

# Stakeholder engagement in food systems and nutrition research programs: Approach, insights, and lessons learned from the FRESH Initiative

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# Stakeholder engagement in food systems and nutrition research programs: Approach, insights, and lessons learned from the FRESH Initiative

## Introduction

Poor diets are a leading cause of malnutrition and diet-related diseases globally.<sup>1,2</sup> Improving diets, including increasing fruit and vegetable (F&V) intake, is critical to address these challenges. Global F&V consumption, however, remains below the recommended 400 grams of fruit and vegetables per person per day.<sup>3</sup> A complex set of factors related to the desirability, availability, accessibility, and affordability of F&V limits intake. This suggests that integrated, food-system-based solutions are needed.<sup>4</sup>

The CGIAR Research Initiative on Fruit and Vegetables for Sustainable Healthy Diets (FRESH - 2022-2024), which transitioned into the CGIAR Science Program on Better Diets and Nutrition (BDN) Area of Work 3 (AoW3) in 2025, tests food systems innovations to increase F&V intake. FRESH was initially implemented in Tanzania, Sri Lanka, Benin, and the Philippines, with impact evaluations planned in Tanzania and Sri Lanka. Using an end-to-end (E2E) approach, the interventions span demand, food environment, supply, and enabling environment components of food systems related to F&V (**Figure 1**). On the demand side, understanding country-specific dietary patterns and drivers of low F&V intake are vital first steps to identify opportunities and design interventions to positively influence desirability and shift consumer behavior. Food environment interventions aim to address constraints such as improving the affordability and accessibility of F&V.<sup>5,6</sup> On the supply side, the team works with farmers and value chain actors to improve access to diverse quality seeds, promote safe and sustainable vegetable production practices (including traditional vegetables), and reduce postharvest losses while addressing food safety. Lastly, the E2E approach considers policy research, capacity sharing, and engagement to strengthen enabling environments for sustainable healthy diets.<sup>7-10</sup>

FRESH, and now BDN AoW3, adopted an iterative stakeholder engagement approach to promote demand-driven evidence generation that was designed to be responsive to local priorities, engaging key actors across the food system in each of the four focal countries. While evidence is an important input into decision-making, its use also depends on its relevance to end-user needs, decision-makers' perceptions of its credibility, relationships between researchers and stakeholders, and effective communication.<sup>11-17</sup> Insufficient stakeholder engagement can limit the consideration of local knowledge, cultural context, and priorities and can in turn inhibit the adoption and use of research findings.<sup>14,18</sup> In contrast, mutual partnerships that bring together policymakers, practitioners, researchers, and frontline actors support the co-production of research and its application in policy and practice.<sup>19</sup> Despite this recognition, there is limited evidence on how engagement is conducted and evolves in practice, particularly from the perspective of stakeholders themselves.

This brief outlines the stakeholder engagement approach and lessons learned during the FRESH Initiative (2022–2024), including key findings from a mixed-methods assessment of FRESH's engagement approach. The study examined FRESH's progress on its intended stakeholder engagement and capacity sharing strategies through an online survey and key informant interviews. While the description and findings reflect the implementation period of FRESH (2022-2024), BDN AoW3 stakeholder engagement activities are building on these initial partnerships and engagement mechanisms and the lessons learned.

**Figure 1: End-to-end approach**



## Stakeholder engagement approach

We define stakeholder engagement as the iterative and non-linear activities that enable dialogue between individuals, groups, and institutions to listen, inform, and collaborate toward a common goal.<sup>20</sup> It involves both formal (e.g., structured consultations, workshops) and informal (e.g., informal or 1:1 discussions, relationship-building) forms of engagement. FRESH (now BDN AoW3) engages stakeholders across the food system to strengthen cross-sectoral collaboration and to support prioritization of F&V across the E2E domains. Co-learning and exchange are prioritized, and local actors are involved in the co-creation and design of research and interventions, rather than limiting engagement to consultation or feedback on research outputs. The team approaches engagement as an iterative and adaptive process that evolves over time based on implementation and learning.

FRESH/AoW3 actors engaged with diverse stakeholders, within and outside government, who influence and are influenced by the food system, recognizing differences in expertise, influence, and roles across the different domains. Stakeholders were selected to ensure priorities reflected national contexts and aligned with existing food-system needs and priorities.

## Defining FRESH actors

FRESH defined three primary actor groups:

- **Core partners (CP):** Researchers from international institutions who designed FRESH and held primary management responsibility and access to resources.
- **Implementing partners (IP):** National institutions in focus countries that co-led research and program activities with core partners and received core partner funding to implement activities.
- **Strategic stakeholders (SS):** Prioritized individuals, groups, or institutions – ranging from government to non-government, local, or in-country international development agencies – with relevant expertise, influence, and involvement in food systems, F&Vs, or specific E2E domains who engaged with FRESH but did not hold operational roles.

