

Alive & Thrive West Africa

2017–2022



© UNICEF | UNI115923 | PIROZZI

Alive & Thrive (A&T) is a global nutrition initiative to save lives, prevent illness, and ensure healthy growth of mothers and children. From 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. In 2014, A&T began working in Burkina Faso, India, Nigeria, and throughout the Southeast Asia region, expanding its scope to include maternal and adolescent nutrition, and using agriculture and social protection programs as delivery mechanisms for maternal, infant, and young child nutrition (MIYCN). Now, A&T is leveraging its robust network and knowledge base to strengthen MIYCN systems and build capacity in these and other countries within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

To establish a baseline within the region, A&T conducted a landscape assessment in 2017. The analysis revealed that there have been positive gains in the coverage of reproductive, maternal, newborn, and child health (RMNCH) services in many ECOWAS countries. However, it also showed that MIYCN interventions have not been adequately integrated into these facility and community-based services. West Africa's vulnerability to climatic shocks and humanitarian crises has also presented a challenge for MIYCN. According to the report, financial and technical resources have historically focused on the treatment of undernutrition, leaving preventive measures largely overlooked. With this evidence, advocacy for preventive nutrition has emerged as a top priority for A&T, along with the integration of MIYCN into existing RMNCH platforms.

This brief gives an overview of A&T's main strategies to address the MIYCN needs in the region, which include: advocating for improved policies and program coverage; strengthening systems by building capacity for the strategic use of data; and generating new knowledge by documenting innovations that expand MIYCN services.

Policy advocacy

Successful MIYCN interventions are dependent upon the strength of the policies and guidance that support them. A&T is advocating for stronger policies and implementation plans,

adequate funding, and proper monitoring. Through ongoing engagement with donors and key decision-makers, A&T's advocacy agenda aims to:

- Increase early initiation of breastfeeding (EIBF) in essential newborn care;
- Integrate maternal nutrition into antenatal care (ANC) services;

Alive & Thrive West Africa is a knowledge partner supporting maternal, infant, and young child nutrition at scale.

PARTNERS SUPPORTED

- Governments in ECOWAS
- Multilateral agencies, including UNICEF, the World Health Organization (WHO), and the World Bank
- Africa Leadership for Nutrition
- Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement
- International and national NGOs
- Medical and midwives' associations

LANDSCAPE ASSESSMENT FINDINGS

1. West Africa has among the highest maternal mortality rates in the world¹:

679 PER 100,000 live births

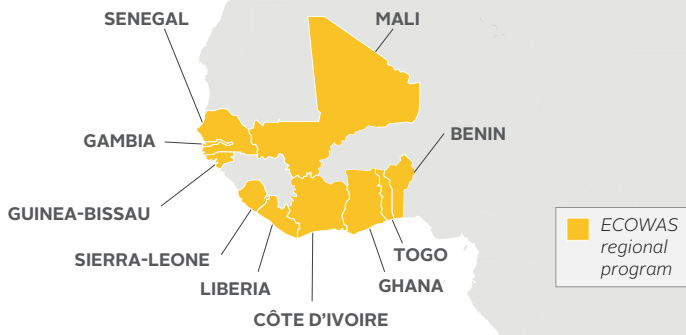
2. Anemia in women of reproductive age ranges from²:

41% TO 54%

3. Nutrition initiatives have historically focused on treatment, leaving less support for prevention of undernutrition.
4. Significant gaps exist in coverage of:
 - Maternal nutrition
 - Early initiation of breastfeeding
 - Exclusive breastfeeding
 - Dietary diversity for complementary feeding

¹ WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, The World Bank. Trends in Maternal Mortality: 1990 to 2015. Geneva: WHO; (2014).

² DHS surveys 2010–2017



KEY PARTNERS

Countdown to 2030

An initiative supported by Manitoba University, West African Health Organization (WAHO), and Johns Hopkins University to improve data analysis.

TRANSFORM Nutrition and African Leaders for Nutrition (ALN)

Initiatives improving leadership, evidence-based policy creation, and country capacity to review and analyze nutrition data.

- Protect breastfeeding and complementary feeding through enforcement of the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes and Codex Alimentarius; and
- Include MIYCN and program coverage indicators in each country's Health Management Information System (HMIS) and national surveys.

Progress toward these objectives is already underway. In 2017, A&T together with the Inter-Parliamentary Union and UNICEF, supported legislators from 20 countries to convene in Ouagadougou for mobilizing political support to strengthen MIYCN initiatives. In 2018, A&T conducted a joint regional workshop with UNICEF, the World Health Organization (WHO), and the International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN) to assist decision-makers from eight countries in developing action plans for breastfeeding-support interventions. A&T and UNICEF are following up on these action plans in each country.

UNICEF's regional Rising program, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, has also provided opportunities for strengthening breastfeeding policies and practices. After developing a regional social and behavior change (SBC) campaign, A&T is working with ministries of health to develop and implement country-specific policies supportive of exclusive breastfeeding, and mass communication approaches that will reach mothers and others to reduce the harmful practice of giving water to infants less than six months of age.

Systems strengthening

Capacity building and the strategic use of data. A&T is bringing MIYCN policies and programs to life by strengthening implementation capacity. At the regional level, A&T, UNICEF, and the WHO support workshops, planning meetings, and technical consultations that bring together ministries of health and other key partners. At the country level, visits and virtual meetings facilitate progress on action plans. A&T's targeted technical assistance is developing local skills in the following areas:

- Promoting baby-friendly health services;
- Delivering a package of maternal nutrition interventions in ANC services;
- Improving urban MIYCN services in settings like Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire;
- Using HMIS and survey data;
- Tracking program coverage and policy implementation; and
- Creating district learning sites for tracking EIBF.

A&T is also working to improve MIYCN program coverage and quality by promoting the systematic identification of gaps in routine data to detect and address shortfalls. In selected countries, A&T does this by defining MIYCN indicators, supporting measures to improve data quality and data visualization, and helping programs ensure regular review of dashboards by program managers.

Knowledge and learning

A&T is disseminating the lessons learned from its program in Burkina Faso that improved breastfeeding at scale, as well as identifying success stories and innovations from other countries in the region. For example, *sage-femmes*—community birth attendants in Niger—have formed an effective network to support pregnant and recently delivered mothers. The lessons from this approach are useful in mobilizing support for pregnant and post-partum women in other areas with low health facility utilization. While, in Senegal, district learning sites support building and sustaining competencies in MIYCN. A&T shares these and other best practices that are relevant for the West African context through networking events, social media platforms, webinars, and professional associations. Regional meetings are also leveraged to initiate and accelerate action when decision-makers are interfacing with technical experts and field implementers with hands-on experience.