Spotlight Analysis: Nutrition and Agriculture

Background
USAID-ACCESO, a four-year project funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), is assisting more than 30,000 households in six departments in western Honduras. The project, which began in April 2011, is working to lift rural households out of poverty and undernutrition through access to economic development opportunities and improved health and nutrition practices. The project is increasing sales and incomes by introducing basic production practices and market-driven programs for high-value cash crops, as well as expanding off-farm microenterprise and employment opportunities.

USAID-ACCESO is working to ensure that increased incomes result in improved health and nutrition, not only for the 30,000 families receiving direct technical assistance, but also for the entire population in the project’s target areas. To do so, the project integrates nutrition and health into its core agricultural production and economic development activities. These activities help to improve nutrition by:
- Increasing **AVAILABILITY** of micronutrient-rich foods through improved and diversified household production.
- Increasing **ACCESS** to nutritious foods by raising income through commercial production and new on- and off-farm employment opportunities.
- Improving **UTILIZATION** by providing training in food preparation and use, balanced diets, nutrition practices, and basic hygiene and sanitation.

USAID-ACCESO is also implementing small-scale home improvements to prevent and reduce respiratory and intestinal illnesses, which are large contributors to undernutrition. These include improvements to firewood stoves, floors and walls, latrines, water chlorination, garbage disposal, and basic home sanitation practices, such as keeping livestock out of the house.

Guiding Principles
The key to USAID-ACCESO’s success is direct interaction with households. Nutritionists and health volunteers make regular visits to clients’ homes and **all** project staff – including the 110 agronomists who visit their clients regularly – receive training in key health and nutrition messages. This allows agronomists to continually reinforce important messages to farmers. In addition to this direct and ongoing messaging, the nutrition strategy is based on the following guiding principles:
- **Integrating nutrition activities** with agriculture activities to maximize synergies and ensure that increased incomes translate into improved health and nutrition outcomes.
- **Empowering women** as agents of change to improve household food security and health outcomes, while continually reinforcing the messaging with men.
- **Leveraging partnerships** with the Ministry of Health (MOH) and other service providers, particularly the Atención Integral a la Niñez en la Comunidad (AIN-C) groups.

Building Trust, Changing Attitudes
Many of the changes necessary to improve health and nutrition among rural families require cultural and behavioral changes. ACCESO is addressing this challenge by:
1. Building confidence with families by focusing on agricultural assistance first. Once families see quick results in crop productivity, they are more likely to trust the project’s advice in other areas.
2. Providing ongoing support – by working directly with the families – until the benefits of the changes are fully demonstrated and implemented.
3. Helping families earn more money so they have greater access to better nutrition and health options.
• Concentrating efforts on the critical 1,000 day window of opportunity from pregnancy to two years of age.
• Targeting interventions to reach the most vulnerable households (using data from MOH and AIN-Cs), to provide individualized, tailored training to parents, focusing on preventing illnesses and recuperating undernourished children.
• Building capacity of AIN-C and other health volunteers by providing better training, tools, and incentives.
• Monitoring and evaluating the impact on nutritional status using indicators such as child weight, infant and young child feeding practices, and diet quality, diversity and quantity.

Activities
USAID-ACCESO’s nutrition strategy is designed to improve access to a more diversified daily diet through increased nutritional awareness and productive gains made by home gardening or commercial farming. The project’s nutrition activities focus on home gardens; Information, Education and Communication (IEC); and small-scale infrastructure and other activities that affect health and nutrition.

Home Gardens
USAID-ACCESO trains women in the cultivation of small home gardens, which provide a reliable source of healthy seasonal fruits and vegetables. Agronomists and nutritionists work in tandem to ensure families reap the nutritional benefits of these gardens. Together, they choose crops that are high in important vitamins and minerals, and are relatively easy to grow. Examples of crops include green leafy vegetables, sweet potatoes, tree fruits, passion fruit, taro, plantains and bananas – crops that do not require the purchase of seeds. Agronomists provide technical assistance, while nutritionists provide information, training and cooking demonstrations. USAID-ACCESO also provides support for small-scale aquaculture and livestock production to further increase household dietary diversity.

Information, Education and Communication
To raise awareness of nutritional best practices, USAID-ACCESO complements its agricultural activities with Information, Education and Communication (IEC). Project nutritionists provide regular trainings to the 30,000 project beneficiaries in nutrition, child care, prevention of illnesses, hygiene and sanitation practices, and family planning. These messages are continually reinforced not only by the nutritionists, but also by the agriculturists who visit their clients regularly. This knowledge, coupled with the increased incomes from the agricultural assistance, gives families the means to dramatically improve their health and nutrition.

To expand and improve the health and nutrition messages to the wider population, USAID-ACCESO nutritionists are working to build capacity of AIN-Cs and health volunteers by providing training and tools to the volunteers, involving them in health activities in the community, and including them as beneficiaries of the project’s economic development activities.

Infrastructure and other activities
Many of the benefits of increased nutrition intake will not be realized if children are suffering from diarrheal and respiratory diseases. To prevent nutrient loss, USAID-ACCESO is working to improve home conditions and community infrastructure. Priority investments include the installation of latrines to improve sanitation and reduce contamination of water sources; the introduction of fuel-efficient wood burning stoves, which will decrease level of indoor pollution; and improvements in community water infrastructure, water source protection, and in-house water chlorination. USAID-ACCESO extension programs have also incorporated farm chemical safety and integrated pest management trainings to ensure proper selection, application, storage, and disposal of pesticides to prevent illness caused by ingestion of chemicals. Taken together, these measures ensure that USAID-ACCESO has a lasting impact not only Honduran agriculture, but also on the overall well-being, health, and nutrition of those living in the six departments in Western Honduras.