

**UNITED NATIONS STANDING COMMITTEE ON NUTRITION  
INFO BRIEF**

**COUNTRY-LEVEL PROGRAMMING  
IN NUTRITION SENSITIVE AGRICULTURE:  
REVIEW OF DEVELOPMENT PARTNER INITIATIVES**

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## Overview

As the idea of bringing agriculture more dynamically into the nutrition picture has gained traction in recent years, many development partner agencies and organizations have embarked on programming initiatives that aim to make agriculture more “nutrition sensitive.” In 2013, the United Nations Standing Committee on Nutrition (UNSCN) commissioned a review of country-level programming in nutrition and agriculture to provide a consolidated overview and to raise awareness regarding these initiatives. Over 30 organizations, including UN agencies, multi- and bilateral development organizations, research centres, and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were contacted. Information was gathered on programming through e-mail correspondence, semi-structured informant interviews, and a desk review of published and grey literature. The 20 agencies who participated fully in the exercise are listed in Annex 1.

### Key Messages

- Agriculture is considered a prime candidate for nutrition sensitive programming through 3 main pathways: as a source of food; as a source of income; and as a way to improve women’s decision-making power and control of resources.
- Programming approaches based on these pathways include district and village-based initiatives using agriculture as a delivery platform for nutrition specific interventions; nutrition promoting value chains; locally supplied school feeding programmes; biofortification; national capacity development initiatives; and operational research.
- Many of the organizations who participated in the review were already partnering or collaborating with others, raising the possibility that coordinated support could greatly enhance the impact of programming as each organization plays its key role.
- Programme scale-up is hampered by substantial challenges to implementation, most of which boil down to 1) identifying and reaching target populations, 2) a lack of tested and validated indicators, and 3) prioritization of sector-specific objectives over improved nutrition objectives. Case studies commissioned by the UNSCN on the “nutrition sensitivity of agriculture and food policies” in 8 countries reached comparable conclusions regarding challenges to implementation.
- Since most government actors still have little incentive to add “nutrition sensitivity” to conventional sector objectives of increased production and productivity, it is essential to generate more evidence and guidance on how the goals of increasing agricultural growth and improving nutrition are compatible.

### What programs were reviewed?

The review did not use formal inclusion criteria. However, to the extent possible, it only reviewed programs that reasonably fit the definition of “nutrition sensitivity,” provided in the 2013 *Lancet Series on Maternal and Child Nutrition*<sup>1</sup>. Programs that did not explicitly incorporate nutrition components in their design, but which had high potential to impact nutrition, posed a challenge. These types of programs are extremely common within agencies whose mandates include food security and rural development. In some cases “retrofitting” to include a specific nutrition component is occurring;

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<sup>1</sup> Interventions or programs that address the underlying determinants of foetal and child nutrition and development (namely, food, care, access to health services, and a safe and hygienic environment) and that incorporate specific nutrition goals and actions (Ruel *et al.*, 2013).

however, in others the nutrition objectives remain implicit. In the full review, these types of programs were highlighted as *not* containing an explicit nutrition component.

### Who is doing what?

Given the heterogeneity of agencies profiled, the review unpacked a wide variety of approaches. However, despite different organizational missions and structures, some common categories of activities emerged. Many interventions focused on integrating nutrition at different points in the food system, from on-farm production to post-market consumption; or they piggybacked on agriculture-based platforms to deliver nutrition-specific interventions. Programming approaches based on these categories included nutrition promoting **value chains**; locally supplied **school feeding programs**; **biofortification**; and the **addition of nutrition education components to district or sub-district food security/rural development projects** (via input subsidy programs, cash transfers or through farmers' collectives, rural community groups, and other organizations).

Additional programming categories were **national capacity strengthening initiatives** and **operational research**:

- **National capacity strengthening initiatives** aim to “reinvent” nutrition’s role in food security policy dialogue by convincing decision makers that maximizing production of staple foods and other commodities is insufficient in and of itself to reduce household food insecurity and malnutrition. Despite a critical mass of evidence in support of this point, the general consensus in many countries is that food security is best measured by national grain stock levels and that positive nutrition outcomes will follow automatically from improved food security and income growth (World Bank 2013). National Agriculture Plans and National Development Frameworks are entry points for capacity building programs aiming to dispel this notion and to make agriculture more nutrition sensitive. These programs work directly with government personnel from agriculture and nutrition to develop a unifying nutrition strategy endorsed across sectors, as well as legislation that includes explicit nutrition objectives and indicators.
- Country-based **operational research** on strengthening the links between nutrition and agriculture aims to provide evidence for pro-nutrition policy reform and for effective programming in agriculture and related sectors. The scope of this activity type was very wide, including all other program areas covered by the review.

