



Researcher-Implementer Partnerships for Learning and Impact: Lessons from IFPRI's Experience with Nutrition-Sensitive Programming

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Introduction

Researcher-implementer partnerships are a subject of growing interest in CGIAR, and beyond, to help ensure research is relevant, cost-effective, and likely to scale up quickly among potential users. In 2021, as part of its synthesis strategy, the CGIAR Research Program on Agriculture for Nutrition and Health (A4NH) commissioned an external review of the International Food Policy Research Institute's (IFPRI) researcher-implementer partnerships in the context of nutrition-sensitive programming.¹ The objective of this external review was to characterize and evaluate IFPRI's researcher-implementer partnerships with Helen Keller International (HKI) and the World Food Programme (WFP). In the context of this external review, "research-implementer partnership" referred to long-term partnerships between two organizations that lasted beyond the life of a single project or funding stream. This review aimed to characterize and document how researcher-implementer partnerships work, what factors facilitate or constrain these types of partnerships, and how the evidence generated by them influences changes in programs and policies at the partner organizations and beyond. The study was completed through a desk review of peer-reviewed and gray literature and a series of in-depth interviews with key informants from IFPRI, HKI, WFP, and staff from other implementing organizations, funding organizations, and academic institutions. In total, 15 individuals from 8 organizations were interviewed virtually in July and August 2021. Data were analyzed using thematic content analysis. This brief synthesizes the lessons learned about effective researcher-implementer partnerships and the implications for researchers, implementers, and funders.

Brief history of the partnerships

The [IFPRI-HKI partnership](#) aimed to rigorously evaluate HKI's homestead food production (HFP) model. The collaboration

started in 2009 in Cambodia with operations research to document and clearly understand the pathways through which the HFP program worked to improve nutrition. This approach, known as program impact pathway (PIP) analysis, was used in all subsequent evaluations under the partnership. The partnership continued in Africa, where IFPRI evaluated three HKI programs between 2010 and 2016. From 2010 to 2012, the two organizations conducted the first-ever randomized controlled trial of a nutrition-sensitive agricultural program – the Enhanced Homestead Food Production (EHFP) program. In 2014, based on lessons learned from that evaluation, HKI and IFPRI integrated nutrition-specific components into the base EHFP program in Burkina Faso and Tanzania to rigorously test whether the addition of these components could enhance program impacts on child stunting. Since then, the IFPRI-HKI partnership has involved dissemination of results and lessons learned from the partnership over the years. HKI and IFPRI continue to collaborate on non-HFP projects in Africa and Asia, mainly around maternal and child health and nutrition.

The [IFPRI-WFP partnership](#) was formed in 2016 and aimed to make WFP's programs more nutrition-sensitive, to rigorously evaluate them to optimize program design, and to build the evidence base on nutrition-sensitive programming. The partnership focused on five key program areas: Social Protection; General Food Assistance; School Feeding; Smallholder Agricultural Market Support; and Food Assistance for Assets. Using a collaborative process, IFPRI developed a report for WFP on how to make programs more nutrition-sensitive, which informed WFP's guidance on nutrition-sensitive programming, launched in 2017. Also in 2017, IFPRI began working with WFP's country office in Sri Lanka to make an existing Food Assistance for Assets program more nutrition-sensitive and to evaluate the effectiveness of doing so. Since then, IFPRI and WFP have continued to collaborate on nutrition-sensitive programming, writing joint proposals, and disseminating efforts and findings from the partnership.

Findings

The IFPRI-HKI and IFPRI-WFP case studies uncovered common facilitators and barriers to engaging in long-term researcher-implementer partnerships in the context of nutrition-sensitive programming, some of which have previously been identified and discussed in detail by IFPRI.²

Facilitators for researcher-implementer partnerships

- 1. Commitment to research and quality programs:** Respondents noted that the mutual appreciation for evidence-based programming and implementers seeing research as integral to their programming are key to the success of researcher-implementer partnerships.
- 2. Shared vision and mutual respect:** Respondents highlighted that mutual appreciation for each other's work and a shared vision (mutual objectives and priorities) to improve programming are key to keeping partnerships on track.
- 3. Open communication:** Another important feature described by respondents was the open discussion about what does and does not work, with implementers being open to hearing about what does not work and ideas on improvements.
- 4. Committed, collaborative, and continuous staff:** Respondents highlighted the importance of having field staff committed to delivering quality programs and research staff who know how to organize the research and understand the complexities and realities of programming. Good working relationships between research and implementer staff and a collaborative approach in designing the research were also key. Continuity of staff involved in the partnerships also helped ensure institutional knowledge, continuity in programming, and continued ability to engage in the partnership.

