

**Improving the Nutrition of China's Babies: Critical Actions Needed to Assure a Healthy, Intellectually Alert and Productive Population for the 21st Century: *Outlining Key Elements of Communication Support***

**Gary R. Gleason, Ph.D.  
Program Director  
International Nutrition Foundation**

China is at a nutrition crossroads. Following the current period of sustained economic growth and political stability, improvements in crop varieties and yields and improved interregional food distribution the majority of China's families now produce or procure sufficient food for adequate nutrition in terms overall calorie requirements. With elimination of famine, the country's nutrition challenges has shifted from providing food quantity toward assuring nutrition quality in family diets.

This shift is especially important in regard to the protein and micronutrients needs of babies as evidence accumulates showing the importance of various nutrients not only to the baby's health and development but also that the nutrition of the baby affects the his or her physical and mental status as an adult. The mother's nutritional status at the time of conception affects her success in carrying a baby to term and on fetal development. The mother who exclusively breastfeeds from birth, as is universally recommended, becomes the source of all the nutrients the normal birth weight baby needs for four to six months. When complementary feeding begins, (and that of other primary caregivers'), and what nutrients the baby receives and how care and feeding are carried out become critical to good health as well as physical and cognitive development. If China, sets new nutrition goals and policies that include a focus on the nutrition of all babies, their protection, health and intellectual potential both as children and adults can be better assured.

Some of the policies and actions necessary to improve baby's nutrition in China are already set and underway. In recent decades, China has actively promoted breastfeeding through a Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative (BFHI) that is spreading to hospitals across the country. Policies, breastfeeding, support, promotion, education and facilitation in these facilities protect and expand the practice by mothers. Breastfeeding promotion through the mass media and other channels is also widespread. Such support should continue with the goals that the BFHI cover all counties, municipalities in provinces across the country and to increase and that exclusive breastfeeding become universally practiced.

To eliminate iodine deficiency disorders including lowered mental capacities, China set required policies and successfully introduced the fortification of salt with iodine. Full national implementation of universal salt iodization requires ongoing support including monitoring and ongoing promotion of this commodity.

While these nutrition successes are consolidated across the country, important challenges that also affect the health development and potential of babies across China remain. Chinese and scientists from around the world continue to develop, report and amass evidence of the impact of specific types of nutrients and micronutrients on fetal and young child growth, including the development of their brains. Recent research confirms the need for specific nutrients/micronutrients to better assure normal intrauterine growth development and nutritional deficiencies during the two years following birth can have long terms effects on health and cognitive capacity throughout life. For example,

- Iodine deficiencies in women's diets impact negatively brain development in a fetus.
- Folate deficiency in a woman can cause neural tube defects during the first 25 days of fetal development.
- Health and development of infants not exclusively breastfed during their first months of infancy are well known.
- Inadequate protein and calories levels in the foods that complement breastmilk for older infants and young children result in growth stunting that in turn has a negative impact on a healthy and a successful adult life.
- Vitamin A deficiency affects sight and overall health.
- Iron deficiency anemia in infants and young children permanently impairs cognitive capacity.

Building on successes in national promotion of breastfeeding and salt fortification with iodine, China has the opportunity to expand and consolidate national nutrition goals and expand national

efforts to assure nutrition essential for physical and mental development for all babies throughout the country.

Most Chinese mothers begin thinking and speaking about "their baby" from the time they find themselves pregnant until their baby becomes their child at about two years of age. By this age, some important potential for lifetime growth and cognitive ability are permanently set. Formal national goals and a national *babies' nutrition programme* can be set up by China Governmental agencies, many mass organizations, researchers and international organizations. These agencies and groups will need to expand their current work on various nutrients, foods and feeding practices and also link their work together to guarantee overall adequate nutrition for all children less than two years of age.

Supposing China's development continues and reaches more deeply into poorer rural and urban communities generating the policies and programmes necessary to assure all Chinese babies receive the quantities, quality and variety of foods needed for good nutrition requires a major effort. While some factors associated with the nourishment of Chinese babies are outside the realm of family decision-making and cannot easily be improved without new policies and programmes, many practices are within parental and other caregiver control.

Given these factors, a initial activities need to include development of communication strategies with elements of well planned advocacy directed at securing programme leadership within key political, technical, service delivery and communication sectors. Programme partnership building and resource generation are advocacy goals as well. If a needed policies result and a national programme is successfully planned, it will include major communication elements directed toward integrated Information, Education, Communication (IEC) efforts and aimed at reinforcing positive practices of supporting behavior changes by parents and families practices that lead to good nutrition of their babies.

### **Elements Communication Support at Macro Levels of a National Programme to Assure All Babies' Nutrition**

#### **Advocate:**

The goal of macro level advocacy would be to initiate necessary reviews and obtain commitment to the set up a major ten-year nutrition programme in China with special focus on the women and babies. Among the first groups targeted are policy makers, potential programme leaders and collaborators on each relevant nutrition intervention . Such advocacy targets will be diverse. They will need to range from Government officials to leaders of processing industries of foods that need to be fortified with various micronutrients and from to groups who likely to be involved in making available affordable micronutrient supplements for babies. Other advocacy targets are those working to expand the BFHI and promote breastfeeding and the media and others who can contribute to nutrition education and promotion. The Governmental and other groups who will lead these efforts will also need to be targeted for initial advocacy to assure their involvement and active support. Advocacy activities and supporting materials need to explain the new efforts proposed and justify the need and roles for mass organizations and women and children's activists such as the NWCCW, CWF, the media, NGOs and international partners with global experience.

