



Food and Agriculture  
Organization of the  
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 **IFAD**  
Investing in rural people

 **World Food  
Programme**

Gender transformative approaches for food security and nutrition



## GOOD PRACTICE

# Nurturing Connections<sup>©</sup>

PREPARED BY

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## SECTION 1

## OVERVIEW OF THE METHODOLOGY

**Name of the methodology****Nurturing Connections®****Countries with implementation experience**

- **West Africa:** Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal
- **Asia:** Bangladesh, Cambodia

**Start/end date**

2012 – ongoing

**Lead organization sponsoring the development and implementation of the methodology**

Founded in 1915, Helen Keller International (HKI) is dedicated to saving and improving the sight and lives of the world's vulnerable by combating the causes and consequences of blindness, poor health and malnutrition. HKI has more than 120 programmes in 20 countries around the world.

**Purpose of the methodology and the domains of gender inequality that are addressed**

Nurturing Connections® was developed and piloted by HKI in 2012. It has been adapted for homestead food production (agriculture and aquaculture) and nutrition, and tested in market development initiatives. The curriculum seeks to challenge and transform inequalities related to power relations, traditions and socio-cultural norms that can pose an obstacle to achieving better nutrition and production outcomes. The curriculum is delivered as a standalone gender component in parallel with technical training on agriculture and nutrition. The process guides households towards more equitable intra-household relations, including:

- women's decisions about agricultural production, childcare and health seeking;
- women's access to decision-making power over productive resources;
- women's control over use of income and assets;
- women's self-efficacy;
- shared responsibility for domestic tasks; and
- improved spousal communication to promote the resolution of conflicts, new gender norms and new attitudes about violence.

**Contribution of the methodology to wider development/organizational/project goals**

Nurturing Connections® is integrated into multisector nutrition programmes, including nutrition-specific interventions and nutrition-sensitive agriculture.

HKI has been implementing Nurturing Connections® through the Enhanced Homestead Food Production (EHFP) programme, which aims to improve nutrition and food security of vulnerable households by enabling women to exert more influence over household food production and the use of income, and supporting the adoption of improved nutrition and hygiene behaviours in the household.

**Target group**

- Mothers with young children (under two), their husbands and in-laws in rural areas
- Key influencers, such as village leaders

## SECTION 2

## IMPLEMENTATION ARRANGEMENTS

**Key entry points for applying the methodology**

Nurturing Connections® is implemented with households participating in EHFP programmes, in which couples with young children, elders and other influential family members are invited to attend the sessions first in separate peer groups (e.g. women only) and then mixed groups (e.g. couples together). These sessions are mediated by HKI and partner staff. Households targeted by the project come together in various groups with a maximum of 15 to 20 people, and are invited to sessions by the project facilitators. Community leaders and local government officers are invited to encourage people's participation and reiterate messages through other community engagement activities.

In one community there are typically three groups (women, men and in-laws). This can vary depending on the context and scope of the project. For example, there could be groups of traditional leaders or other household decision makers, resulting in more than three groups in a community.

**Implementing partners**

Nurturing Connections® has been implemented both by HKI and partner organizations.

**— Local organizations**

- **Bangladesh:** Debi Chawdhurani Palli Unnayn Kendra, SKS Foundation, Friends in Village Development Bangladesh, RDRS Bangladesh, Center for Natural Resource Studies, Uttaran, Jagrata Juba Shangha, Department of Agriculture Extension.
- **Cambodia:** Village Support Group, Organization to Develop Our Village, Prom Viheathor, and government partners: Provincial Office of Women's Affairs, Provincial Office of Agriculture and Health.

**Process of and criteria for selecting facilitators/champions/mentors**

Remunerated facilitators are hired by HKI and local partner staff through an open application process. Primary criteria required include: experience in implementing food security/nutrition programmes, and gender equality and women's empowerment activities; knowledge of a specific geographical area and its socio-cultural norms; and the local language where the project is implemented.

Facilitation skills (not training) are highly desirable. Facilitators are (to the extent possible) of the same sex and age range of the peer group they are assigned to. Ideally, two facilitators cover one group, but it is also possible to have one per group. If the project allows having one dedicated set of facilitators for Nurturing Connections®, they cover two groups a day (one in the morning and one in the afternoon).