Barriers for researcher-implementer partnerships

- 1. Funding:** Both researchers and implementers described insufficient funding as the main barrier to successful partnerships. One researcher respondent noted, *"if the funding is not there to support these types of partnerships, then it's pretty difficult to engage in them in any meaningful way."* Implementer respondents described how the funding for research is not always there and often cannot be acquired through fundraising, which primarily focuses on program areas. Respondents underscored a possible reason why there are not more similar partnerships might be a lack of funding to implement and support the partnership beyond specific projects, which are usually short-term, rather than a lack of desire for the partnership itself.
- 2. Lack of a shared vision:** Respondents described how researchers' and implementers' very different priorities and approaches in terms of timelines and complexity of re-

search, among other factors, could interfere with forming long-term partnerships.

- 3. Lack of commitment to research:** Respondents noted that program staff at implementing organizations often lack willingness to conduct rigorous research and may not see its relevance or the need for specific study designs. They highlighted the need for having people at implementer organizations who can explain the importance and relevance of research to their program staff and bolster motivation to support the research. Further, implementers noted that researchers often find that the evidence generated through effectiveness evaluations of their programs is of limited use. They noted that the lack of commitment to research among most implementers is often due to poor understanding of how research can help inform and improve their programs.
- 4. Different time scales:** Respondents shared how the different time scales on which researchers and implementers operate make collaborations difficult. Implementers often want data and results immediately to quickly feed into programming, whereas "good" research often takes a substantial amount of time.
- 5. Misconceptions about independence of researchers:** Respondents described how implementers often have misconceptions that research should be independent of programming to qualify the work as a rigorous evaluation. Such misconceptions could result in short-term collaborations to answer a single research question and hinder longer-term partnerships to address more complex issues.

Use of the evidence

IFPRI's researcher-implementer partnerships with HKI and WFP have resulted in numerous outputs, including peer-reviewed articles, discussion papers, research reports, book chapters, conference presentations and abstracts, policy seminars, and the PIP evaluation approach. This evidence has been used to initiate and implement multiple changes at the organizations involved in these partnerships, described in detail in the individual case studies. These changes include improvements in programming, wider adoption of the PIP approach, more thoughtful engagement with partners, improvements in implementers' research capacity, revamping implementers' monitoring and evaluation approaches, and refining and redefining of program outcome measures.

However, while by no means exhaustive, the in-depth interviews conducted indicated that, beyond the organizations involved in these two partnerships, the evidence and outputs they generated have had a limited reach. Specifically, the external review examined the reach of the IFPRI-HKI evidence on HFP programs and the PIP evaluation approach. With respect to the IFPRI-HKI evidence on HFP programs, the external review found that this evidence has been used in significant ways to influence the way other HFP projects are designed, evaluated, and funded. One primary avenue for

sharing the IFPRI-HKI evidence is through larger implementers working with local partners and governments. However, beyond projects led by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with direct contact with IFPRI or HKI, the IFPRI-HKI evidence has not broadly reached other NGOs implementing HFP programs. This may be due to the small sample size, the difficulty of identifying small home-gardening-oriented NGOs (for example, lack of websites or publications around home gardening to indicate them as a potential organization to interview), or an inability to assess reach in different ways.

