



THE GAMBIA BUILDING RESILIENCE THROUGH SOCIAL TRANSFERS (BReST)

A woman watering her tomato garden in Kerewan. © WFP/Mamadou Jallow

Malnutrition in The Gambia

Over the past 10 years, The Gambia has made considerable progress in reducing the prevalence of stunting (13.6%) and wasting (6%) among children under five, despite poor basic services, inadequate sanitation, fragile food and nutrition security and the current COVID-19 pandemic. However, there are significant disparities between the west (capital Banjul) and the east of the country, up-river, where rural households are poorer and gender inequalities prevail. In recent years, iron deficiency has increased among both children and women, and anaemia affects 57.5% of women of reproductive age. The Gambia remains one of the poorest countries in sub-Saharan Africa. It ranked 148th out of 162 countries in the 2019 Gender Inequality Index, with a value of 0.612¹. In a context of high population growth, low agricultural production and diversification, frequent droughts and poverty contribute to people's food insecurity and malnutrition, particularly among children.

BReST (2016-2020)

Building Resilience through Social Transfers for Nutrition Security in The Gambia (BReST) was a European Union-funded (EUR 3 million) programme covering three of the country's regions: Upper River Region, North Bank Region, and Central River Region. In line with the National Development Plan (NDP) 2018-2021, BReST's goal was to strengthen resilience and improve the nutritional status of breastfeeding women and children under 2. BReST was specifically mentioned in the NDP as a key social protection initiative to address vulnerabilities. It was implemented by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), in partnership with two main government partners, the National Nutrition Agency

(NaNa) and the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare (MoWCSW). BReST combined cash transfers (GMD 600²/month per mother-child pair) with a strong nutrition education component, through two interrelated pathways:

1. resilience building through cash transfers,
2. improved nutritional and care practices through nutrition education and hygiene promotion targeting mothers.

It also sought to improve the implementation of related Government policies through strengthening the social protection capacities of government partners and civil society organisations. The project targeted regions with the highest infant malnutrition rates.

Tangible results in the lives of women and children

BReST created a continuum of care for women and children during a key life stage (the first 1 000 days) by supporting mothers to diversify their diets and access health and nutrition services. The programme registered 6 176 mother and child pairs, exceeding the original target of 5 850 beneficiaries. On payment days, the women took part in an hour-long health and nutrition education lesson, focusing on different aspects of infant and young child feeding (IYCF) practices. In parallel the health facility staff monitored the children's growth and provided Vitamin A supplementation and deworming tablets where needed. Mothers requiring additional counselling beyond the monthly IYCF sessions were identified and received follow-up support at the household and community level. The final evaluation of BReST confirmed that the

1 The European Commission Gambia Nutrition Country Profile 2021 (in press) is the main source, based on data from the UNICEF/WHO/ World Bank Joint Child Malnutrition Estimates, the Global Nutrition Report, and the UNDP Gender Inequality Index.

2 600 Gambian dalasi equals about 10 euro.



prevalence of acute malnutrition in children under 2 decreased from 5.6% (2016) to 2.2% (2019). Higher rates of exclusive breastfeeding improved dietary diversity in

infants of 6-24 months and improved IYCF and hygiene practices; improved household economic resilience was also reported³.

Outcomes	2016	2019
Acute malnutrition (children under 2)	5.6%	2.2%
Individual dietary diversity	34.2%	55%
Minimum meal frequency (infants 6-24 months)	No data	63%
Dietary diversity (infants 6-24 months)	No data	81.9%
Exclusive breastfeeding	52%	93%

Realising human potential

The BReST programme is anchored in a rights-based approach. By focusing on the first 1 000 days, BReST promotes the realisation of mothers' and children's rights and potential. BReST strategically advocated for a social empowerment mechanism that takes a holistic view of malnutrition. This is an important step towards achieving progressive coverage of social protection policies in The Gambia. The Government has presented the programme at several conferences, including the Annual National Social Protection Forum and the 62nd UN Commission on the Status of Women. In January 2020, the Government established a National Social Protection Secretariat with the support of the EU and development partners. BReST has been adopted as a social protection flagship programme within the National Development Plan and provides evidence to support social protection as part of an integrated health, nutrition improvement and poverty reduction strategy⁴.

vulnerable regions. It promoted ownership by government services at all levels, which implemented social transfers and collated evidence on the importance of such a programme. BReST was able to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic by providing emergency cash transfers to the registered beneficiaries. This proved to be critical in supporting families to cope with the economic challenges caused by COVID-19 and to sustain gains made during implementation. During the programme, the majority of women improved their household productive capacity or savings, which in turn reduced negative coping mechanisms - such as taking a child out of school to save money for food - to economic or climatic shocks. One of the programme's unexpected effects has been the improvement of intrahousehold gender dynamics, with the woman and her spouse discussing whether to spend or save the cash to benefit the health and wellbeing of the children and family.

Tackling health, economic, climate and environmental challenges

In the Sahel, droughts are becoming more and more intense and have serious consequences for the population, who live mainly from agriculture. BReST effectively targeted the most

3 UNICEF, 2021. Building Resilience through Social Transfers for Nutrition Security in The Gambia (BReST). Final Narrative Report: 1 August 2016-31 August 2020. The video "[Building Resilience through Social Transfers for Nutritional Security \(BReST\)](#)" provides a human interest story from the project.

4 Social Policy Research Institute (SPRI), 2020. BReST Evaluation. [Evaluation reports | UNICEF Evaluation in UNICEF](#)