

Monitoring and Evaluating the Food Security and Nutrition Effects of Agricultural Projects

F. James Levinson and Anna Herforth

The monitoring and evaluation of agricultural projects for their impact on household food insecurity and nutrition is important given the paucity of data documenting successes and failures in such projects, and because possible adverse effects in such projects need to be identified and addressed rapidly. Recognizing, however, the lack of capacity and/or reluctance of some agriculture project managers and planners to incorporate nutrition considerations in their project planning or their management information systems, a feasible alternative approach is needed – one capable of meeting agriculture-nutrition M&E objectives without encumbering project managers.

There may be a role for external M&E teams comprised of staff skilled in agriculture-nutrition linkages (Ag2Nut teams). These teams could identify sensible indicators to measure nutrition-relevant impact based on the type of activities in the program, carry out the key M&E necessary for tracking progress, and feed back to the program management; they also could support nutrition-sensitive program design or adjustment.

The teams could carry out M&E for food security and nutrition at geographically representative sentinel sites, where baseline data are followed by the collection of quantitative and qualitative data at six month intervals. Data collected in these areas plus comparable control sites would include (a) information indicating participation and the extent to which households and individuals within households have been reached/affected by the project, (b) data on household food insecurity levels and on dietary quality, (c) where appropriate, data on young child nutritional status (collected annually), (d) information on women's empowerment (qualitative and quantitative); (e) information which might indicate harm to food security or nutrition (e.g. increased time constraints, or inadequate protection of natural resources), and (f) data on a subset of indicators of primary interest to project managers.

For this approach to be viable, adequate staff and funding are needed. There is a need to identify Ag-Nut M&E teams capable of participating actively in an initial stream of nutrition-sensitive agriculture projects. The approach is predicated on the fact that many current agriculture investments do not include an approach to measure nutrition or food consumption impacts. Thus funds for nutrition-relevant M&E may not be built into the programs themselves, requiring a source of external funding for this approach.

Ag2Nut teams would work with local agriculture staff in initial projects to test the approach while developing prototypes, training modules and TA mechanisms. Where Ag2Nut teams also are sufficiently involved in project design, and where explicit understandings exist that harmful effects will be quickly addressed by project management, such systems have the potential to move this type of nutrition-sensitive intervention forward. In addition, they offer an opportunity to build capacity among program managers to plan for and to measure food security and nutrition effects of programs.

The approach offers a means of assessing the effects of operational nutrition-sensitive agriculture projects that are rolling out in the immediate term, thus enabling learning from substantial investments. It would also enable agriculture projects to understand their impact on food security and on nutrition, two goals that are often explicitly sought, particularly in the current environment where there is increasing desire to improve impact on nutrition.