



Nutrition-sensitive voucher schemes in South Sudan

Improving diets while promoting the diversification of livelihoods and nutrition education in a protracted crisis

Context

Over 75 percent of the population in rural and peri-urban areas in South Sudan rely on agriculture for their livelihoods. With the outbreak of conflict starting at the end of 2013, the country has seen large-scale displacement, loss of livelihoods and an economic crisis that resulted in widespread food insecurity and malnutrition. This has been further exacerbated by severe drought, low coverage of essential services, livestock diseases, inadequate hygiene and poor infant and young child feeding practices. The upsurge in violence since July 2016 further devastated crop production, including in previously stable areas.

Soaring inflation and market failure also hit areas where people traditionally relied on markets to meet their food needs. Urban populations were struggling to cope with massive price rises on basic food items. With the increasing levels of vulnerability and impoverishment in South Sudan's capital, Juba, urban agriculture has become increasingly important to enhance a household's food basket, and to earn additional income. It also plays an important source for food to supplement a family's traditional maize- or sorghum-based diet.

In 2017, the Food Security and Nutrition Monitoring Survey analysis had found eight out of the nine states assessed showing global acute malnutrition rates above the World Health Organization (WHO) emergency threshold of 15 percent. Over 1.1 million children were estimated to be acutely malnourished across the country. The overall population facing acute malnutrition in South Sudan was predicted to further increase by the following year, calling for a dedicated response.

To respond to the food security and nutrition crisis, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) promoted a nutrition-sensitive approach with two aims. Firstly, to increase production and consumption along the food value chain, and secondly, to facilitate access to nutritious food to vulnerable groups.

This promising practice explores the use of nutrition-sensitive vouchers as response modalities in projects funded by the World Bank and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). Further bolstering the nutrition-sensitive voucher scheme was the Governments of the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland and the Republic of Norway's contribution to FAO's Emergency Livelihood Response Programme (ELRP).

Key facts



Geographic coverage

Aweil South, Juba, Jur River and Abienhom counties



Conforms to UN South Sudan map, July 2020



Target group

Food-insecure urban and peri-urban households, including female-headed households, pregnant and breastfeeding mothers, households with malnourished children of less than five years of age, the elderly, widows and youth.



Food system components

Food supply chains: production, handling and storage; Food environment; consumer behaviour and diets

What are nutrition-sensitive vouchers and how can they contribute to enhancing community nutrition and resilience in South Sudan?

A voucher scheme provides farmers with access to goods (e.g. agricultural inputs, food items) and/or services. Beneficiaries are provided with a voucher, paper or electronic card of a set value, that they can exchange for goods at existing shops (i.e. retailers/suppliers). The shops must be registered for the duration of the scheme, usually several weeks or several months. In South Sudan, **FAO distributed vouchers** to vulnerable households as part of a nutrition-sensitive response to the food security and nutrition crisis. As a pre-condition to receiving these vouchers, **beneficiaries were required to partake in technical skills training and nutrition education sessions** to promote better nutrition practices within the communities. The intervention was complemented with the provision of agricultural inputs as well as food storage and handling equipment.

The nutrition-sensitive voucher approach used in South Sudan provided both short-term and medium-term benefits. **Nutrition vouchers facilitated the access to nutritious food in a context of emergency.** The milk, fish, meat and vegetables beneficiaries could purchase helped families enhance their diets, which is mainly a cereal-based one.

Methodological approach

During the time of the July 2016 conflict, FAO was engaged in two pilot food voucher programmes in Eastern Equatoria State and Warrap State to support internally displaced people (IDPs) access to high-nutrient foods to diversify their cereal-based diets. This approach contributed to satisfy the nutritional needs of IDP households. Building on these experiences, between February 2017 and December 2018, **FAO and its implementing partners, including World Concern, Rural Community Development Initiative and others, distributed vouchers, provided training and nutrition education** to vulnerable households as part of the response to the food security and nutrition crisis in South Sudan.

Targeting beneficiaries

The baseline study conducted under the World Bank-funded project revealed a low intake of high nutritional value foods among the household dietary diversity indicators, with households consuming less than the recommended number of four food groups for a balanced diet. Food consumed by households consisted mainly of some traditional vegetables, sorghum, groundnut and sugar in tea, with only few households reported being able to afford eating meat, fish, milk and fruit. Furthermore, the baseline found that most households in the targeted locations face challenges providing food for their families due to a lack of resources. As such, the interventions included both immediate support for vulnerable households to access nutritious food coupled with training and nutrition information; and medium-term support for peri-urban communities to diversify their production. Selected beneficiaries included mothers with children under five years, vulnerable households in urban centres, IDP camps with no or limited access to land for production and peri-urban communities with access to land for production.





