Nutrition-Enhancing Interventions and Agriculture Value Chains: Preliminary Lessons from Feed the Future Implementation in Four Countries

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Preliminary lessons are drawn from four large, multisectoral, 3-5 year long, agriculture value chain projects, being implemented with varying degrees of nutrition sensitivity. They are located in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Liberia, Malawi and Tajikistan and are supported by USAID and the USG Feed the Future Initiative (FTF). Each is expected to improve income for up to 400,000 households. Examples of nutrition-enhancing agriculture in the four projects are: vegetable demonstration plots, promotion of dietary diversity, nutrition messages in agriculture trainings, demonstration of labour-saving technologies, food processing, and cultivation of biofortified seeds. In Tajikistan and Malawi, nutrition-specific interventions such as promotion of exclusive breastfeeding are included, and also in Malawi, improvement of nutrition clinical services. The projects are described briefly and lessons and recommendations from the initial process of FTF implementation are discussed.

Observations and Recommendations on the Process of Implementing Nutrition-Enhancing Agricultural Programs within the FTF Initiative

Several years into the FTF Initiative is an important time to reflect on process lessons. FTF provides an unprecedented opportunity to explore enhancing nutrition outcomes from the agriculture platform. Marked by an unusually high degree of agency backing and alignment, FTF is complete with a conceptual framework, robust requirements for M&E, a learning agenda, and incentives for performance via competition to implement FTF projects. This early phase is characterized by the compelling notion that improving nutritional status will require assistance from agriculture and other sectors as well as redoubled efforts from the health sector, yet also by not having enough evidence and experience to know exactly how to systematically and sustainably program for nutrition-enhancing agriculture. Initial attention is warranted to get the process right, and recommendations are offered.

Define and use a lexicon of common key nutrition and agriculture terms to enhance joint planning. The term 'nutrition' has many meanings. Nutritionists often refer to child nutritional status – stunting, anaemia, vitamin A status (nutrition-specific), while agriculturists may refer to healthy diets, increasing the nutritive quality of food, or ensuring adequate food consumption to reduce hunger (nutrition-enhancing). To achieve clarity on the aspects of nutrition that can be improved, it is recommended that programs first articulate their definition of nutrition, then their project objective.

Design special studies to understand the relationships and assumptions involved in nutrition-enhancing agriculture. Agriculturists know how to implement productivity and marketing activities, but not always in a manner that enhances nutrition. For example, there is limited experience with promoting nutrition along the crop-to-food-to-diet pathway, that is, how producing and marketing crops becomes the food consumption and healthy diet of the nutritionally vulnerable in rural and urban areas. Small scale and operations research is recommended. Emphasizing the process, the how, we need to ask not only *if* certain relationships among variables and actions occur, but how they occur, to what extent, and under which circumstances.

***Raise awareness about nutrition within sectors and among stakeholders*.** Several years were spent planning how to include nutrition in the central FTF agenda, and now that process is underway in agency offices and ministries in FTF countries. Advocacy is needed to get nutrition on the agriculture and health agendas and maintain it there.

Understand the sectors' different approaches to targeting. In an agricultural value chain approach, there is a mix of target actors and target beneficiaries. Those with entrepreneurial and risk-taking business behaviour are targeted initially (early adopters). Target beneficiaries are the later adopters who respond to the economic incentives once benefits are demonstrated. In a public health nutrition setting, targeting is more direct. Project beneficiaries are identified and targeted from the start. Clarity about targeting is recommended at project design phase, so the points of complementarity can be identified.

Capture consumption and diet benefits among urban consumers. In the four FTF projects in DRC, Liberia, Malawi and Tajikistan, technical support for increasing agricultural productivity is directed to farmers in the rural areas and their households are the only population being monitored. Meanwhile, an implicit goal of each is to increase the food being sold into the markets of one or more major urban areas, but their outcomes are not monitored. It is recommended that the FTF Initiative also assess consumption and dietary diversity benefits to urban consumers.

Understand the multifactoral nature of reducing child stunting. Child growth and development can be strongly influenced by multiple food, care behaviour, and health factors. A young child might be fed well, but experience diarrhoea that stunts his growth; or be healthy, but not fed well enough to maintain good growth. Any of the multiple factors could be the limiting one. Thus, asking whether agriculture programs on their own can reduce child stunting is not a valid question (Masset et al., 2012). Understanding the multifactoral nature of child stunting is critical to setting realistic objectives and aligning the indicators.

Manage the nutrition-enhancing agriculture mandate. Each country's FTF entity chooses the number of projects it will support to achieve the agriculture and nutrition global impacts. Working toward nutrition-enhancing agriculture must be managed accordingly. If the agriculture and nutrition objectives are contained in one project, the implementing partner manages the nutrition-enhancing agriculture mandate and nurtures the cross-sectoral relationships. If the mandates are in separate projects, the FTF entity manages the alignments needed to achieve results. It is recommended that lessons from each of these ways of managing the nutrition-enhancing agriculture mandate be analyzed and documented.

Capitalize on agriculture's comparative advantage when considering nutrition sensitivity. Agriculture's comparative advantage is economic, which can be capitalized on by promoting business, as in food processing. Emphasizing agriculture's comparative advantage does not preclude other nutrition-enhancing agricultural activities, such as promoting nutrition through agricultural extension, but it highlights the activities on which an economic-facing, value chain project could most readily collaborate.

Design value chains for greater consumption of animal-source foods. Animal source foods are an important ingredient of a diverse, quality diet, especially for young children, because the foods are concentrated with essential nutrients needed for growth and development. Animal-based value chains have been chosen in some FTF countries, yet consumption by targeted rural beneficiaries is limited, because the animal is kept as an asset (goats in Liberia) or because the product is sold (dairy in Malawi). Consideration of other animal-based value chains is recommended so that rural households can benefit from their consumption, as well as from their economic benefits.

Leverage the unique position of women farmers at the nexus of nutrition and agriculture. Women are the primary caretakers of their children. Rural women also do a lot of agricultural work. Thus, they are

the lynchpin between their households' nutrition and agriculture, a unique position that should be leveraged strategically.