

Rural Prey Veng province mothers and children benefit noticeably from health programme

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A MONTHLY distribution of fortified foods to pregnant and nursing mothers has caused noticeable health benefits among rural farm families in five Cambodian provinces, thanks to a combined effort of NGOs and government health officials.

After a three-hour drive from Phnom Penh, including a Mekong River car ferry crossing at Neak Loeang, the World Food Program vehicle arrived last week via a very deeply rutted dirt road at Wat Mesang, the local Buddhist temple that serves the village of Mesang and 11 other rural farming villages in the area, where an estimated 15,500 people live.



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There, a few hundred people including mothers with small children gathered around and waited as local health officials, aid workers from the World Food Program and the Reproductive and Child Health Alliance prepared a table with a cooking stove in front of a pile of sacks containing rice and CSB, a fortified corn and soy blend.

A man with a bullhorn explained to the crowd how to cook the CSB, which everybody seemed to like, into a kind of yellow gruel and then each mother and child were given their monthly ration that included six kilos of CSB, 300 grams of vitamin A-fortified oil, 750 grams of sugar and four kilos of rice. The CSB can also be made into sweets and drinks.

The local health official on hand was Phleng Soeng, who said the local Government Health Center's antenatal care programme has increased in popularity from about 50 percent in 2009 to nearly 100 percent today as pregnant and nursing mothers spoke highly of the health benefits provided in the village.

"Previously only 30 percent were coming to the health centers to deliver their babies, but now that has grown to 90 percent," Phleng Soeng said.

He said the interesting thing he's noticed in the women is healthier, fresher looking skin and babies with more weight.

"When pregnant and nursing women eat CSB they have an increase in breast milk," he said.

"I'm very happy to see the improvement in the mothers and their children," he said.

Phleng Soeng took time to offer his praise to the World Food Program and RACHA for providing the means for the programmes administered through his local office.

“We want more WFP support for this area,” he said.

The 2005 Cambodia Demographic and Health Survey showed that 55 percent of Cambodian children under five were anemic and that 44 percent of women had evidence of anemia, resulting from deficiencies of iron, folic acid and vitamin B-12.

Aware of the data, the Mother and Child Health Program targets pregnant women, nursing women with children under six months old, mothers with children aged 6-24 months and children aged 6-24 months. The programme has been running since 2000 with participants including RACHA, the Caritas Catholic charity and Church World Service.

Local government health centres administer the programme either in cooperation with NGOs or through the Ministry of Health.

The objectives of the programme are to prevent and reduce malnutrition among pregnant and nursing women and children under 24 months old.

A period of 1,000 days is globally recognised as a critical time from the moment a woman becomes pregnant until their baby is two years old. If they don't get enough iron, folic acid and other essential nutrients during this period the effects are irreversible and the child will suffer health consequences throughout his life.

The programme is called 1000 Days: Change a Life, Change the Future and is recognised by international experts and organisations as the best investment a country can do for its population because it means healthy people who can work and think, and their lives won't be dominated by illness, stunting and diminished brain function.