Finally, some organizations were involved in developing **guidelines and standards** to shape agriculture and the food system more broadly. For example, food-based dietary guidelines (FBDGs) and food labelling may encourage changes in food consumption patterns, along with education and promotional materials.

Annex 2 provides agency-specific examples of these programming approaches.

Of note: Many of the organizations who participated in the review were already partnering or collaborating with others. FAO<sup>2</sup>, for example, has partnerships across government and academia; and IFPRI<sup>3</sup> is working to carry out monitoring and evaluation activities for programmes whose implementation is led by international NGOs. This raises the possibility that coordinated support could greatly enhance the impact of programming as each organization plays its key role. For example,

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<sup>2</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN

<sup>3</sup> International Food Policy Research Institute

research organizations provide the evidence for action, which is then funded by multi- and bilateral agencies. These activities are then carried out together with country partners and international NGOs, who are likewise supported by logistic, technical, and coordinating support from UN agencies.

### Challenges to implementation

Organizations mentioned a number of challenges to implementing activities, including:

- ***Sustaining integration and coordination between line ministries and other government actors.*** By definition, integrating nutrition into agriculture, or agriculture into nutrition, requires working across sectors. However, multisectoral programming is widely recognized as difficult and presents substantial challenges in practice for central and other levels of government. Challenges include lack of knowledge regarding the impact of agriculture and other sectors on nutrition; constraints posed by institutional and sectoral administrative structures; limited resources in terms of staff time, budgets, and related disincentives; and the political economy of cross-sector work (Garrett and Natalicchio, 2011; IFPRI, 2012; World Bank, 2013; Gillespie *et al.*, 2013; Ruel *et al.*, 2013; Levinson and Balarajan, 2013). For example, as previously mentioned, national grain stock levels continue to be upheld as an important measure of food and nutrition security in many countries. In this context - where production of staple crops is paramount - most government actors involved in agriculture will have little incentive to reconcile the complicated gender issues, targeting mismatches and monitoring challenges cited below. In some cases, coordination problems of donors themselves (donor operating restrictions, poor internal coordination) further compounds the challenge for country governments (du Vachat 2013).
- ***Identifying and reaching target populations.*** The vast majority of nutrition oriented interventions target women of child-bearing age and children under five. Target populations for food security and agriculture-based activities have a much wider scope. They are likely to include “smallholders” but may also include “producers”, “low-income consumers”, “value-chain actors” and a variety of other demographics that may not necessarily have much overlap with a population targeted according to nutrition criteria. Targeting challenges may be even more pronounced if the program focuses primarily on rural development or agricultural growth - as opposed to food and nutrition security. A tri-country review (Burkina Faso, Kenya, Peru) by *Action against Hunger* found that nutritionally vulnerable families are rarely targeted as beneficiaries for medium- and longer-term interventions focused on overall sectoral growth (du Vachat, 2013).

Gender-based targeting issues also pose a problem, as conventional agriculture-based projects may end up supporting men more than women. For example, SPRING’s review of USAID’s Feed the Future projects (see Annex 2) found that male smallholders were the primary beneficiaries of a majority of projects (Du, 2013). While presumably due to a constellation of factors, the importance of extension services in this context cannot be overstated. In most countries, agricultural extension services traditionally are staffed by and serve men. The end result may be that women extension agents and recipients receive less technical information and training than men (Fanzo *et al.*, 2013a).

- ***Identifying appropriate nutrition indicators for agricultural projects.*** Given the multisectoral nature of the causes of malnutrition, of which adequate quantity and quality of food is only one, there is some question as to whether nutritional outcomes measured by anthropometry are the most appropriate indicators of agriculture’s impact on nutrition. Proxies such as dietary quality and

dietary diversity, while imperfect, may be the highest level indicators for which it is realistic to expect observable changes in agricultural projects (FAO/WHO, 2014; Rose, Luckett, and Mundorf, 2013). SPRING's 2013 review of Feed the Future (again see Annex 2), for example, cautions that stunting could be a "too-high-level" indicator for many FtF projects to deliver within their project cycle. As a result the review recommends adding periodic measurement of more proximate "intermediate indicators", such as household level dietary diversity, to the program's design (Du, 2013).

