



Practical Insights into Design and Implementation of a Gender-Transformative
Agriculture-Nutrition-Finance- Marketing Intervention in Northern Ghana

| CHAPTER

16

Institutional collaboration and capacity strengthening for successful implementation of an integrated approach

Patricia Gyan-Bassaw and Birhanu Biazin

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Chapter 16

Institutional collaboration and capacity strengthening for successful implementation of an integrated approach

Patricia Gyan-Bassaw and Birhanu Biazin

16.1 Abstract

The GROWING project has been implemented through a multilateral partnership with a consortium of international organizations, civil society organizations, and government agencies. It adopted a co-creation and collaborative approach to operationalize a multisectoral development model integrating gender equality, nutrition, climate-smart agriculture, and financial inclusion in northern Ghana. The consortium strategically combined the agricultural research and innovation expertise of the International Potato Center (CIP), CARE's gender-transformative and community-based programming, the nutrition division of Ghana Health Service (GHS) in the Ministry of Health, the Women in Agricultural Development (WIAD) directorate in Ghana's Ministry of Food and Agriculture (MoFA), and three local implementing partner (IP) non-governmental organizations — RAINS, the Sung Foundation, and URBANET. The multisectoral integration of the various components was supported through joint planning and evaluation of the project's progress made in weekly meetings of the CIP and CARE staff and quarterly regional meetings engaging the district-level officers and directors of GHS and DoA alongside the IPs. A Technical Working Group, which comprised experts from the development, research, and academic communities, met every year to conduct deep technical reviews of the planned activities and implementation modalities. Reports from the Technical Working Group were presented to the Project Steering Committee, which included higher level members of the donor organization — Global Affairs Canada — and CIP, CARE, GHS, DoA, and project participants. The CGIAR Partnership Health Check-up Tool was administered in 2023 and 2024 to evaluate the project's health. This assessment measured the level of understanding of the project's vision, partner roles, information flow, communication, and conflict resolution practices. The results revealed better progress in 2024 than in 2023 in understanding the project vision and the roles of the implementing partners and in the project's communications and management. Overall, this project demonstrated strong potential for institutionalization.

16.2 Introduction

The GROWING project was a multifaceted proof-of-concept initiative that employed a multisectoral and collaborative approach to drive sustainable impact in gender, nutrition, climate-smart agriculture, marketing, financial inclusion, and agro-processing in participating communities while simultaneously strengthening the capacities of key actors. From its inception, the project was designed intentionally for co-creation, ensuring that implementation was not only technically sound but also contextually relevant and owned by stakeholders.

At the heart of the consortium were two core partners: CIP, a CGIAR research center with strong experience in integrated agriculture–nutrition–marketing programming, and CARE International, a global humanitarian NGO with strong expertise in designing and delivering women’s empowerment initiatives, gender-transformative approaches, Village Savings and Loan Associations, and food security interventions with sustained impact in Ghana. Together, these two institutions constituted the backbone of the consortium. To broaden reach and ensure strong alignment with national systems, they were joined by the GHS and DoA under Ghana’s ministries of Health and Food and Agriculture, respectively. This collaboration was driven by two key understandings: 1) the Government of Ghana and its public institutions hold the primary mandate to deliver development outcomes although they often operate under severe resource constraints, and 2) sustainable and scalable impact is more achievable when projects leverage existing government systems and structures to introduce appropriate innovations while providing the needed logistics, capacity building, and technical support to accelerate delivery.

16.3 Institutional partnerships and roles as a pathway to sustainability

16.3.1 Partnership between CIP and CARE

The project design was initiated by CIP and CARE International. Established more than 55 years ago, CIP has a mandate to transform agricultural resilience and nutrition by investing research in potato, sweetpotato, and other root and tuber crops. Through rigorous breeding and systems research, CIP has become a global leader in the development and dissemination of orange-fleshed sweetpotato to combat vitamin A deficiency across Africa. In Ghana, CIP has strongly supported the breeding and value chain development of sweetpotato and other tubers for more than three decades. CARE is a leading humanitarian organization fighting global poverty, envisioning a world of hope, tolerance, and social justice in which poverty has been overcome and all people live in dignity and security. CARE has been operating in Ghana since 1994 using a participatory approach to work in partnership with civil society organizations, the government, and the private sector. CARE works to benefit the lives of the rural and vulnerable poor, with emphases on women and children, by implementing programs to advance agriculture; food and nutrition security; economic empowerment; education; civil society strengthening; water, sanitation and hygiene; and health.