Government officials, party leaders, heads of mass organizations, NGOs and the media are advocacy audiences. Many organizations and individuals responsible for and involved in setting nutrition goals and developing nutrition programmes are at national, provincial, county and municipal levels. This necessitates a "multi-level" advocacy plan. These groups need to learn essential facts about the current impact of malnutrition, including micronutrient deficiencies, on a baby's fetal development on its health and development during the first two years of life. For Government policy makers, the negative impact of curtailed early physical growth and cognitive development on as individuals health and productivity as an adult needs to be clearly explained. International and national data that relate key nutrition policy and programmes actions to effects that are relevant and important to each audience should be used and advocacy materials and presentations need to be clear to non-technical audiences.

To be successful advocacy will need to include information on the consequences of current nutrition problems on individual health and be complemented by information on the consequences of the nutrition of babies on social development, productivity and micro and macro economic growth. Regional breakdowns will be needed on the status of nutrition problems affecting Chinese babies and women. Gender differences are also important.

Effective advocacy will also need to report and balance, China's nutrition achievements such as reductions in PEM, improved food production and distribution, successes in breastfeeding promotion/

BFHI and achievements in control of iodine deficiency control through universal iodization of salt. Also required are current nutrition goals, political commitments and plans developed in relation to China's National Plan of Action for Children and Women (including province and county NPAs), the World Food Conference (WFC), the Summit on Women and similar international fora. Advocacy support materials also need to delineate China's major nutrition challenges for 2000-2010 such as maternal malnutrition, non-exclusive breastfeeding, persistent protein-energy malnutrition in some areas and widespread micronutrient deficiencies (iron, iodine, Vitamin A, folic acid, zinc.)

Major new goals and actions need to be are also required, such as the micronutrient nutrition of women to assure their own and healthy fetal development, overall and micronutrient nutrition of pregnant and breastfeeding women and their babies, ongoing breastfeeding promotion, improved complementary feeding, food fortification and micronutrient supplementation when needed.

As macro-level advocacy for a national nutrition commitment for babies in China is carried out to generate interest and a framework of multi-sectoral support, the details of an actionable strategy will need developed. Such a strategy will take into account current nutrition goals, activities and programmes, the impact of national health reform and decentralization on public health services and the realities of the "market orientation" of many public service institutions, health facilities and the media. National research and actions toward micronutrient food fortification, international recommendations for women about micronutrient supplementation during pregnancy and lactation will be highly relevant as well. Cultural and regional diversity, and the strength of local customs, changing social norms and family structures on dietary practices are also critical considerations.,

Among the steps important in developing such a strategy are the following:

- Review of the 1990-2000 NPA as it related to nutrition.
- Adjustment of a new 2000-2010 NPA to adopts a full "life cycle" approach to women's and children's nutrition.
- Outline of a multi-intervention, complementary framework of actions that expands and strengthens nutrition goals and activities in at least seven areas:
  - 1) *Reinforcement and refinement of nutrition related services. education and promotion that aims at assuring good nutrition and micronutrient status at critical periods of the lifecycle(prior to pregnancy, during pregnancy and during lactation.*
    - *Ongoing promotion of BHF/ breastfeeding..*
    - *Set up of policies and actions needed to fortify appropriate foods with the micronutrients needed reduce common micronutrient deficiencies*
      - *Iron*
      - *Vitamin A*
      - *B vitamins*
      - *Zinc*
      - *Iodine*
    - *Develop and conduct a major information, education and communication efforts aimed at dietary improvement of children less than two years of age.*
      - *Breastfeeding*
      - *Appropriate complementary feeding (timing of introduction, types of complementary foods, local/home production, preparation, quantities, feeding methods, etc.)*
        - *More protein (eggs)*
        - *Micronutrient supplements (???)*
    - *Promotion of increased and appropriate micronutrient supplementation of high risk groups including women of childbearing age, pregnant women and children less than two years of age.*
    - *Enhancement of the CARE approach in early child feeding.*
    - *Ongoing monitoring of programme interventions and their complementary and culturally appropriate application throughout the country.*

As an preparatory step in strengthening nutrition activities for young children and women in China organizations and institutions concerned about public health and nutrition could immediately

begin work at provincial and country levels throughout the country to better identify currently used, affordable meals/dishes that can improve child maternal nutrition and promote their wider use. Possible partners in such an effort include Government and other organizations such as the following:

- *China Women's Federation (CWF)*
- *National Working Committee for Children and Women, NWCCW*
- *Provincial and Country Authorities*
- *Ministry of Health*
  - *Health Education Institutes*
- *Ministry of Agriculture*
- *Ministry of Education*
- *Municipal Authorities*
- *Local media*
- *UNICEF*
- *Others*

National, Provincial and Country requirement to devote TV broadcasting time to nutrition education based on locally available foods.

National production (CDCC) and provincial adaptation of guidelines for working at country level and with families on child and maternal nutrition improvement.

- ◆ Stress current practices, good and bad.
- ◆ Stress roles of family members (especially mothers and mothers in law) on breastfeeding and complementary feeding.
- ◆ Include supplementation for prevention of micronutrient deficiencies of young children and pregnant women

Fortification of all complementary foods with iron and other appropriate micronutrients.

apprpr

u. jildmalnutriton accepted meals and recipes