- ***Sustaining integration of nutrition indicators in agricultural project design.*** Conventional nutritional analysis of a target population includes assessment of micronutrient status, collection of anthropometric data, and context-specific understanding of the causes of malnutrition. Staff with these expertise are often limited to a small nutrition division or unit within the Ministry of Health and may have limited or no reach into the Ministry of Agriculture. As a result, sustained monitoring and evaluation of stunting and dietary diversity, and other nutrition indicators in agricultural projects can pose a problem. Successful integration would require the understanding and support of the project managers and other actors based in agriculture and dedication and capacity on the part of the nutrition specialists. In many countries and projects, neither variable is guaranteed.

These challenges to implementation hint at how difficult it is to make agriculture-based programming truly "nutrition sensitive." Despite the fact that nutrition is now placing high on many countries' political agendas, agricultural growth and production of staple crops continue to be the paramount objectives of agricultural decision makers. Most of these government actors have little incentive to add "nutrition sensitivity" to conventional sector objectives of increased production and productivity.

As such, it is essential to generate more evidence and guidance on how the goals of increasing agricultural growth and improving nutrition are compatible. There *is* scope for "winning" on both fronts. Widely endorsed Key Recommendations for Improving Nutrition through Agriculture suggest how to accomplish these goals through project and policy design (UNSCN, 2013). That said, "win-wins" are not always realistic. In these situations, policy decisions must be made. An important guideline in these situations would be to, at very least, "do no harm" to nutrition (see UNSCN, 2013, World Bank 2013, and the full report of this review for more information on "do no harm").

## Epilogue

Continued dialogue and concrete examples of how to overcome the challenges facing nutrition sensitive programs can help move the nutrition and agriculture communities closer together, increase buy-in from both, and contribute to the layout of a broad framework for future priorities in nutrition sensitive development. In recognition of this need, the UNSCN commissioned a series of country case studies on the "nutrition sensitivity of agriculture and food policies" in 2013. Complementary to the landscaping exercise described here, this work stream investigated eight countries<sup>4</sup> with the objectives of (i) identifying and describing country-specific food and agriculture policies and investments that incorporated nutrition sensitive actions and recommendations, and (ii) describing how implementation of these policies was influenced by the underlying political environment, including identifying factors contributing or impeding collaboration and cooperation between relevant ministries. As with the Review Exercise described here, main findings point to a lack of tested and validated indicators, as well as

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<sup>4</sup> Brazil, Malawi, Mozambique, Nepal, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Thailand

frequent prioritization of sector-specific objectives over those whose primary aim is improved nutrition (Fanzo et al., 2013b).

**Additional information**

More findings from the country case studies as well as additional details on the landscaping review can be found in the UNSCN's News 40:

[http://www.unscn.org/files/Publications/SCN\\_News/SCNNEWS40\\_final\\_high\\_res.pdf](http://www.unscn.org/files/Publications/SCN_News/SCNNEWS40_final_high_res.pdf)

The full reports as well as supplemental materials are also available on the UNSCN website:

<http://www.unscn.org/en/publications/>

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### Annex 1) Organizations which participated fully in the Review

<b>UN Agencies</b>	The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)	International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)	World Food Program (WFP)	United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF)	International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)	International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)	World Health Organization (WHO)
<b>Research Organizations</b>	Institute of Development Studies (IDS)	International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI)	Leverhulme Centre for Agriculture and Health (LCIRAH)	Bioversity International	Harvest Plus		
<b>Multi and Bilaterals</b>	US Agency for International Development (USAID)	Irish Aid	UK Department for International Development (DFID)	The World Bank			
<b>Foundations</b>	The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation	Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN)					
<b>International NGOs</b>	Action Against Hunger (ACF)	Helen Keller International (HKI)					



## Annex 2) Agency-specific examples of nutrition-sensitive programming

Organization	Area of Work / Program Type [countries]	Program Description
<b>UN Agencies</b>		
<i>Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)</i>	<i>Delivery Platform / Research</i> Improving the dietary intakes and nutritional status of infants and young children through improved food security and complementary feeding counselling (IMCF) [Malawi, Cambodia]	Improve dietary intakes and nutritional status of infants and young children through complementary feeding using local foods. Evaluate impact of program that combines nutrition education for IYCF with promotion of production and consumption of local foods.
	<i>Capacity Strengthening</i> CAADP Nutrition Capacity Development Initiative [51 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa]	Sub-regional workshops in West Africa, East and Central Africa, and Southern Africa to integrate nutrition into agricultural investment plans
	<i>Guidelines and Standards</i> Codex Alimentarius Food-based dietary guidelines (FBDG) [global]	See under WHO.
<i>World Food Program (WFP)</i>	<i>Production, Processing, Marketing</i> Purchase for Progress (P4P) [20 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, Afghanistan]	Increase participation of local small farmers in WFP procurement activities through increased access to local markets, improve availability of and access to nutritious food for participating producer households.
	<i>Production, Processing, Marketing/ Research</i> Homegrown School Feeding Program (HGSF) [20 countries with case studies of Ghana, Brazil, India, and Thailand]	Collaboration between WFP, the Gates Foundation, the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and other partners to develop a systematic approach to design and implementation of school feeding programs that use locally procured food.