The intentional, consultative, and time-sensitive processes this project employed in onboarding government and civil society partners have proved invaluable. By embedding the project within

government systems, leveraging contextual knowledge, and fostering multi-level collaboration, the GROWING project has enhanced the acceptability, ownership, and sustainability of its outcomes among its partners and other stakeholders. This institutional design originated during the project proposal stage, when CIP and CARE carefully selected complementary partners with demonstrated technical capacity and proven track records. The project combined CIP's global expertise in agricultural research, nutrition-sensitive and market-oriented development interventions — especially in root and tuber systems — with CARE's gender-transformative and community-based development experience. Together with government and local organizations, the consortium demonstrated the feasibility and impact of taking an integrated agriculture-nutrition-gender approach in Ghana (Table 16.1).

16.3.2 The roles of government sectors: GHS and DoA

The co-creation, participatory planning, implementation, and monitoring of the GROWING project was strongly supported by the various district structures and staff of two key government ministerial agencies: GHG and DoA. This was undertaken through memoranda of understandings between CIP and CARE on the one hand and GHS and DoA on the other, clearly stating the roles and responsibilities of each partner throughout the project's planning, implementing, and monitoring processes. Work in planning and implementing the project's nutrition-sensitive interventions was strongly supported by district- and sub-district-level nutrition officers backstopping the project's Community Health Officers, who supported the GROWING Futures Clubs (GFCs) in the project's targeted communities. As the project's Nutrition Component was the first of several components to be implemented, the GHS staff played significant roles in recruiting and sensitizing the project's participants. The DoA made many multisectoral contributions, including introducing and promoting climate-smart agricultural practices in backyards and demonstration plots (via crop extension officers and agriculture extension agents); supporting training and promotional events for market-related interventions, including coaching/mentoring the Healthy Food Connectors and Nutritious Food Corp Agents (via WIAD officers); developing the capacity of agro-processing groups (WIAD officers); introducing and promoting cavy rearing (livestock officers); establishing CARE's Social Analysis and Action approach to addressing social norms; backstopping the project's gender champions (WIAD officers); and backstopping Village Agents implementing Village Savings and Loan Associations (WIAD officers). This extensive DoA participation not only ensured that the project's outputs were inclusive and equitable but also helped to institutionalize the project's successful interventions for their sustained impact.

16.3.3 Implementing partners: RAINS, Sung Foundation, and URBANET

Implementation of the GROWING project was supported by three NGOs recruited by CARE as implementing partners (IPs) based on their longstanding presence and contextual expertise in northern Ghana. These NGO IPs were the Sung Foundation in the Savannah region, RAINS (Regional Advisory Information and Network Systems) in the North East region, and URBANET in the Northern region. A women's rights organization, the Sung Foundation added value by championing women's empowerment and gender equality through its rights-based approaches. RAINS and URBANET brought decades of

experience in food security, livelihoods, and sustainable agriculture, particularly in the marginalized and resource-poor contexts of northern Ghana. By capitalizing on the institutional memory and trust the field staff of these organizations had cultivated in their communities, the project ensured that its interventions were not only technically appropriate but also socially and culturally acceptable.

16.3.4 Contributions from other partner institutions

Several other organizations contributed to the project's formative study, tailored training tools, and multi-sectoral action research processes. The CGIAR GENDER Impact Platform supported qualitative research undertaken to adapt empowerment concepts to the local setting and also partly financed implementation of the project's endline study. The project's nutrition modules, which were developed in Ethiopia, were adapted and contextualized for the northern Ghanaian conditions in collaboration with senior researchers at Ghana's University for Development Studies and nutrition officers in the project's six intervention districts. The university researchers also supported a feasibility study on household cavy rearing.

