



Fighting Childhood Malnutrition in Mozambique

Like many women in rural northern Mozambique, Atea Mussa started giving her children water to drink in addition to breast milk on the day they were born. Her own mother taught her that without water, the babies' throats would dry out and they might die.

But finding clean water near Atea's village of Ampivine in Nampula Province is a daily struggle. The area lacks piped water and sanitation is poor because most households have no toilet or latrines. The available water often carries microbes that cause diarrhea, putting children at risk of malnutrition even when food supplies are adequate.

Atea's two oldest children, now ages 5 and 3, suffered repeatedly from diarrhea as babies. More than 50% of the area's children under 5 are stunted – shorter than they should be for their age due to chronic malnutrition. The problem is compounded by the practice of weaning children on plain porridge even if more nutritious foods are available.

When Atea was pregnant with her third child, new ideas about child rearing came to the village and surrounding areas. The radio began to play messages about the benefits of exclusive breastfeeding and ways to improve children's diets with local foods. A community volunteer trained through a USAID program offered free nutrition and hygiene classes, which Atea attended. Although others initially were skeptical, Atea trusted Amina Abubakar, the new community volunteer or "animadora" in Portuguese.



Photo: USAID/Mozambique Suzanne Poland

Volunteer nutrition educator Amina Abubakar shows off healthy 6-month-old Nelson while his mother Atea Mussa looks on.

These activities are part of an initiative, funded largely through USAID's Food for Peace program, to address the root causes of chronic childhood malnutrition. USAID is investing \$20 million a year in food security programs that combine nutrition education and agriculture extension services to reach more than 200,000 poor rural families. The programs are designed to give Mozambicans the skills they need to reduce malnutrition through healthy diets, produce more food, and increase their household incomes.

When Atea gave birth to her son Nelson Aldi in late 2003, she broke with tradition and followed the animadora's advice, giving the baby nothing but breast milk for the first four months. Then she added porridge mixed with nutrient-rich foods like peanuts and sesame to his diet. Nelson not only survived without water, he thrived. At six months, he is a happy, chubby baby known and even envied in the community for the fact that he is rarely ill and has never suffered from diarrhea.

If Nelson could talk, he would say "thank you" because he is growing well and when you grow well, school is easy."

- Atea Mussa, mother of 6-month-old Nelson

When a visitor asks the animadora how she knows her program is working, she takes Nelson from his mother and lifts him into the air with a big smile. Because of his example, more mothers are adopting new ways of feeding their children. "The children are healthier and the sicknesses are less severe," Amina observes. "The mothers always congratulate me and are grateful."

Beliefs are changing even among the older generation. "The grandmothers see the advantages because the children are growing well and don't suffer," says Atea, who is proud that her son has a healthy start in life. She hopes Nelson will grow up "to help others in the community" as a nurse, a highly respected profession.