<i>World Health Organization (WHO)</i>	<i>Guidelines and Standards</i> Food-based dietary guidelines (FBDG) [global]	Develop procedural manual on FBDGs to explain the concept and give practical guide to countries on how to develop them.
	<i>Guidelines and Standards</i> Codex Alimentarius [global]	Through the Codex Alimentarius Commission, established by FAO and WHO, develop harmonised international food standards, guidelines and codes of practice to protect the health of the consumers and ensure fair practices in the food trade.
<b>Research Organizations</b>		
<i>Institute of Development Studies (IDS)</i>	<i>Production, Processing, Marketing / Research</i> Strengthening Agri-food Value Chains for Nutrition [Ghana, Nigeria, Tanzania]	Identify opportunities for creation of nutrition-sensitive value chains by the private sector; map current and potential value chains for nutrition; provide case study examples.
	<i>All Areas / Research</i> Leveraging Agriculture for Nutrition in South Asia (LANSA) [India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Afghanistan]	Examine how South Asian food and agricultural policies can be designed to increase impacts on nutrition, especially women and adolescent girls.
<i>International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI)</i>	<i>Production, Processing, Marketing / Research</i> Realigning Agriculture to Improve Nutrition (RAIN) [Zambia]	Aim to reduce malnutrition through integrated agriculture, health, and nutrition interventions. Monitor and evaluate interventions, whose implementation is led by Concern Worldwide.
	<i>All Areas / Research</i> Transform Nutrition [Ethiopia, Kenya, Bangladesh, India]	Create feedback loop between actionable evidence on upscaling direct nutrition interventions and improving capacity and enabling environment for nutrition-sensitive interventions, with multiple research and implementation partners.
	<i>All Areas / Research</i> Agriculture for Nutrition and Health (A4NH) [34 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia and the Pacific, including Turkey]	Led by IFPRI in partnership with other research institutes of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), explores how to maximize the health and nutrition benefits of agriculture through research and capacity strengthening on value chains, biofortification, integrated programs, and agriculture-associated diseases.

<b>Multi- and Bilateral Agencies</b>		
<i>US Agency for International Development</i>	<i>Production, Processing, Marketing / Capacity Strengthening / Research</i> Feed the Future [Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Honduras, Liberia, Mali, Nepal, Senegal, Tanzania, Zambia, Cambodia, Ghana, Haiti, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Rwanda, Tajikistan, Uganda]	Integrate nutrition into agricultural project design which cut across program types.
	<i>Research</i> Strengthening Partnerships, Relationships, and Innovations in Nutrition Globally (SPRING) [Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Haiti, India, Niger, Nigeria, Tajikistan, Uganda]	Review and analyse Feed the Future projects to determine opportunities to make them more nutrition sensitive.
<i>World Bank</i>	<i>Capacity Strengthening</i> South Asia Food and Nutrition Security Initiative (SAFANSI) [Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka]	Increase commitment of governments and development partners to more effective and integrated food and nutrition policies and investments.
	<i>Capacity Strengthening</i> SecureNutrition [global]	Host virtual platform to narrow knowledge gaps on nutrition-sensitive service delivery and monitoring and evaluation within agriculture.
<b>International NGOs</b>		
<i>Action Against Hunger (ACF)</i>	<i>Production, Processing, Marketing / Delivery Platform</i> Maximizing the Impact of Food Security and Livelihoods Interventions [Nigeria, Central African Republic, Burkina Faso, Myanmar, Afghanistan, Chad, Occupied Palestine]	Support emergency nutrition activities within a resilience framework that promotes longer-term food security through home gardens, post-harvest handling and processing, and other agriculturally related interventions, along with actions to improve water and sanitation, health, and hygiene
<i>Helen Keller International (HKI)</i>	<i>Production: Household Consumption</i> Enhanced Homestead Production (E-HFP) [Bangladesh, Cambodia, Nepal, Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, Niger, Senegal and Tanzania]	Promote homestead food production at household and village level.