CIP staff collaborated with AidData, a research and innovation lab at Virginia's William & Mary University, to investigate the most effective ways to introduce a knowledge-based "storage in sand and sprouting" (Triple S) technology used to sustain sweetpotato seed supply in northern Ghana. This collaboration aimed to determine whether different ways of introducing a technology (e.g. complementing training with and without use of video products) and the use of different groups to promote it (e.g. women or men as Community-Based Extension Agents) made a difference to its uptake. The AidData scientists helped to design a longitudinal study with proper randomization of the treatment and control communities over consecutive cycles of the project.

Development of tailored training materials for the integrated components of the GROWING project was supported by experts from various organizations. The development of modules for climate-smart agricultural practices was supported by experts at Ghana's Council for Scientific and Industrial Research–Savanna Agricultural Research Institute (CSIR-SARI) and by an intern from Cornell University. In collaboration with an educational outreach initiative at Purdue University, Scientific Animations without Borders (SAWBO), three videos (two promoting the Triple S technology and one promoting the Double S) were developed and translated into the local languages of the project's intervention communities — Dagbani, Gonja, Mampruli, Chekosi, and Likpakpaaln. SAWBO also gave the project permission to translate a video it produced on preparing compost into those five languages. This translation work was undertaken in close collaboration between SAWBO and district DoA staff located in the major language zones: East Mamprusi district for Mampruli language, Chereponi district for Chekosi language, Gushegu district for Dagbani language, Saboba district for Likpakpaaln language, and North and West Gonja districts for Gonja language. CGIAR's Nutrition Platform funded development of a video on the outcomes of the project's integrated nutrition intervention and the resulting behavior changes in dietary practices.

Table 16.1. Major GROWING project result areas and roles of its partner organizations

Major result area	Leadership	Collaborator(s)
Adapt nutrition curricula and job tools to local conditions and ensure gender-responsiveness for use by CHOs	CIP	University for Development Studies
Disseminate Healthy Baby Toolkits, Goal Cards, orange-fleshed sweetpotato, moringa, amaranth, and papaya to GFC households	CIP	CARE, GHS, DOA
Undertake gender equality assessments in the project's districts to inform development of a gender strategy providing a targeted implementation approach for every project component	CARE	CIP
Conduct annual monitoring and baseline and endline studies of key results to inform implementation in subsequent years and eventual scaling strategies	CIP	
Conduct monthly gender-responsive nutrition sessions using training of trainers, step-down and GFC-level facilitations on changing dietary practices and related behaviors in water, sanitation and hygiene	CIP	GHS
Recruit, train, support, and monitor Community-based Extension Agents backstopping GFCs in agriculture and farming as a business a	CARE	DoA
Develop gender-responsive training tools on CARE's Social Analysis and Action approach along with facilitation techniques for all of the project's implementing partners and volunteers	CARE	
Develop gender-responsive training tools for climate-smart production and commercialization of nutrition-sensitive crops and storage practices for GFCs members, particularly women	CIP	CARE, CSIR-SARI
Conduct gender-responsive training on sustainable, climate-smart production practices for GFC members, particularly women	CARE	CIP, IPs
Conduct acceptability studies and design and implement environmentally aware small livestock (cavy) interventions	CIP	DoA
Introduce and implement gender-responsive, innovative, and environmentally aware pilots for cavy rearing using participatory approaches with extension personnel and women farmers	CIP	DOA, CARE
Conduct cost-benefit analyses to prioritize orange-fleshed sweetpotato products and to process and train selected medium- and small-scale processors	CIP	WIAD/MOFA