## Identifying and working with core partners

FRESH was developed by CGIAR researchers from the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), CIMMYT, Alliance of Bioversity International-CIAT (ABC), International Water Management Institute (IWMI), and International Potato Center (CIP), in close partnership with the World Vegetable Center, Applied Horticultural Research, the University of Sydney, the Institute of Development Studies, Wageningen University & Research, and the

University of California, Davis. These institutions worked in partnership with the implementing partner institutions of Sokoine University of Agriculture, Wayamba University of Sri Lanka, and the Philippines Department of Science and Technology–Food and Nutrition Research Institute (DOST-FNRI), along with other partners in developing the FRESH Initiative.

In each country, a FRESH Country Coordinator coordinated FRESH activities. Stakeholder engagement was led jointly by the Country Coordinator and a core partner researcher, in collaboration with the broader team of core and implementing partners. Three Country Coordinators were from core institutions (World Vegetable Center and IWMI), and one was from DOST-FNRI, an implementing partner institution.

### **Identifying and working with implementing partners**

Across the four focus countries, FRESH partnered with 21 institutions to conduct research or development activities across the E2E domains. Implementing partners were identified through different approaches, including existing mandates within the country, expertise, and collaborations with core partners. Their roles varied by country and E2E domain but generally included: 1) designing and conducting research, 2) designing and delivering capacity sharing activities on different topics such as seed development, good agronomic practices, post-harvest management, and dietary analysis, 3) collaborating on technical analyses such as cost of healthy diets or microbial assessments, and 4) engaging with strategic stakeholders.

### **Identifying and working with strategic stakeholders**

A stakeholder mapping was conducted in August 2023, during a FRESH biannual partner meeting, to identify priority actors across E2E domains based on influence and interest across the four countries. Country Coordinators complemented this process with one-on-one meetings and workshops to introduce FRESH, share its vision of multistakeholder engagement, gather feedback, and identify appropriate engagement modalities. This process aimed to avoid the duplication of ongoing activities within the countries, leverage existing platforms, and identify champions for nutrition.

Where relevant platforms existed on food systems, horticulture, or nutrition, FRESH embedded some of its engagements within them. In Tanzania, this included engagement with the National Multisectoral Nutrition Technical Sub Working Group on food systems and nutrition-sensitive actions (government-led), the Arusha Sustainable Food Systems Platform (co-led by government and civil society), and the Development Partners Nutrition Group (development partner-led). In Benin, FRESH engaged with the National Horticulture Platform – a platform for sharing research, informing policy, and enabling co-learning among vegetable value chain actors (civil-society-led). In Sri Lanka and the Philippines, engagement took place through targeted workshops with government, civil society, NGO, private sector, and researchers in the absence of established platforms for collaboration. In the Philippines, FRESH maintained close collaboration with Local Government Units and the Local Agricultural Office.

