

SUCCESS STORY

For healthier babies and families

Exclusive breastfeeding improves child immunity and helps with weight gain.



Photo: USAID/Mali
A Malian mother and her child

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- Traoré Diata Berthé,

July 2017—In the south of Mali, members of the Fanidiama village community gather under a large tree to learn about the benefits of exclusive breastfeeding.

As part of World Breastfeeding Week, USAID’s High Impact Health Services Project organizes such educational sessions in several villages of Mali.

Mahamadou Bouare, a village community adviser, uses pictograms to demonstrate the benefits of breastfeeding. “Breast milk builds an infant’s immune system and protects it against infectious diseases,” he says. “It helps foster the mother-child relationship. It is the best food for the child as adapted to its nutritional needs. Additionally, breast milk helps with the natural spacing of births.”

Malian mothers often breastfeed their children up to the age of 2 years and beyond, but exclusive breastfeeding is a stumbling block. Mothers and grandmothers traditionally give water, date juice diluted with water, or herbal teas to infants. In some villages, this is still the first food that newborns receive.

In 2016, more than 3,000 women from the areas covered by the project started practicing exclusive breastfeeding. Traoré Diata Berthé, 36, one of the women who attended the sessions organized by the project, remarked, “I decided to practice exclusive breastfeeding when I started attending training sessions held by the project. In comparison to my other children, my last born had no diarrhea, no fever and no respiratory disorder.”

She added that, “With my other children, I saw my menstruation return three to four months after the birth. Since I started breastfeeding, I went six months without returning to menstruation, and I did not have to use any other family planning method either. Besides, the family could save more money on health care, as our last born rarely felt sick.”

Although only one-third of Malian children less than 6 months old are exclusively breastfed, this practice is slowly gaining ground thanks to projects like this that help bring about necessary behavior changes at the community level. Many women like Fanidiama are now convinced that breast milk is the only food a child under 6 months should have.

The USAID’s High Impact Health Services Project (SSGI) is five years program of 46 million aiming to reduce or eliminate maternal, newborn, and child deaths in Mali. The project is implemented in five regions — Kayes, Koulikoro, Sikasso, six communes of Bamako and Gao district. It provides support to 37 district hospitals, 762 primary health facilities and approximately 6,900 villages. It works with 1577 community health workers and more than 17, 200 community volunteers.