Major result area	Leadership	Collaborator(s)
Make an inventory and analyze the financial services and products available in northern Ghana to inform the project's implementation team on ways to improve women's access to formal financial services	CARE	IPs, WIAD
Strengthen existing Village Savings and Loan Associations and set up new ones, implementing and monitoring protocols and training	CARE	IPs, WIAD
Provide technical assistance to identify, train, and support Healthy Food Connectors in providing gender-responsive extension agent services to members of all three types of income-earning GFCs	CIP	WIAD, CARE
Develop, test, and revise gender-responsive videos, related media tools, and collaborations for facilitating training activities and nutritious crop uptake	CIP	CARE, WIAD, GHS
Conduct gender-responsive and generationally relevant business skill trainings for women and men engaged in all three income-earning GFCs and for the project's Healthy Food Connectors and Nutritious Food Corps Agents	CIP	WIAD, CARE
Conduct scaling events to increase access by community members (particularly women and youth) to seeds of nutritious crops, improving communication between both genders of traders, agro-processors, nutritious food connectors, etc.	CIP	CARE
Provide technical assistance in consultation with communities to identify and train men and women gender champions in use of CARE's Social Analysis and Action framework	CARE	WIAD, IPs
Hold dialogues, trainings, and one-on-one meetings with men and women community members and other district-level stakeholders on the way forward for women's equitable access to productive land and inputs	CARE	WIAD, IPs
Support men and women community leaders, District Assembly members, and Gender Champions in advocating gender equality via fairs, exhibitions, and media channels	CARE	WIAD, IPs
Ensure that stakeholders, including senior government health personnel, integrate the GFC approach to nutrition in health service delivery in non-project communities in the target regions	CIP	CARE, GHS
Lead overall project coordination, management, partnership health check, and communications, including planning the project's weekly, quarterly, and annual meeting with the project's Technical Working Group and Project Steering Committee	CIP	CARE

16.4 Co-creation, joint planning, and implementation

16.4.1 Stakeholder consultations and quarterly meetings

The GROWING project's design was contextualized through repeated consultations with its key stakeholders. During the project's inception phase (March–October 2022), its implementation plan was co-created with, and supported by, participation of the key partners alongside experienced experts from the University for Development Studies, CSIR-SARI, environmental consultants and private sector actors, CGIAR sister institutions such as the International Institute for Tropical Agriculture, and other projects funded by Global Affairs Canada, such as the “Greater Rural Opportunities for Women 2” project led by the Canadian NGO Mennonite Economic Development Associates. This co-creation process enabled interventions to be tailored to community needs and realities while also embedding government and civil society knowledge into the implementation framework. For instance, during the project's inception consultations, it was established that each region should select its priority legume crop. The Savannah region chose to transfer climate-smart agricultural knowledge and skills on the groundnut value chain while the Northern and North East regions chose the soybean value chain. These choices were based on in-depth stakeholder understanding of the popularity of, and farmer preference for, the two legume crops as evidenced by their production and sales.

CIP and CARE held weekly planning and review meetings with the project's component leaders and supervisors. These regular joint planning and review meetings helped strengthen the integration of the various project components on gender, nutrition, climate-smart agriculture, marketing, small livestock, Village Savings and Loan Associations, and agro-processing. Quarterly meetings were organized in each of the three regions with the partners from the two districts coming together. The quarterly meetings engaged key staff from CIP and CARE, the district GHS director, the DoA district director, WIAD officers, district nutrition officers, District Assembly planning officers, and representatives of the implementing partner NGOs. In these quarterly meetings, key lessons on technical implementations were transferred from one district to the other. The quarterly meetings were also an important forum for pinpointing key implementation challenges and for moving strategies agreed upon forward.

16.4.2 The Technical Working Group and Project Steering Committee

A further support structure was the establishment of a Technical Working Group composed of senior and experienced experts from University for Development Studies, CSIR-SARI, CGIAR centers, CARE, CIP, GHS, and MoFA. The Technical Working Group served as a knowledge hub and advisory body, bringing technical expertise in climate-smart agriculture, nutrition, marketing, gender, and financial inclusion to bear on project strategies. At the apex of governance was the Project Steering Committee comprising representatives from Global Affairs Canada (Chair), CARE Canada and CARE Ghana, CIP, MoFA (WIAD), and the Ministry of Health (nutrition). Bi-annual engagements — typically combining field visits with reflective review meetings — proved a cost-effective way to access expert advice while strengthening institutional

partnerships. Importantly, these forums also injected fresh perspectives and practical recommendations that were systematically fed back into the project management cycle. The Project Steering Committee convened annually to review project achievements, validate annual plans, and provide high-level guidance (Figure 16.1). Its composition reflected both donor priorities and the project's integrated mandate while also allowing for the flexibility to invite grassroots actors or additional stakeholders to enrich its discussions. The Project Steering Committee thus became a platform not only for oversight but also for strengthening donor-government trust, elevating project innovations for national consideration, and advancing pathways for sustainability.



