As malnutrition continues to threaten the children of Gambia, the Rapid Social Response (RSR) Program is supporting the National Nutrition Agency (NaNA) in their work to raise policymakers’ awareness of the socio-economic gains the country is making from investing in nutrition. The government has developed an updated policy for nutrition, with an accompanying strategic plan for implementation. Both are integrated in the new Poverty Reduction Strategy of Gambia.

Rationale

Gambia was badly affected by the recent food, fuel, and financial crises, which stalled many of the country’s gains toward the United Nations’ Millennium Development Goals. With 24 percent of its children under five suffering from stunting (UNICEF 2010), Gambia has no time to lose. The updated policy improves and guides the nutrition work of stakeholders at the central and regional level. The strategic plan accompanying the updated policy for nutrition has implementation features of service-delivery platforms, which—when a crisis hits—can scale up quickly to reach many more mothers and young children.

Response

With the government’s growing commitment comes the recognition that malnutrition is best addressed by the community, using simple, appropriate, cost-effective strategies. In villages, community-based approaches are a move away from traditional vertical approaches, in which children’s nutrition is addressed at the health center, often too late. The community-based approach entails engaging the community in activities that will combat malnutrition through prevention and recognition of early warning signs. The RSR-funded project provides behavior change communication activities for caretakers of young children aimed at changing practices of hand washing, feeding, malaria control, and home and village cleanliness. Trained village volunteers screen children for malnutrition and refer those with severe cases to the health clinic for treatment; they also distribute vitamin A capsules and medicine against intestinal worms.

RSR has also provided support to policy development at the central government level and helped NaNA, the agency responsible for implementing the policy, to strengthen institutional capacity and outreach. With RSR support, financial and procurement staff have been recruited and trained, new accounting software has been introduced, and a framework for monitoring and evaluation has been adopted. Moreover, an awareness-raising strategy has been developed, and staff with expertise in communication and monitoring and evaluation have been recruited.
In addition, RSR has supported the training of 23 trainers from the government’s regional health teams to guide the work of community workers in villages and helped form 180 village support groups for nutrition activities in the communities, encompassing a total of 1,260 members and volunteers in 506 villages across the country.

**Accomplishments to Date:**
- Supported the development of an updated policy on nutrition
- Helped to elaborate and produce budget estimates for a strategic plan for nutrition
- Developed tools for monitoring and evaluation
- Supported campaign to register all children under five in 506 communities
- Developed nutrition advocacy strategy

**Integrated Anemia Control**

RSR is supporting a pilot project for integrated control of anemia, which is a major cause of maternal deaths and cognitive deficiencies in children under five in Gambia. The pilot is an add-on to the service delivery platform for maternal and child nutrition at the community level. Community workers, by a simple prick in the finger, can quickly diagnose an iron deficiency and thus detect anemia early. The pilot project supplies villages with needed resources to prevent iron deficiency, such as knowledge on why and how to use insecticide-treated bed nets to prevent malaria (one of anemia’s leading causes), incentives to start a communal garden, and food fortification powder that can be sprinkled on top of food.

The pilot project has demonstrated that simple, low-cost interventions that are integrated in the community can reduce anemia among children and pregnant and lactating women. The next step is to build links to other relevant sectors, such as health, agriculture, education, and social protection and to other community development initiatives, then scale-up the project across the whole country. With an effective model, a stronger state nutrition agency, and an improved policy, the government and its partners may save lives and offer a better future to mothers and children in every Gambian village.