Facilitators may cover topics directly related to Nurturing Connections® only, or other topics, such as nutrition counselling.

**Training of facilitators/champions/mentors**

Nurturing Connections® capacity building programme for facilitators includes an initial 10- to 15-day training, which comprises:

- an introduction to gender equality and women's empowerment within nutrition and food security (needs and on-the-ground-approaches);
- facilitation skills (theory and practice) vs training methods;
- Nurturing Connections® activities, demonstration and practice;
- pilot testing in the field; and
- a workshop on revising activities as needed and planning implementation.

Refresher training (two days) is provided to facilitators at the end of each thematic chapter of the curriculum. The facilitators' performance is monitored regularly.

The facilitators may implement Nurturing Connections® activities directly or be trainers of other facilitators through cascade training.

## SECTION 3

## IMPLEMENTATION CYCLE

**Key steps in the implementation cycle**

- **Step 1: Formative research**  
This is not an academic study but qualitative research of gender norms and socio-cultural barriers to equality, related to specific programme areas. It is conducted by HKI within EHFP initiatives.
- **Step 2: Desk-based adaptation of the HKI Nurturing Connections® curriculum, including local language translation**  
This is led by HKI in consultation with consortium/project partners.
- **Step 3: Training of facilitators and field validation (pilot-test)**
- **Step 4: Review and finalization of the manual**
- **Step 5: Sensitization about the approach with local community leaders and authorities**  
Local authorities and leaders are informed of the sessions, and invited to observe where applicable. Highly sensitive topics (e.g. domestic violence) that are discussed in women's groups are first dealt with in a confidential setting without external observers.
- **Step 6: Implementation on-the-ground**  
Targeted households are grouped by HKI staff based on geographical proximity (possibly within the same village). Scheduling of sessions is discussed and agreed with group participants, who receive reminders a day before the session. There are four thematic modules or 'blocks', each of which takes on average four weeks to complete (depending on the sequencing) in a series of sessions lasting 1.5-2 hours each. Projects always follow the four blocks, but the content can be reduced to the most relevant/priority activities from each block. The four modules are:
  - Let's Communicate: building communication, trust and respect
  - Understanding Perceptions and Gender: identifying perceptions related to gender disparities
  - Negotiating Power: within the household
  - Acting for Change
- **Step 7: Monitoring of facilitators and sessions, refresher training, revisions to activities as needed**

**Average length of the implementation cycle**

The length can vary significantly, depending on the number of sessions implemented per block and their frequency (weekly, fortnightly, or monthly). In HKI's experience, the curriculum takes from 4 to 14 months to implement all four modules.

**Graduation from the methodology**

There is a time limit to the methodology but not a graduation *per se*.

The main EHFP programme lasts for a minimum of two years. Nurturing Connections® comes in after the first six months of the project, after the initial nutrition knowledge training has been conducted and the homestead production has been set up. If there is time left in the project after the completion of Nurturing Connections®, counselling sessions continue on themes and discussions that have been more difficult to address.

## SECTION 4

## MONITORING

**Monitoring system**

HKI programme staff (including gender, nutrition and agriculture experts) and partners arrange regular field visits to monitor facilitators' performance and participants' attitudes and comprehension, and capture early signs of positive behaviour change and the challenges encountered.

Monitoring is qualitative and template forms have been developed by HKI in English, French, Khmer and Bengali. A separate qualitative and quantitative monitoring exercise is conducted for the EHFP programme and nutrition activities. A randomized control trial is being conducted in Cambodia (2019).

**Indicators****— Quantitative**

The Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index indicators (WEAI, Pro-WEAI, A-WEAI) have been applied to measure impact.

**— Qualitative**

These indicators are currently under revision. Examples include:

- Level of satisfaction of the beneficiaries with Nurturing Connections® activities
- Level of quality of field implementation
- Extent to which men and women respond favourably to women's participation in agricultural production and income-generating activities
- Processes around intra-household negotiation, including sharing domestic chores among family members, decision making, control over assets and communication
- Types of role modelling for women entrepreneurs and supportive men

## SECTION 5

## BUDGET

**Main items of expenditure**

- Capacity building costs, including:
  - initial training of facilitators/trainers
  - monitoring visits by project staff
  - coaching and re-training opportunities as needed (minimum four of two days each for the full approach)
- Graphic design and printing of the manual in-country
- Implementation costs, including:
  - materials for activities (e.g. printing of pictures, cards, markers)
  - travel to project areas by facilitators
  - snacks and gifts for participants (e.g. soap bars, detergent)

**Total budget**

Not available because costs vary significantly by country and size of implementation.