Figure 16.1. Technical Working Group members during their annual meetings in (top to bottom) 2022, 2023, 2024, and 2025 (photo credits: CIP).

16.5 Achievements and lessons learned

16.5.1 Results from the Partnership Health Check-up

To maintain a suitable balance in its work integrating different partners, components, and practices, the GROWING project assessed the health of its partnerships for two consecutive years, in 2023 and 2024. The aim was to encourage open communication on the project’s partnerships and processes, with any concerns identified early and addressed appropriately. The project used the CGIAR’s Partnership Health Check-Up Tool to do this. With this tool, project staff obtained feedback on how the partnership was working from individuals in different positions and working at different levels of responsibility (e.g. managers/supervisors, senior officers, junior officers) among the project’s key stakeholder organizations. Respondents used a simple Likert Scale (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree) to score their levels of satisfaction concerning different partnership processes. Results from the survey were discussed during

planning meetings, where the partners could discuss and come to agreement on actions to be taken to strengthen the partnership processes. The results showed noticeable improvements over time, from 2023 to 2024, in understanding the project's vision and the roles of the implementing partners and management (Table 16.2). Partner institutions were clear not only about their own roles in the project (mean score of 4.22 out of 5) but also about the roles of the other partners (mean score of 4.05 out of 5 in 2024). This indicated the strength of the project's partnerships, made possible, it was believed, by the project's continuous engagement work (communications, in-person meetings). Key stakeholders said that they appreciated the GROWING project's commitment to sharing information on project activities and implementation (mean score of 3.91 out of 5 in 2024). The suggestions made by senior- and junior-level staff of the partner organizations differed. While senior staff suggested improvements in management, focusing on more efficient transfers of resources, junior staff suggested improving communications and information flows. The project significantly strengthened institutional collaboration across government agencies (GHS and MoFA), civil society organizations (RAINS, URBANET, and Sung Foundation), and research institutions. This enhanced coordination improved the coherence of interventions, facilitated shared learning, and created a more enabling environment for multi-sectoral implementation. The strengthened partnerships also laid a solid foundation for sustained cross-sector engagement beyond the project cycle, supporting long-term integration of project innovations into national systems.

Table 16.2. Comparison of the mean score values of the Partnership Health Check-up in 2023 and 2024

VARIABLE	2024	2023
	Mean n=232	Mean N=89
1. MY ORGANIZATION AGREES WITH THE COMMON VISION FOR THE GROWING PROJECT.	4.60	4.51
2. MY ORGANIZATION IS CLEAR ABOUT ITS ROLE IN THE GROWING PROJECT.	4.46	4.22
3. MY ORGANIZATION IS CLEAR ABOUT THE ROLE OF OTHER PARTNERS IN THE GROWING PROJECT.	4.24	4.05
4. MY ORGANIZATION HAS PROVIDED REPORTS ON TIME.	4.15	3.78
5. MY ORGANIZATION HAS RECEIVED INFORMATION ON OVERALL PROJECT ACTIVITIES AND MODALITIES OF IMPLEMENTATION FOR THE GROWING PROJECT.	4.07	3.91
6. MEETINGS HAPPEN AT THE APPROPRIATE FREQUENCY.	3.85	3.38
7. MEETINGS ARE DOCUMENTED APPROPRIATELY AND MINUTES CIRCULATED.	3.82	3.54
8. MEETINGS ARE FOLLOWED UP BY ACTION.	3.97	3.72
9. INTERNAL PROJECT COMMUNICATION AMONG PARTNERS IS GOING WELL (I.E. PARTNERS WITH WHICH THE PROJECT HAS A FORMAL AGREEMENT).	3.95	3.48
10. COMMUNICATION WITH EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS IS GOING WELL (I.E. STAKEHOLDERS THE PROJECT WISHES TO INFLUENCE, BUT WHERE THERE IS NO FORMAL AGREEMENT).	3.84	3.51
11. PARTNERS IN THE GROWING PROJECT ARE ABLE TO RESOLVE ANY POTENTIAL CONFLICTS RELATED TO PROJECT ACTIVITIES.	4.20	3.79
12. MY ORGANIZATION IS WILLING TO LEARN FROM EXPERIENCES AND IS ABLE TO MODIFY THE WAY IT DOES THINGS.	4.51	4.30
13. MY ORGANIZATION SUPPORTS MY PARTICIPATION IN THIS PROJECT'S ACTIVITIES.	4.53	4.42
14. I AM AWARE OF MY RESPONSIBILITIES IN THIS PROJECT.	4.20	4.30
15. I FEEL I HAVE ENOUGH TIME TO SPEND ON THIS PROJECT.	3.93	3.00
16. I FEEL I HAVE SUFFICIENT JOB TOOLS TO IMPLEMENT MY DUTIES IN THIS PROJECT.	4.22	3.62
17. I CLEARLY UNDERSTAND THE ROLE OF THE LEAD PARTNER, CIP, IN THE GROWING PROJECT.	3.88	3.89
18. THE LEAD PARTNER OF THE PROJECT IS SUFFICIENTLY FLEXIBLE TO INCORPORATE THE CONCERNS AND INTERESTS OF THE OTHER PARTNERS.	3.87	3.61
19. I FEEL THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS IN THE GROWING PROJECT IS VERY TRANSPARENT AND INCLUSIVE.	4.08	3.56
20. I AM PLEASED WITH THE LEVEL OF HONESTY AND TRUST IN THIS PARTNERSHIP.	4.60	4.11