“I decided to make a similar [energy-saving] stove in my home and I was very excited because of the small quantity of firewood needed in order to cook . . . I am proud of this stove.”
– Regina, Project beneficiary

Addressing the components of the food systems to improve diets

- **Food supply chains: production, handling and storage**

Households received nutrition vouchers (smart cards and paper vouchers) for a period of eight to twelve weeks to use in designated points. In addition to receiving the vouchers, 2 600 households under the World Bank-funded project were supported in setting up small kitchen gardens.

The project baselines found that most of the farmers had not received any agricultural training. As such, households were required to participate in skills training as a precondition to receiving the nutrition vouchers.

Training focused on nutrition-sensitive agricultural practices, which covered basic foods that can be grown at the household-level throughout the year.

Furthermore, awareness-raising training of trainers (ToTs) sessions were conducted on making and operating energy-saving cooking stoves, hay baskets and solar driers for vegetable preservation by using locally available materials.

- **Food environment**

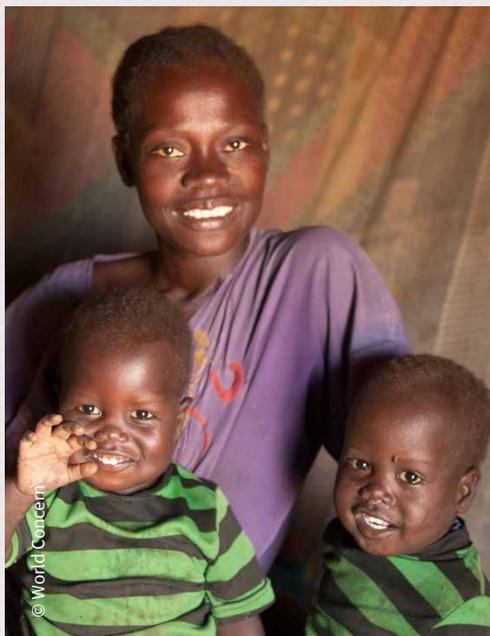
Market assessments were conducted to map out trader locations and assess the potential for the markets to supply the desired commodities during the nutrition voucher scheme’s implementation period. Selected suppliers for the scheme were identified so as to multiply the benefits of the project to the rest of the community members.

- **Consumer behaviour and diets**

The vouchers enabled families to supplement their diets by accessing nutritious food, such as fish, milk, vegetables and meat. Priority was given to households with children at risk of malnutrition, and children who were receiving treatment or were recently discharged from treatment for acute malnutrition in centres supported by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF). Beneficiaries were selected following a participatory process with the involvement and consultation of relevant stakeholders in the nutrition sector. Under the World Bank-funded project, nutrition committees were formed to support the identification of vulnerable households and the implementation of the voucher scheme at the county level. Trainers were also identified to conduct ToTs for partner project staff to set up kitchen garden demonstrations. The kitchen gardens were established as demonstrations to be replicated by the rest of the beneficiaries and communities.

Additionally, nutrition information and education activities were conducted to address gaps in knowledge, promote practices to prevent malnutrition and enhance maternal, infant and young child nutrition. Beneficiaries learned food preparation and infant feeding practices to improve children and household members’ nutrient intake. Cooking demonstrations using locally available foods were conducted, specifically focusing on food preparation and complementary feeding for children aged six to twelve years old. Discussions were also held on cultural beliefs and practices that negatively impact on maternal, infant and young child nutrition.

Testimony



“The vouchers are very helpful. They are not only helping malnourished children; they are also helping us as parents. We are getting meals and becoming healthy as a family,” says Treza, a mother of five.

Through the project, Treza is also learning how to manage her own kitchen garden, where she has planted an array of vegetables including okra, kale and tomatoes. “I did not know how to do this. Now I have learned. I know that this resource has money and can also feed my family,” she says. She eagerly awaits harvest time. She thinks of it as a time to joyfully gather her family to savour a tasty meal made from the farm’s produce.

Families benefited directly from the nutrition vouchers and learned practical skills on better farming methods so they can eat more nutritious food. “Vouchers may end, but what is more important is what we’re tilling at the farm. I will keep farming and use the sale proceeds to provide for my family,” says Treza.

The evidence and testimonies displayed in this fact sheet are mainly the result of a desk analysis of articles, project documents and impact assessment reports conducted by FAO and its implementing partners.

