ADAPTATIONS IN THE MANAGEMENT OF CHILD WASTING IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19

Case Study
Organization: ACTION AGAINST HUNGER
Location: TANZANIA
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CONTEXT OVERVIEW

Action Against Hunger USA in Tanzania has modified its nutrition programs to minimize the risk of COVID-19 transmission while continuing services for the management of child wasting. In addition to adhering to key infection prevention and control (IPC) measures, Action Against Hunger implemented the following program adaptations:

1. Modified admission and discharge criteria; and
2. Scale up of Family MUAC approach and suspension of mass screenings.

Conversations are currently underway regarding the implementation of additional adaptations, including modified frequency of follow-up visits and modified dosage of therapeutic and/or supplementary foods.

ADAPTATION IMPLEMENTATION

(1) Modified Admission and Discharge Criteria

In response to government guidelines on preventing the spread of COVID-19, Action Against Hunger in Tanzania has temporarily suspended the use of weight and height measurements at clinics, and therefore the use of weight-for-height (WHZ) as an admission criterion for its nutrition programs. Dosing, formerly based on a child's weight, has also been modified on a case-by-case basis, based on previous dosage, wasting severity, and the child's size and age.

Program staff report that the shift to using only mid-upper arm circumference (MUAC) and edema as admission criteria has reduced their workload, since it is easier to take these measurements. Furthermore, it is easier for staff to sanitize MUAC tapes only, rather than tapes, height boards, and weighing scales after screening each child present at the clinic. This mitigates any increases in time spent at the facility due to increased IPC measures. Anecdotally, the shift has not negatively impacted admissions. Feedback from staff and community members is generally positive, as the shift allows for continued clinic-based screening and treatment activities.

(2) Scale Up of Family MUAC Approach

Mass screenings and nutrition surveillance by community health workers (CHWs) were suspended or restricted in Tanzania under COVID-19 government guidance. Action Against Hunger has therefore scaled up Family MUAC. This approach that trains caregivers to measure and monitor their child's MUAC at home. The aim is to support continued screening and early case identification in alignment with

government regulations on reducing crowds and gatherings. Family MUAC was piloted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and Action Against Hunger has accelerated its rollout to fill the gap in screening.

Community mobilization officers and community health workers have led trainings for groups of 20-30 caregivers on the Family MUAC approach and COVID-19 sensitization messages. Each session was conducted in open air and IPC measures were observed. Training CHWs in new project areas has proved challenging due to restrictions on gatherings. Therefore, the rollout relies heavily on those who have already received training. Action Against Hunger is working to identify ways to train new CHWs on this approach. Households are often very dispersed in Action Against Hunger's areas of operation, making it difficult for CHWs to reach many community members with trainings and follow-up. Finally, there are a limited number of MUAC tapes available, and constant cleaning of MUAC tapes wears them down quickly, requiring frequent replacement.

LESSONS LEARNED

(1) Successes

- There is some hesitation at higher levels about the use of Family MUAC, attributed to limited evidence on how Family MUAC influences health-seeking behavior in this context. However, it is expected that Family MUAC and increased sensitization will improve health-seeking behavior.
- Communities and caregivers have expressed positive feedback on the Family MUAC approach. Staff report that caregivers are eager to take ownership of monitoring children's nutrition status at home.

(2) Challenges and Limitations

- Supply of MUAC tapes has been a challenge due to import restrictions and limited supply. Action Against Hunger has launched procurement to secure more tapes and scale up the program.
- A rigorous monitoring system for this project is still under development. It has therefore sometimes been a challenge to track Family MUAC referrals.

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