16.5.2 Lessons learned and the way forward

Weekly meetings among CIP and CARE component leads and officers supported realistic and iterative planning and implementation processes and made efficient use of staff time and project resources (e.g. vehicles) through integrated action plans and field trips. This close collaboration fostered shared ownership, brought together complementary expertise, and supported timely and coordinated problem-solving.

Field officers from other partner institutions (GHS and DoA) needed to balance their GROWING activities with their organizations' annual work planning, national reporting requirements, and emergency responses. To help balance these workloads, the project team reviewed the annual operational plans of the partner agencies to align the GROWING project's trainings and meetings with the partner officers' availability. This alignment significantly improved the sequence of project activities, reduced scheduling conflicts, and enhanced the timely delivery of planned interventions.

Some staff from the project's government partners had unreasonable expectations around the material and logistical support (e.g. motorbikes) provided by GROWING, with field officers often comparing the level of support provided by GROWING to that of other projects. This was addressed through sustained dialogues with directors and senior-level officials, which improved understanding of the roles played by the different partners, managed expectations among GHS and MoFA-DoA officers, and reinforced commitment to collaborative implementation within agreed project parameters.

Moving forward to another phase of the GROWING project, the knowledge, skills, and operational experience accumulated by the partner institutions have created favorable conditions for both scaling and institutionalizing GROWING's interventions. These partner institutions are now in a better position to assume stronger leadership roles in implementing the project's components that are directly aligned with their mandates. This new leadership in turn enables greater integration of project innovations into routine government and organizational-level programming, strengthens intersectoral collaboration, and facilitates more efficient and timely delivery of activities. As government institutions carry their national mandate to improve the country's nutritional well-being, through GHS, and climate-smart agriculture, through MoFA, meaningful and lasting change in these and other components of the GROWING project will be made as these government institutions adopt, integrate, and champion the project's successful interventions.

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The International Potato Center (CIP) was founded in 1971 as a research-for-development organization with a focus on potato, sweetpotato and Andean roots and tubers. It delivers innovative science-based solutions to enhance access to affordable nutritious food, foster inclusive sustainable business and employment growth, and drive the climate resilience of root and tuber agri-food systems. Headquartered in Lima, Peru, CIP has a research presence in more than 20 countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

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CIP is a CGIAR research center, a global research partnership for a food-secure future. CGIAR science is dedicated to transforming food, land and water systems in a climate crisis. Its research is carried out by 13 CGIAR Centers/Alliances in close collaboration with hundreds of partners, including national and regional research institutes, civil society organizations, academia, development organizations and the private sector.

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