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Breastfeeding Works with Support: Evidence and Lessons from CASCADE Ethiopia

Background

World Breastfeeding Week (WBW) is a global campaign celebrated annually during the first week of August to protect, promote, and support breastfeeding as a foundation for child survival, nutrition, growth, and development. The WBW 2026 theme, "Breastfeeding for a Sustainable Start in Life: Strengthen What Works," calls for scaling up proven approaches that support mothers through families, communities, health systems, workplaces, and policies.

Breastfeeding remains one of the most cost-effective mothers' actions for preventing child mortality and malnutrition. According to the Ethiopia Demographic and Health Survey report (EDHS 2024-25), early initiation of breastfeeding was 73% and exclusive breastfeeding was 57%. Recognizing that breastfeeding success depends on strong support systems, CAtalyzing Strengthened policy aCtion for heAlthy Diets and resiliencE (CASCADE)[1] Ethiopia has promoted optimal breastfeeding as a core component of Adolescent, Maternal, Infant and Young Child Nutrition (AMIYCN) through its social, behavioral change (SBC) interventions, health system strengthening, community engagement, family support, multi-sectoral coordination, and breastfeeding-friendly workplace initiatives. This learning brief highlights evidence, lessons, and promising practices from CASCADE Ethiopia on what works in strengthening breastfeeding support systems and creating a stronger and healthier start in life for every child.

Nigiste Tarekegne, a model mother and advocate of optimal breastfeeding, from Libokemkem Woreda, South Gondar Zone, Amhara Region, Ethiopia.

1 CASCADE (2022–2027) works to improve food security, reduce malnutrition, and strengthen resilience among women of reproductive age and children across Benin, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria, and Uganda. Funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands and implemented by CARE Nederland, CARE USA, and the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN), the programme applies a food systems approach to support stronger nutrition policy implementation, promote multi-sectoral coordination, engage the private sector, and address structural and gender-related barriers to healthy diets.

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What CASCADE Ethiopia Did

Recognizing breastfeeding as the cornerstone of AMIYCN, CASCADE Ethiopia implemented a comprehensive package of interventions to strengthen breastfeeding support systems at household, community, health facility, workplace, and institutional levels.

Key interventions included:

Recognizing breastfeeding as the cornerstone of AMIYCN, CASCADE Ethiopia implemented a comprehensive package of interventions to strengthen breastfeeding support systems at household, community, health facility, workplace, and institutional levels.

- Promoting optimal breastfeeding practices through AMIYCN interventions, with a focus on early initiation of breastfeeding, exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months, and continued breastfeeding for up to two years and beyond.
- CASCADE conducted a five-day AMIYCN Training of Trainers (ToT) with certification to 21 (5 females) collaborating with the Ministry of Health's nutrition coordination office. This training targeted Food and Nutrition Strategy (FNS) implementers (health experts including health care providers, nurses, public health officers, community health supervisors, health and nutrition team leaders, and nutrition focal person) from the regional, zonal, and woreda levels.
- Cascading the AMIYCN basic training to 138 (29F) participants of lower-level FNS implementers including health workers working at health center level.
- In addition, capacitating of 673 community group facilitators (365 women) on AMIYCN including village saving and loan association (VSLA), social analysis and action (SAA), and men and boys' groups using adapted and locally translated manuals.
- Integrating breastfeeding and nutrition counseling into routine health services, including antenatal care (ANC), postnatal care (PNC), immunization services, and growth monitoring and promotion sessions.
- Conducting supportive supervision across 42 primary health institutions, schools, and households and facilitating review meetings involving 459 participants including the zonal, woreda and kebele level health officials and Health Extension Workers (HEWs), community group facilitators (272 women) to improve the quality and consistency of breastfeeding and nutrition counseling services.

AMIYCN Training of Trainers

21 trainers certified

5 Women

16 Men

Community facilitators training on AMIYCN

673 Community group facilitators

308 Men

365 Women

Lower level implimenters AMIYCN training

138 participants

29 Women

109 Men

Supportive supervision

42 primary health institutions, schools, and households

459 review meeting participants

272 women

- Training 673 community group facilitators (365 women) to lead community conversations, and SBCC sessions that promoted maternal nutrition, breastfeeding, and complementary feeding practices, reaching more than 5,000 women and caregivers.
- CASCADE adapted and distributed AMIYCN SBC materials, including 60000 leaflets, 2,000 pocket guides, and 320 job-aid booklets. The project strengthened communication capacity by training 18 health promotion officers (6 women) on SBC and message design.
- Promoting father and family engagement to create supportive home environments for breastfeeding mothers.
- Establishing and equipping 10 Breastfeeding-Friendly Corners (BFCs) in government institutions and promoting their utilization by lactating mothers returning to work.
- Advocating for breastfeeding-friendly workplaces and institutional support systems for working mothers.

Sewalem Nigussie, a model mother and advocate of optimal breastfeeding, from Libokemkem Woreda, South Gondar Zone, Amhara Region, breastfeeds her baby at a breastfeeding corner established by CASCADE in collaboration with FNS sectors.

