Nutrition, the talk of the town in rural Ethiopia

Households in rural towns learn about nutrition and apply their knowledge through homestead gardening, exclusive breastfeeding, and more!

Undernutrition has been rampant for decades in the agriculturally productive northern region of Ethiopia. Following the three-month rainy season, the countryside is vibrant with bright green vegetation, yet nearly one in two children under five are stunted in the Amhara region (Ethiopian Demographic Health Survey, 2016). Communities have little to no awareness about nutrition and continue to feed their children *enjera be shero* – a staple flat bread and sauce – three times a day.

In October of 2017, Save the Children’s Feed the Future Ethiopia Growth through Nutrition Activity, funded by USAID, began conducting ten-month long Enhanced Community Conversations (ECCs) in four regions of the country to educate communities about the importance of appropriate nutrition for pregnant and lactating women and children under two years of age. Groups of 20 mothers, fathers, or grandmothers gather once a month to talk about topics such as exclusive breastfeeding, pre-natal care, balanced diets, amongst numerous other topics.

Alemtsehay and Alemu Shitaye, are a young lively couple and the parents of a year and a half toddler in Ankesha District of northern Ethiopia. Their humble two-room home is plastered with colorful ECC posters Alemtsehay brings home after attending her sessions. She eloquently summarizes what she learned from her sessions and describes how she prepares supplementary foods for her toddler comprised of grains, vegetables, and eggs or milk. Her husband interjects to share how his sisters and him help Alemtsehay with household chores. “We made sure Alemtsehay followed up with the nearby health center since entering her second trimester and took her iron supplementation pills daily,” he goes on to add.

Alemu and Alemtsehay are also the proud owners of six chickens, three sheep, and a lush homestead garden no larger than 100 meters cubed, neatly planted with rows of Swiss chard and pigeon pea.

Growth through Nutrition Activity supports households with farm tools, vegetable seeds, poultry, and sheep or goats and teaches them how to make homestead gardens and rear chicken and sheep so beneficiaries are able to put into practice what they learn from their ECC sessions.

The couple practice crop rotation and partially rest their garden for the next sowing seasons when they will plant carrots and cabbage.

225 kilometers across region, Yeshiwork is tending to kale in her rather spacious garden in Alefa District while her two-year-old toddler plays about. Although slightly more timid than Alemtsehay, Yeshiwork too is

“We use what we produce and sell the rest at the market... if we don’t have a certain food type, we’ll buy it from the market or trade with our neighbors.”

– Alemu Shitaye, small holder farmer in Ankesha District
“Milk and meat we may not always find, but I try to feed by family different types of food throughout the day. I’ve bought three chickens now too, so I have a supply of eggs, if not for us, at least for my toddler.”

– Yeshiwork Abebaw, housewife and mother in Alefa District

conversant about her ECC sessions as she describes the need to include fats and oils, vegetables and fruits, and animal source foods in her household diet. “Milk and meat we may not always find,” she says admittedly, “but I try to feed my family different types of food throughout the day. I’ve bought three chickens now too so I have a supply of eggs, if not for the rest of us, at least for my toddler.”

Her and her neighbor Serawdenk have similar stories to that of Alemu. These lucky neighbors are also the recipients of mung bean, however, the magical bean turning heads in North Gonder District with great nutritional value, short maturation period, and high market price! Yeshiwork and Serawdenk regularly prepare the bean in the form of a sauce, porridge, or bread for their families and rave about its taste.

Growth through Nutrition Activity introduced mung bean in Takusa and Alefa Districts in July of 2017. Today this high protein, vitamin-rich crop from the pea family is being purchased and planted by non-beneficiary farm owners in both districts.

In the same town, Kefale, the fishmonger, is the father of five children, his youngest a one-year-old, and Setotaw, a farmer, is a father to three children, his youngest a three-month old infant. The two are members of fathers’ ECC groups in Alefa District. Like Alemu, they fervently describe the need to feed their families nutritious foods.

“I buy kale and avocados from my neighbors,” explains Kefale, “and besides I’m fishmonger. I feed my family well!” Kefale has not received any inputs from the project, but has planted an avocado and mango tree in his backyard since joining the ECC.

During their sessions, ECC members partake in role play activities to learn what food items to prioritize when shopping at the market, break off into small groups to share their experiences with household decision making, and are given take-home exercises to incite conversation amongst their family members.

“I have a better relationship with my wife since joining ECCs,” explains Setotaw. “We discuss everything. I know I should neither be as meek as a donkey, nor as dominant as a lion,” he says making a reference to imagery used in the ECC.

To date, Growth through Nutrition Activity enrolled 719 ECC groups and supported 7,281 beneficiaries with agricultural inputs across four regions of Ethiopia. These enthusiastic, progressive individuals are knowledgeable. They understand nutrition in a way most city folks don’t, and are eager to put into practice what they’ve learned. They are pioneers and potential change agents for their community at large.

Considering the project is largely present in agriculturally productive areas, one can only imagine the multiplier effect a little nutrition education and input support can have on the communities of rural Ethiopia.