With respect to the PIP approach, establishing the extent to which PIPs have been used by researchers and implementers was more difficult. In terms of researchers, one respondent felt that PIPs have become mainstream within agriculture-nutrition programming and evaluation, while another respondent felt almost no one in the public health research community knows about them. In terms of implementers, HKI, WFP, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), and Nutrition International (which have all collaborated with IFPRI to develop PIPs) continue to use PIPs in their work and strategic planning. However, other implementers not directly involved with IFPRI had difficulty answering questions around the use of PIPs. One issue observed is that PIPs are often referred to by different names and presented without attribution, making it difficult to assess the reach of the IFPRI-HKI PIP approach. For example, the U.S. Agency for International Development, while calling it by a different (unspecified) name, seems to employ the PIP approach. Further, the review of the literature suggested that increasingly PIPs are used to plan and analyze nutrition interventions, to describe how they expect the inputs invested and activities designed to lead to the intended outputs, outcomes, and ultimate impact, and to further unpack the pathways for success and failure.^{3,4,5,6,7} Beyond the nutrition sector, PIPs have been used in the context of conditional cash-transfer programs to assess implementation processes.^{8,9,10} Thus, while PIPs are by no means universally used and used less commonly than theory of change approaches according to one researcher, they seem to be more commonly used among nutrition-sensitive agricultural programs and are used increasingly over time due to the complex nature of the programming.

Conclusions and recommendations

The external review showed that long-term researcher-implementer partnerships are an effective way to generate rigorous evidence and to improve knowledge and programming in different contexts (including nutrition-sensitive agriculture, social protection, and nutrition) and for different organizations (including implementers, researchers, and funders). These types of long-term partnerships are becoming more common, as several respondents mentioned. However, respondents noted that they can further be strengthened and improved through:

1. **Setting up separate funding mechanisms for the research and the program:** These funding mechanisms should en-

sure funding for both types of activities and support engagement between researchers and implementers and development of the partnership, including developing shared agendas and objectives.

"Together, program and research agencies, need to do more to advocate to donors. I think that's where the gap is. [...] If there was a way to work together and to do joint advocacy on why marrying research and program can benefit not just the program itself, but also the government(s) that we are trying to support and advocating to the government(s) that this should be part of their budget allocation and design of the program as well. We need to break these barriers from the beginning."

– WFP respondent

"If WFP and IFPRI want to continue this partnership, it is essential that they set up a separate funding mechanism for research and evaluation that is to support this type of engagement or other similar types of engagements on other topics."

– IFPRI respondent

2. **Delineating roles, responsibilities, and expectations early on:** Partners need to be proactive early on to delineate roles, responsibilities, expectations, strategies for fundraising, and strategies for continued engagement. Establishing expectations from the start can align timelines for implementers and researchers and resolve misconceptions about the independence of researchers.
3. **Formalizing partnership and objectives:** Researcher-implementer partnerships should be formalized as a stated partnership with mutually shared objectives and priorities and high-level commitments to engage. Adequate leadership and management of the partnership can also help motivate staff involved, particularly at implementer organizations where program staff often have to contribute to research activities in addition to their usual work.

The external review also indicated that these types of long-term researcher-implementer partnerships are relevant to a range of organizations, including implementers, researchers, and donors. However, more work is needed to better understand how the evidence generated by researcher-implementer partnerships is used by others. Neither the IFPRI-HKI nor the IFPRI-WFP partnership was aimed at influencing other organizations' use of the evidence and PIP approach. The case studies on the IFPRI-HKI evidence and the PIP approach were exploratory, intended to see whether there was influence beyond the direct partners. With limitations in mind, these findings indicated limited reach beyond the direct partners. For partnerships that explicitly aim to influence other organizations' use of the evidence, broader, more varied, and more active dissemination may be needed to reach

audiences beyond those directly involved in the partnerships or in direct contact with the partnership organizations. Clear dissemination objectives, with types of audiences to be reached, may need to be set by partner organizations to ensure the generated evidence is widely disseminated to a variety of stakeholders. In addition, traceability plans should be incorporated in partnerships aiming to influence others to help trace and understand their reach over time.

"I strongly believe that in the world of development programming these types of partnerships are essential. If you want to make the best use of the money that goes into development, I think it is essential to have these types of intensive researcher-implementer partnerships, so that you're sure that you are implementing the programs that are most likely to lead to the impacts you want. I think donors should invest more in these types of longer-term partnerships, where you can build the institutional knowledge on both sides, both from a program perspective, but also from a research perspective, and jointly evolve the processes, approaches and evidence."

– IFPRI respondent

Endnotes

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