Adapting New Diets in Rural Ethiopia

Vulnerable households are diversifying their diets and their livelihoods

My eyes have been opened since joining the program. Now I take good care of the chickens and sheep...my garden...and feed my family well. I can never return to the ways of the past.”

– Mandarina Gazali, wife and mother of two

Mandarina Gazali lives with her husband and their two children in Gesera District of south-central Ethiopia. Like many in the Oromia region, she and her family used to get by on a small plot farming as their main source of livelihood and she had little or no awareness about the importance of providing her children with diverse, nutritious foods.

Undernutrition is a great challenge in Ethiopia where stunting and wasting rates remain high. One in two children under the age of five suffer from stunting in Oromia Region alone, according to the Ethiopian Demographic Health Survey (2016).

In 2017, Save the Children’s Growth through Nutrition Activity funded by USAID began its implementation with the aim of improving the nutritional status of mothers and young children in four regions of the country. USAID promotes diversified nutrition by delivering a livelihood package to smallholder farmers which includes pulse and vegetable seeds, fruit seedlings, poultry, small ruminants (goats or sheep), farming tools, as well as nutrition-sensitive agriculture training. A number of these beneficiaries also partake in behavioral change communication sessions once a month where topics such as exclusive breastfeeding, young child feeding, water and sanitation, among numerous other topics are discussed at large.

Being among the poorest households in her community, Mandarina and her family were targeted by the project in 2017. She was trained on nutrition sensitive agriculture, homestead gardening, and livestock management shortly after her enrollment and was pleased to receive carrot, Swiss chard, and potato seeds along with three sheep and six chickens.

Mandarina and her husband began cultivating vegetables in their homestead garden, gathering feed for their poultry and livestock, and built a coop for their chickens using local materials. It was not long before the couple were able to grow healthy chickens and multiply their sheep from three to six. Today, Mandarina’s children consume vegetables and eggs along with their local staple foods, an all too unfamiliar but essential regimen in their household.

Growth through Nutrition also aims to diversify livelihoods of vulnerable households through sales of excess produce and by engaging women in saving groups. Having grown vegetables for two terms since joining the program, Mandarina and her family have enjoyed the returns of Swiss-chard and egg sales which Mandarina in turn uses to purchase vegetable oil, iodized salt, and other food items her household requires. She also saves money every two weeks in accordance with the bylaws of her savings group from which she will soon be able to take loans.

Thanks to the support of USAID, up to 28,000 households like Mandarina’s are receiving the inputs needed to grow diverse food sources, and more importantly, learning that the consumption of these foods is of paramount importance for the well-being of their mothers, infants, young children, and communities at large.