
  - There are many NGOs and stakeholder organizations working to improve IYCF and child nutrition, but often the work is not coordinated or shared with the media. Journalists find out about new research from third parties, or about events, after they have already happened. Developing a joint media calendar to help coordinate efforts is one way to maximize IYCF coverage.

Journalists can become champions for child nutrition.



- **Breastmilk substitute companies pose a challenge to increased IYCF coverage** – In Bangladesh, one of the main sources of revenue for media houses is advertisements from breastmilk substitute (BMS) companies. This has led to a resistance from some outlets to say anything against the companies for fear of losing revenue – and even if an outlet does, there are other media houses that get bought-off with sponsorships.
- **Established media relationships are critical for responding quickly to negative issues** – Periodically, IYCF advocates need to respond to sensitive political situations, or to false or misleading information that has been presented in the media. For example, stakeholders in Viet Nam, including Alive & Thrive, UNICEF, and WHO, came together to formally respond to the government’s practice of defining follow-on formulas as “nutrition products,” or complementary foods, rather than as breastmilk substitutes. One result of this practice was that it allowed more products to fall outside the advertising regulations for formulas established by the government. Media coverage that resulted from a joint press release distributed widely to journalists that Alive & Thrive had a relationship with helped clarify the issue, and contributed to the government’s decision to re-define follow-on formulas in policy guidance documents.

## Conclusion

Media engagement and capacity-building is an effective tool to raise awareness, increase dialogue, and shift opinion-leader perceptions on IYCF, child nutrition, and health issues. It can advance the advocacy goals and priorities of any global health initiative, especially when designed to support and coordinate with broader communication and awareness-building activities already underway.

Any organization can earn media coverage for announcements, but an ideal media engagement program includes comprehensive and long-term activities to ensure a sustainable impact. This is best achieved by taking a systematic approach: from assessing the media landscape, to building a sustained rapport and training of reporters and editors. Through thoughtful engagement and capacity-building, an organization can achieve greater visibility for IYCF and other issues, and cultivate true champions in the form of news reporters, editors, and spokespeople.