## SECTION 6

## RESULTS

**Number of beneficiaries reached**

- Bangladesh: close to 150 000 households across multiple projects
- Cambodia: almost 3 000 households across two projects
- Côte d'Ivoire: close to 2 800 households
- Senegal: almost 400 households

**Main changes attributed to the methodology**

- **Gender-related changes**
  - Women's decision making over production and income increased
  - Increased women's ownership of assets
  - Improved spousal communication
  - Increased support by husbands for domestic tasks
  - Improved women's mobility
  - Improved women's self-esteem
  - Improved ability of women to take children to the clinic
  - Improved control by women over planting decisions and agriculture-derived income
- **Other changes**
  - More equitable sharing of nutritious foods among family members

**Key success factors and strengths of the methodology**

- Locally adapted methodology and content of activities are designed with local staff to reflect real situations in a specific context. Participants recognize themselves in the role playing and stories and engage actively in discussions.
- Engaging the key household decisions makers through the peer group sessions is critical to changing norms. Peer groups include husbands, wives and mothers-in-law, as well as community leaders, such as village chiefs.
- Using a participatory approach with games makes the curriculum fun, keeps participants interest, and ensures engagement and understanding in low-literacy settings.
- Good facilitation skills are crucial to successful implementation.
- The ability to speak the local dialect and have materials translated by someone from the given context is essential.

**Challenges and measures to overcome them**

- Resources required to hire an adequate number of people and to train them as facilitators on sensitive topics.
- Ideally, Nurturing Connections® deploys facilitators of the same sex and age range as the peer groups, but it has proven to be difficult to find experienced people with this profile, especially with respect to facilitation skills. This has required significant investments in capacity building opportunities for the facilitators, and ongoing field coaching by experienced programme staff (e.g. gender and behaviour change specialists).
- It takes time to shift gender norms in communities. HKI has experimented to check what impact can be achieved by implementing only 'core' activities (e.g. decision-making power, self-esteem topics).

## Potential for upscaling

### — Requirements to support upscaling

- Commitment by government to invest in changing norms through interventions such as Nurturing Connections®
- Commitment by community leaders to gender equality, for which Nurturing Connections® is a relevant and important approach.

### — Potential improvements

- Scaling up the entire curriculum could be challenging in terms of resource needs. Therefore the identification of its 'core' elements would be useful going forward.

### — Adaptation

Nurturing Connections® has been adapted across geographical and cultural contexts, and development programme platforms. It has been implemented in food security, health and nutrition programmes, and interventions on market development and the use of aquaculture technologies for women.

Further research could be conducted to better understand results of Nurturing Connections® related to agriculture, nutrition and other social outcomes.

Regarding methodology, there is scope to identify ways to complement face-to-face encounters with other channels to improve efficiency and impact (e.g. digital reinforcement).

## Potential for replication

### — Key enablers

- Flexible methodology
- Examples available from multiple countries and in local languages
- Documented steps for replication and guidance materials available
- Post-training coaching and monitoring to ensure quality facilitation
- Partnering with institutions capable of using results to achieve scale and sustainability.

## Sustainability of the methodology once project/external input is complete

In West Africa, HKI observed interest from influential participants to become community volunteers and continue the discussions using existing community platforms (e.g. community meetings, fairs, events).

In Bangladesh, the government has recently committed to scaling up a multisector package that includes agriculture and nutrition training and Nurturing Connections®. It is currently working with the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) and HKI on planning the implementation.

## SECTION 7

## RESOURCES

### Publication

- The Nurturing Connections® manual in English and French is available at [https://www.hki.org/our-impact/knowledge-resources/gender-equality#.XL\\_ldegZY2w](https://www.hki.org/our-impact/knowledge-resources/gender-equality#.XL_ldegZY2w)

### Additional resources

- Additional resources, including videos and stories are available at <https://www.hki.org/nurturing-connections-healthier-communities/>
- Impact study reports are available upon request

**Cover photo:** Nurturing Connections® game as part of Family Farms for the Future project funded by GAC & IDRC. Kampot Province, Cambodia

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