Impacts

- **Enabled access to nutritious foods**
In a context of a food security and nutrition crisis, nutrition vouchers supported beneficiaries with immediate access to nutritious foods for healthy diets. The food bought with the vouchers enabled them to eat a more diversified diet as they awaited to harvest their produce. Under the SDC-funded project, monitoring being carried out by implementing partners indicated that families were consuming the produce bought with the vouchers and used any resulting savings to purchase other items.
- **Women empowerment and enhanced household gender equity**
Providing women with nutrition vouchers enabled them to have greater control over resources and increased their bargaining power.

Sustainability

While the nutrition-sensitive voucher approach is short-term, the intervention was designed to ensure a degree of sustainability after the implementation period. Specific actions were embedded to achieve this. For example, setting the condition for beneficiaries to participate in skills training and nutrition education activities to receive the vouchers sought to develop agricultural capacities and to streamline nutrition practices at the community level. Adding another layer of sustainability is the provision of complementary agricultural inputs, and the provision of basic nutrition-sensitive technologies that can be used even beyond the project period.

Beyond the community-level, this nutrition-sensitive approach provided capacity-building for national- and state-level institutions with a focus on the integration of nutrition in agriculture. A national capacity assessment was conducted to review the institutional environment for nutrition and coordination. This was followed by state-level consultations with relevant stakeholders from the State Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Health, as well as with the Universities of Juba and Bahr el-Ghazal. The mainstreaming of nutrition into agriculture, emphasizing a multi-stakeholder and multi-sector approach, will be the cornerstone for improving nutrition outcomes in the country.



Replicability and upscaling

Nutrition-sensitive vouchers are increasingly being used as nutrition-sensitive interventions to complement other actions in humanitarian situations. In fact, the projects in reference in this factsheet build upon the experience of using these types of vouchers in Eastern Equatoria State and Warrap State. Similarly, this approach has been adopted in other emergency contexts by FAO as well as other agencies. Having said that, as it stands now, the practice is classified as “promising”. A longer-term programme with a rigorous system to measure the impact on diets could potentially confirm this as a “good practice”.

This intervention is most appropriate in situations where access to staple food is already ensured and access to other nutritious foods and healthy diets are constrained. In the context of this intervention in South Sudan, three issues have been noted as constraining factors, which should be considered when replicating or scaling up in similar contexts:

- **Inflation:** High price inflation negatively affected the amount of food that beneficiaries were able to buy with the voucher, as well as the price of vegetable seeds.
- **Length of intervention:** Due the humanitarian nature of this project, the intervention period was short, which poses challenges to impact assessments.
- **Security:** Security constraints in some locations led to some delays in the voucher distribution during the short intervention period.





Key learning

- **FAO's nutrition-sensitive voucher scheme approach in South Sudan contributes to bridging short-term crisis management and medium-term livelihood support.** With conditional nutrition vouchers, beneficiaries were able to access fresh foods and productive assets as long as they participated in technical skills training and nutrition education. Additionally, agricultural inputs were provided to further bolster the medium-term support. The combination of activities exemplifies a nutrition-sensitive and resilience-building intervention that operationalizes the humanitarian-development-peace nexus.
- **Moving forward, stronger monitoring processes are needed to better assess impacts on nutrition outcomes and can generate evidence that will better inform resilience programming.** Specifically, indicators measuring impact of interventions on the individual and the household could be used for this purpose. These include the following:
 - Minimum Dietary Diversity for Women (**MDD-W**) of reproductive age and children 6 – 23 months.
 - Food Insecurity Experience Survey (FIES)
 - Nutrition (and Food Insecurity) Knowledge and Norms.
- **Malnutrition is a multifaceted problem that requires a multi-stakeholder approach. Collaboration among the different stakeholders (including government) is essential to sustaining the investments exerted by the projects on the community.** All efforts should be aligned and coordinated with those of other agencies and organizations. Critical to the success of the projects was the targeting of beneficiaries whose children were receiving treatment or were recently discharged from health centres supported by UNICEF.

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Partners

Resource partners

- Government of United Kingdom and Northern Ireland
- Republic of Norway
- Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC)
- The World Bank, through the Government of the Republic of South Sudan

Technical partners

- Action for Development
- The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)
- International Rescue Committee (IRC)
- Joint Aid Management (JAM)
- Ministries of Agriculture, Food Security and Health
- Rural Community Development Initiative
- Relief and Rehabilitation Commission
- United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
- World Concern Development Organisation (WCDO)
- World Food Programme (WFP)
- World Vision International (WVI)

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