"The breastfeeding corners have created a supportive environment for lactating mothers while also improving service efficiency. Previously, staff spent considerable time moving between work and childcare responsibilities. Having a dedicated breastfeeding space has reduced time lost, improved staff performance, and enabled mothers to continue breastfeeding their children. In the long term, this initiative can contribute to reducing child stunting and wasting."

Worknesh Akalu, Head of Health Office, Libokemkem Woreda, Amhara Region, Ethiopia

What the Evidence Shows

Improvements in Breastfeeding Practices in CASCADE operational area (Lay Gayint, Tach Gayint, Libokumkum and Ebinat Woredas)

Indicator	Formative Assessment (2023)	Outcome Assessment (2025)
Children ever breastfed	99%	98%
Early initiation of breastfeeding within one hour	85%	94%
Continued breastfeeding (12-23 months)	98%	97%

The most significant improvement was observed in early initiation of breastfeeding, which increased from 85% to 94%, reflecting the effectiveness of strengthened counseling services, community engagement, and increased awareness among families and caregivers.

Improved Breastfeeding Support Through Health Services

CASCADE helped institutionalize breastfeeding promotion within routine health services through capacity building on AMIYCN at all levels and catalyzed routine monitoring and technical supportive supervision with checklists and review of the performance of AMIYCN interventions.
This resulted in the following improvements:

- Health facilities routinely providing nutrition and breastfeeding counseling increased from 28% at baseline to 82% in 2025.
- Breastfeeding counseling became routinely integrated into ANC, PNC, immunization, and growth monitoring contacts.
- Health workers reported increased confidence and improved capacity to provide practical breastfeeding counseling using visual aids and counseling materials.

> “Before the CASCADE project, only one health center implemented AMIYCN. It was a forgotten intervention. Now, it’s considered a best practice and includes dedicated adolescent services.”
>
> Key Informant Interview, Health Expert, Ebinat Woreda, Amhara Region, Ethiopia

What Worked: Key Lessons from CASCADE Ethiopia

Community-Based SBC Approaches

Community conversations, household counseling, mother groups, cooking demonstrations, and community events reinforced optimal breastfeeding messages and encouraged practical nutrition actions.

Lesson: Consistent and trusted communication platforms help translate knowledge into practice.

Father and Family Engagement

Many mothers reported that support from husbands and family members played a critical role in overcoming breastfeeding challenges and sustaining recommended practices.
Fathers supported mothers by:

- Assisting with household responsibilities.
- Providing emotional support.
- Encouraging continued breastfeeding.
- Facilitating access to health services.

Lesson: Breastfeeding outcomes improve significantly when fathers and family members are actively engaged in maternal and childcare.

> "We used to think only mothers were responsible for children's food. Now we share that responsibility and even prepare meals together."
>
> Male FGD participant, SAA group, Ebinat Woreda, Ethiopia

Multi-Sectoral Coordination

CASCADE worked through Food and Nutrition Strategy (FNS) coordination platforms and collaborated with health, agriculture, education, administration, and community structures to promote nutrition actions.

Lesson: Breastfeeding is not solely a health-sector issue. Cross-sector ownership and collaboration strengthen sustainability, accountability, and reach.

Local Government Ownership

The most successful interventions were those jointly supported by:

- Woreda administrations.
- Health offices.
- Sector institutions.
- Community leaders.

Lesson: Institutional ownership is critical for sustainability, utilization, and long-term impact.

Policy and Programme Implications

To sustain and accelerate progress in breastfeeding outcomes, policymakers and partners should:

- Strengthen investments in breastfeeding promotion, counseling, and support services.
- Integrate father and family engagement into breastfeeding and nutrition programmes.
- Institutionalize BFCs across workplaces.
- Allocate resources for breastfeeding-supportive infrastructure and services.
- Strengthen workplace policies that support breastfeeding mothers.
- Continue multi-sectoral collaboration through FNS coordination platforms.
- Scale evidence-based SBCC approaches that have demonstrated results.

Key Recommendations

Government

- Expand BFCs across public institutions.
- Strengthen monitoring of infant and young child feeding indicators.
- Sustain breastfeeding promotion through health extension and primary healthcare platforms.

Development Partners

- Invest in evidence-based SBCC interventions.
- Support learning, documentation, and dissemination of successful models.
- Promote workplace breastfeeding support initiatives.

Communities and Families

- Encourage fathers' involvement in childcare and breastfeeding support.
- Address myths and misconceptions related to breastfeeding.
- Promote positive social norms that support breastfeeding mothers.

Yeshiwork Gudie breastfeeding her baby at a breastfeeding corner at Lay Gayent Woreda, South Gondor Zone, Amhara Region established by CASCADE in collaboration with FNS sectors.

Conclusion

Breastfeeding is one of the best investments for a child's future. CASCADE Ethiopia's experience shows that when mothers receive support from families, communities, health services, institutions, and workplaces, breastfeeding practices improve. To achieve a sustainable start in life for every child, we must strengthen what works and scale the systems that support breastfeeding.

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