



Pathways to improved nutrition in the Ethiopian highlands: Policy and institutional issues

Key messages

- Assessing policy implementation and local institutional capacity gaps helps development actors select “best fit interventions” addressing nutrition through agriculture.
- Agricultural policymakers should take a more comprehensive approach to food security – beyond agricultural productivity also focusing on balanced nutrition.
- *Woreda* and *kebele* level agricultural experts and decision makers need to step up their commitment to mainstream nutrition into all agricultural interventions.
- Existing agricultural and health extension actors need to ensure their interventions are harmonized as a first step towards strengthening local institutional capacity.
- Local institutions must do more to promote diverse and nutritionally-rich foods across farming systems.
- Transforming the constraining norms and attitudes about women’s roles, and their access to and control over productive resources, will enhance their ability to enhance household nutrition security.

The issue

Despite encouraging progress in strengthening nutrition policies and improving nutritional outcomes, under-nutrition remains a significant public health problem in Ethiopia; in 2014, stunting, wasting and underweight of children under five were estimated at 40%, 20% and 9% (Ethiopian Mini Demographic and Health Survey 2014). Although Ethiopia recognized the problem and set clear goals under the National Nutrition Program, local implementation remains weak.

Women and children in the Ethiopian highlands are particularly vulnerable to micronutrient deficiencies resulting from poor diets and suboptimal care feeding practices. In these communities, agriculture offers a potentially strong pathway to improve nutrition outcomes¹.

Realizing this potential requires an enabling and coherent policy environment, and enhanced institutional capacity and commitment to diversify food systems and improve access to better nutrition. Existing policy implementation and capacity gaps that constrain effective linkages between agriculture and nutrition at the *woreda* and *kebele* levels are not fully understood.

Findings

Despite progress in addressing nutrition nationally, the capacity of *woreda* and *kebele* experts to implement policy remains weak and the obstacles facing them are not fully understood. Key challenges include:

Low level of commitment by woreda and kebele health and agriculture experts to mainstream nutrition sensitive interventions into agricultural programs

- Nutrition is not recognised as a priority activity by most local agricultural experts.
DA in Goshe Bado kebele “I think our first interest is to provide the necessary inputs to increase crop and livestock yields and achieve food security; nutrition work is done by HEWs”.
- Although their mandate is to promote nutrition, health extension workers (HEWs) frequently prioritize some nutrition specific actions—e.g. breastfeeding support—over promoting nutrition through diet diversification alongside development agents (DAs).
- Local collaboration between health and agriculture experts is weak.
- Decision makers expect NGOs to work on nutrition interventions as there is limited budget for nutrition sensitive activities within the agriculture sector.

Poor nutrition advocacy support

- There is a lack of human and material resources to advocate adequately to mainstream nutrition into agriculture at all levels, including *woreda* health and agriculture offices, research centres, universities, NGOs and farmers groups.
- The move towards high yielding monocrop-dominated cropping systems hinders policy support for crop diversification.

Budget constraints

- With the exception of external donor funds, government has not allocated its own funds to support nutrition interventions, limiting coverage of available interventions and commitment to their sustainability.
Health office head at Basona Worena district “Our roles are clear, but we simply do not have the budget to implement activities as needed”.

¹ Herforth, A. and Harris, J. 2014. Understanding and Applying Primary Pathways and Principles. Arlington, VA: USAID/Strengthening Partnerships, Results, and Innovations in Nutrition Globally Project.

Weak coordination among key actors

- At *woreda* and *kebele* levels, health, agriculture and research experts have limited opportunities to plan and implement activities jointly.
- Capacity building activities relating to nutrition are fragmented; joint training opportunities are not offered to health and agriculture experts.

Key sectors lack technical expertise and knowledge

- There are few training materials relevant on nutrition-sensitive agriculture at the *woreda* and *kebele* levels.
- DAs lack capacity and expertise to promote diet diversification.
- HEWs frequently prioritize nutrition specific interventions.

Women lack decision-making power

- Women lack the power to choose what to produce.
- Women lack the income to allocate to food.

Recommendations

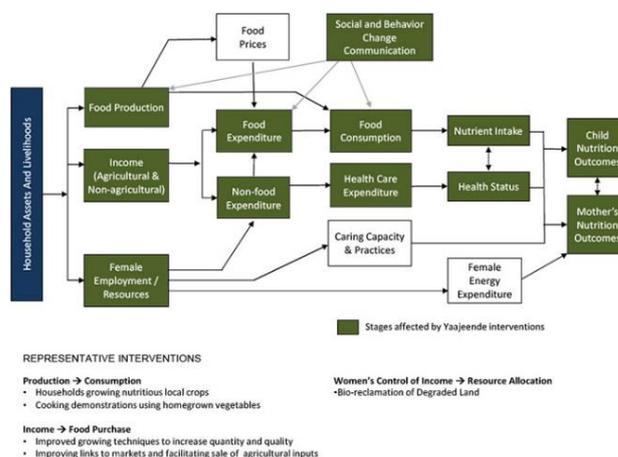
- Develop advocacy briefs with key messages highlighting the role of agriculture in improving nutrition.
- Conduct public awareness workshops, innovation platform meetings, and farmer field days on nutrition sensitive agriculture.
- Assign nutrition champions in *woreda* strategic and *kebele* operational innovation platforms to strengthen coordination between agriculture and health extension workers.
- Design training and behaviour change materials, including nutrition manuals, job aids, brochures and posters with key messages relevant for nutrition sensitive agriculture for the different actors.
- Jointly train *woreda* experts, DAs, HEWs and members of innovation platforms, using a training-of-trainers model.

- Train farmers through farmer field-day cooking demonstrations.
- Raise awareness among men and women farmers using transformative approaches to challenge inhibitive norms and attitudes regarding gender roles, and access to and control over productive resources.

Methodology

The research was conducted between May and June 2015 in Basona Worena and Sinana districts. Researchers collected quantitative data in two intervention *kebeles*, and undertook desk research on the national nutrition program policy document, the growth and transformation plan, national strategy for child survival, national strategy for infant feeding, food security strategy, as well as focused group discussions and key informant interviews. Before the research phase, Africa RISING local partners formed nutrition research teams in each district where they served as data collectors and field officers. Each team also comprised members from the *woreda* agriculture and health office, university and agricultural research centres.

Figure 1: Pathways showing agriculture, income and gender as pathways to improved nutrition



The Africa Research In Sustainable Intensification for the Next Generation (Africa RISING) program comprises three research-for-development projects supported by the United States Agency for International Development as part of the U.S. government's Feed the Future initiative.

Through action research and development partnerships, Africa RISING will create opportunities for smallholder farm households to move out of hunger and poverty through sustainably intensified farming systems that improve food, nutrition, and income security, particularly for women and children, and conserve or enhance the natural resource base.

The three projects are led by the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (in West Africa and East and Southern Africa) and the International Livestock Research Institute (in the Ethiopian Highlands). The International Food Policy Research Institute leads an associated project on monitoring, evaluation and impact assessment.

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