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## Lifesaving Links in Nigeria

### The Critical Role of Infant and Young Child Feeding Support Groups

By SPRING/Nigeria

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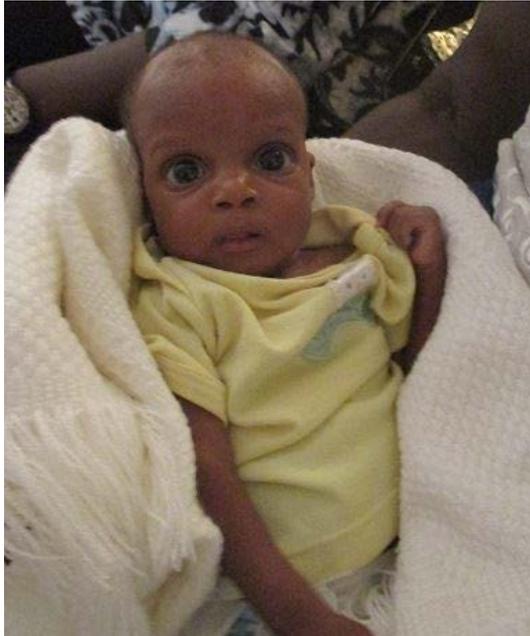


Photo credit: SPRING/Nigeria 2015

The health of one-month-old Nyepesi improved greatly after her grandmother's IYCF support group referred the infant to a local health facility.

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**"I have lost my daughter to death and all I have to remember her is Nyepesi, thank you for saving her life. Though my daughter is dead, with Nyepesi, she is still alive."**

--Maza Akaba, Nyepesi's grandmother

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#### Fighting HIV Stigma

At birth, Nyepesi lost her mother to HIV. She was left in the care of her grandmother, Maza Akaba, who lives in Ichecheni community, 10 kilometers from Nyepesi's home in Lafia, Nigeria. No one in the community would assist Maza with baby Nyepesi's care because of the stigma associated with her mother's HIV-positive status. Maza was willing to care for her granddaughter, but her own ill health and lack of knowledge about caring for an HIV-exposed infant were overwhelming.

Help came Maza's way on a market day when she met a community volunteer trained by the Strengthening Partnerships, Results, and Innovations in Nutrition Globally (SPRING) project. The volunteer invited Maza to an infant and young child feeding (IYCF) support group where she received information about local health services. This small interaction began two-week-old Nyepesi's journey to recovery.

#### Identifying Proper Treatment

As an HIV-exposed infant, Nyepesi required antiretroviral drug prophylaxis. The local health care facility recognized and filled this need immediately. Facility staff also addressed the infant's most pressing problem: malnutrition. Because Nyepesi's mother had died, the infant was not being breastfed. By feeding Nyepesi a nutrient-dense therapeutic milk high in calories, fat, protein, and vitamins, facility workers were able to stabilize her health. She was then referred to the Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development for additional care, since her grandmother did not have the financial means and was too ill to serve as her long-term caregiver. Eventually, Nyepesi was given a home in a government-owned orphanage, where she is thriving while staying connected to her grandmother. The village chief praised the efforts of the IYCF support groups and the health

facility's quick action to save Nyepesi's life. She is now in good health and growing well. Her grandmother is excited at the change in her granddaughter and has thanked the community support group members for their assistance.

## Creating Important Linkages

Funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development, SPRING's support for IYCF training plays a critical role in ensuring that infants and young children like Nyepesi receive the treatment they need. During trainings, SPRING/Nigeria establishes a link between primary health facilities and community volunteers who facilitate IYCF support groups. This ensures that there are trained health workers to whom caregivers can be referred if they have complex questions or require additional attention. SPRING also trains support group facilitators to refer patients who have severe acute malnutrition and other illnesses to facilities for immediate attention, since many home-based methods are insufficient for immediate recovery.

SPRING/Nigeria has also provided orientations to key ministries and parastatal organizations engaged in child welfare services, such as the Ministries of Health, Women Affairs, and Agriculture, to help them define their roles and responsibilities. Clear definitions help ensure that timely, quality health and nutrition services and referral systems are in place at different contact points throughout the community.

## Encouraging Advocacy

Maza continues to attend the support group that helped Nyepesi. She is an advocate for nutrition



Members of an infant and young child feeding support group meet in Ichecheni, Nigeria.

and often speaks about her experience with community members. Nyepesi's progress is an excellent example of what can be accomplished by well-trained IYCF support groups.

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Funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development, SPRING has provided technical support focusing on the first 1,000 days of life to prevent stunting and anemia in Nigeria since 2012. SPRING works to strengthen community support systems by training community volunteers, establishing support groups, building the capacity of primary health care facilities in IYCF, and fostering linkages between support groups and facilities.

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### SPRING

JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc.  
1616 Fort Myer Drive, 16<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Arlington, VA 22209, USA  
Phone: 703-528-7474  
Fax: 703-528-7480  
Email: [info@spring-nutrition.org](mailto:info@spring-nutrition.org)  
Internet: [www.spring-nutrition.org](http://www.spring-nutrition.org)  
Facebook: [www.facebook.com/bdspring](http://www.facebook.com/bdspring)