

Micronutrient Powder supplementation brings new hope for children of Nepal

Palpa district, Nepal – Leela Rana, has been volunteering as a Female Community Health Volunteer (FCHV) for the past five years. As FCHV, she provides counselling and basic health and nutrition services to members of her community.

These days, she is busy disseminating information on Infant and Young Child Feeding (IYCF) practices and distributing Multiple Micronutrient Powder, known locally as “Baal Vita”, to children aged from six months to two years old.



Tackling the problem of malnutrition

In Nepal, one out of every two children aged under-five suffers from chronic malnutrition which often results in stunting. Further, around 80 per cent of children below two years of age suffer from anaemia. In a country with estimated per capita income of only US\$ 470 per annum, access to micronutrient rich

foods on a regular basis is a distant reality for most families.

Along with the economic hindrances, lack of proper knowledge on the importance of energy dense complementary feeding and other care practices, such as good hygiene in the community, is contributing to the high levels of under-nutrition.

“After attending the IYCF and Baal Vita training, I now know that 80 per cent of the brain develops within the first two years of life,” said Leela. “When I became a mother for the first time, nine years ago, I was not even aware that infants should be exclusively breastfed for six months.”

Leela recalls feeding only rice and lentils to her daughter for the first year without realizing how diverse and energy dense food was important for overall development of her baby. “I will now be giving my six-month old daughter the first round of Baal Vita along with high energy food,” said Leela. “Although I missed the opportunity for my first child, this time I will ensure that she gets a chance to develop fully, both physically and mentally.”

Baal vita pilot project fills the nutrient gap

Today, Leela is a strong advocate of proper nutrition and care for children. She has been promoting Baal Vita along with IYCF practices among mothers and care-givers

in her community. She organizes mothers' group meetings every month where she highlights the importance of micronutrient supplements, breastfeeding, improving the quality of complementary feeding, and the importance of hygiene and child stimulation for the holistic development of children.

"Baal Vita has helped increase the appetite of my grand-daughter and she has become much more active now," said Narayan Devi Gyawali, who has been feeding Baal Vita to her 18 month old grand-daughter for the past month. Another mother, when asked why she is giving Baal Vita to her son, said confidently, "Baal Vita will help him grow and his brain will develop fast!"

Local bodies support the project

In Palpa district, local authorities in the villages and others, such as youth clubs, have been supporting the FCHVs to promote Baal Vita in their communities. In Pipaldanda village, the local governing body distributed a bowl and spoon to every mother with the Baal Vita sachets. "This small initiative among us will motivate the community to make optimum use of it," said Bhakta Jung Rana, the Village Secretary. He pointed out that this was the first time the village had ever provided support to any nutrition programmes.

Meanwhile, youth clubs, using their own resources, have provided FCHVs with trunks to safely store Baal Vita. Inspired by such efforts, other villages in the district have initiated similar support for FCHVs. School children have also been mobilised as community advocates to further promote IYCF and Baal Vita.

Government to scale-up the project nationally

To improve the national nutrition status, the Government of Nepal, with support from UNICEF, is piloting integrated community promotion of Infant and Young Child Feeding and Multiple Micronutrient Powder distribution in six districts of Nepal. The project is also being supported by the International Zinc Association along with other external development partners.

"Based on lessons learnt, a national programme will be designed and rolled out in all 75 districts of the nation," said Dr. Yashovardhan Pradhan, Director General of the Ministry of Health. "Since we are promoting the use of Multiple Micronutrient Powder at six months, this will also help mothers initiate complementary feeding on time," he added. At present only 60 per cent of infants from 6 to 7 months receive complementary feeding.

Dr. Chet Raj Pant, who heads the social sector in the National Planning Commission, after interacting with mothers in the field, said he was happy to see that mothers have really noticed a difference in their children after giving them Baal Vita. "This, quite simply, will bring a brighter future to Nepal," he said.

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