Mother-to-mother training in Malawi helps battle child malnutrition

ROME, Jan 19 (Thomson Reuters Foundation) - Three weeks is all it takes to change the fortunes of a baby’s life, simply by training mothers to make small changes to what they are fed and how their food is prepared, according to scientists who studied malnourished infants in rural Malawi.

The findings showed training mothers and pregnant women in food hygiene and a varied diet by other mothers helped to ward off diseases like diarrhea and resulted in steady weight gain in young children, Anitha Seetha, who led the study, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. Scaling up this low-cost approach could make a significant contribution to combating malnutrition in Africa, Seetha, of the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) said in a statement.

Under-nutrition is responsible the death of about 3 million children under five every year globally by making them more susceptible to infections and delaying their recovery, said the United Nations’ children agency UNICEF. In Malawi, one of the world’s poorest countries, one out of six children under five are underweight, and nearly half are stunted or shorter than average height, latest figures from UNICEF, the World Health Organization and World Bank show.

Medical experts say stunting hinders children’s cognitive growth and economic potential. Stunted children generally complete fewer years of schooling and earn less as adults and the effects are largely irreversible.

The study, by ICRISAT and Malawi’s Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources, focused on 179 mothers of children under two years of age in two districts, where the majority of families are smallholder farmers.

The researchers developed two porridge recipes using locally available foods such as maize, groundnut, carrots and pigeon peas, and had mothers raising healthy children lead cooking and training sessions for those with undernourished children.

They recorded daily the children’s weight, height, and mid-upper arm circumference - measures of under-nutrition - and the incidence of diseases such as diarrhea, which the World Health Organization said is the leading cause of malnutrition in children. The results showed that children whose mothers received training showed progressive improvements in weight. Cases of diarrhea also disappeared almost entirely, said the study and published the Journal of Public Health Nutrition, Cambridge University Press on Wednesday. Read more