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Title: Integrating early childhood development in work of Community Health Workers – Experience from Mitanin Program of Chhattisgarh, India

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Chhattisgarh state has a high burden of child under-nutrition. Gaps exist in practices related to feeding, in managing infections and in providing appropriate care for psychosocial development in children.

The state has an opportunity in form of its scaled-up Community Health Worker (CHW) program involving 70,000 CHWs known as Mitanin. Mitanins were involved in nutrition education right from beginning of their curriculum in 2002. Their action included counseling to improve practices of breastfeeding, appropriate complementary feeding and managing child-illnesses.

National Health Mission in India promoted Village Health Sanitation and Nutrition Committees (VHSNCs) under leadership of CHWs. The committees and Mitanin CHWs carried out community based monitoring regarding entitlements of people under public programs. Such collective-action emphasized access to food-security programs and safe drinking-water.

In 2012, Mitanin program recognized the need for addressing early childhood development holistically in work of CHWs. It integrated parent-education for psychosocial development in its existing mechanism of home visits by 70,000 CHWs to homes of under-3 year children and pregnant women.

It has evoked a positive response from Mitanin CHWs. The initiative has also sparked-off debates on role of CHWs with respect to early childhood development. The key debates are - a) Will it increase burden on CHWs b) Will it interfere negatively with their work on priorities like managing childhood illnesses.

Experience of Mitanin program suggests its replication in CHW programs that fulfill the condition of adequate home visits, on nutrition and health education for first-1000 days, in practice of CHWs.