

1.1 PURPOSE AND CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

This study of the complementary feeding of infants age 3-12 months was undertaken to improve the understanding of how mothers and other caretakers in central Mali introduce young children to food other than breast milk. Most nutritionists agree that children need solid food in addition to breast milk when they are age 4-6 months in order to reach their full growth potential (Brown, Dewey, and Allen, 1998; Koniz-Booher et al., 1991; Martines, Rea, and DeZoysa, 1992). The 1995-1996 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) for Mali found that only half of the mothers reported giving solid foods to their children age 6-9 months (Coulibaly et al., 1996). However, in the same survey, few children were exclusively breastfed and most were given water or other liquids from birth. These other liquids are likely to be sources of contamination and lead to a risk of diarrhea and ultimately to growth faltering.

The DHS survey found that children grow at nearly normal rates until they reach six months when they begin falling far behind international standards. The evidence suggests that there may well be a relationship between the consumption of complementary foods and the nutritional status of young children. The study presented here seeks to understand the reasons for late addition of solid or mushy food and the very early supplementation with other liquids and to address the context of maternal decisions on infant feeding.

1.2 ISSUES IN THE STUDY OF INFANT FEEDING IN MALI

Although we acknowledge the broader issues of deprivation, poverty, and powerlessness that compromise food security in many of the communities involved in this study, our interest is in infant feeding and, in particular, in practices of complementary feeding. As described, the focus is on two specific practices:

1. *Delaying giving complementary food until after six months.*

The Demographic and Health Survey indicated that a very high proportion of infants six months old or more received no solid foods in addition to breast milk. For example, nearly 40 percent of children age 8-9 months and 21 percent of those age 10-11 months received nothing but breast milk and water despite international recommendations advocating beginning infant feeding at 4-6 months.

2. *Giving liquids under six months of age*

The Demographic and Health Survey indicated that even in the first month of life, nearly one-fifth of infants were receiving other liquids in addition to breast milk and water. This proportion increased to 23 percent among children age 2-3 months and to 30 percent among children age 4-5 months.

It should be noted that according to the DHS survey and the research presented here, giving complementary food (including traditional medicines) before 4-6 months (Practice 2) was more common than delaying it until 9-12 months (Practice 1).