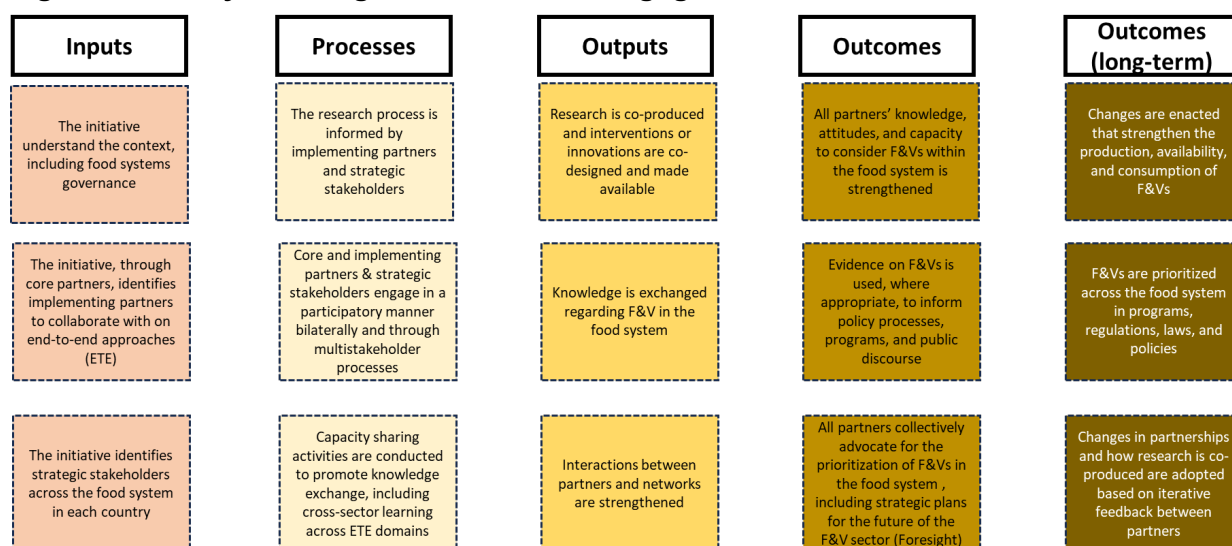
### **Theory of change**

The theory of change (TOC) (**Figure 2**) for the Initiative's stakeholder engagement approach outlines how engagement is expected to contribute to the consideration of F&V across food systems. It articulates the pathways through which engagement inputs and processes support the co-production of research, strengthen relationships and capacities, and ultimately influence food-system decisions, policies, and actions.

It is important to note that the TOC assumes that engagement is an iterative, adaptive, and long-term process, recognizing that meaningful shifts in collaboration, evidence use, and policy prioritization occur over time rather than in the short term.

- **Input:** Understanding of each focus country context and identification of implementing partners and strategic stakeholders.
- **Processes:** Research priorities and processes are informed by partners and stakeholders through participatory engagement, including through multistakeholder platforms, and identification of capacity needs.
- **Outputs:** Strengthened networks and opportunities for exchanging knowledge, leading to co-produced outputs (e.g., innovations, interventions, publications, and training materials).
- **Outcomes (intermediate):** Enhanced partner and stakeholder knowledge and capacity (including using evidence) on F&V, as well as collective advocacy and prioritization of F&V across the food system in focus countries.
- **Outcomes (long-term):** Improved collaboration and prioritization of F&V in food systems, leading to improved availability, affordability, and consumption.

**Figure 2: Theory of change of stakeholder engagement**



## Stakeholder engagement activities

Stakeholder engagement during FRESH was conducted through proposal development, Initiative launches, biannual partner meetings, monthly coordination meetings, and bilateral and multistakeholder meetings (**Table 1**). Engagement began during the inception phase in all four countries, with consultations held during the proposal development stage to seek feedback on project relevance and country fit. The global and country launches of FRESH served as a way to convene national experts to introduce the FRESH objectives and discuss the global and country priorities and opportunities to increase the intake of F&V through addressing food system barriers.

Core and implementing partners engaged and continue to engage bilaterally with government, academia, national research institutes, implementers, and community-level actors across the different domains in the food system. These engagements support the prioritization and co-design of research and associated interventions, identify opportunities for collaboration, and foster learning about related initiatives.

Core and implementing partners also jointly developed and implemented research activities that span the demand, food environment, supply, and enabling environment domains, and implemented supply-side interventions. Collaborative needs assessments on food environments were conducted in Tanzania, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines.

**Table 1: Summary of engagement activities and stakeholder participation conducted during the FRESH Initiative phase.**

| Engagement activities                                             | Stage of research process          | Dates     | Groups involved in each country |           |          |             | Rationale and examples                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|-----------|---------------------------------|-----------|----------|-------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                                                   |                                    |           | Tanzania                        | Sri Lanka | Benin    | Philippines |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| Proposal development                                              | Inception                          | 2022-2023 | CP SS                           | CP SS     | CP SS    | CP SS       | Inform FRESH's overall research agenda and identify areas of potential collaboration.<br>Ex: virtual stakeholder consultations                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Initiative launch                                                 |                                    |           | CP IP SS                        | CP IP SS  | CP IP SS | CP IP SS    | Create awareness of the Initiative and strengthen partnerships<br>Ex: global and country Initiative launch events                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| Bilateral meetings                                                | Research process                   | 2022-2024 | CP IP SS                        | CP IP SS  | CP IP SS | CP IP SS    | Discuss planned activities across demand, supply, food environment, and enabling environment and identify specific areas of collaboration.<br>Ex: one-on-one meetings with academia, government, farmers, vendor stakeholders                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Design and implementation of research and intervention activities |                                    |           | CP IP                           | CP IP     | CP IP    | CP IP       | Work with implementing partners to conduct studies, design or implement interventions across demand, supply, and food environment.<br>Ex: design and implementation of the impact evaluations, supply-side activities at production hubs, demand and food environment intervention co-design, capacity sharing                                                                                                                               |
| Monthly coordination meetings                                     | Research process                   | 2023-2024 | CP IP                           | CP IP     | CP IP    | CP IP       | Coordinate and share across core and implementing partners working on the different E2E domains within a specific country context through monthly meetings.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| FRESH biannual partner meetings                                   | Research process                   | 2023-2024 | CP IP SS                        | CP IP SS  | CP IP SS | CP IP SS    | Meetings that take place two times per year, bringing together core and implementing partners, and some strategic stakeholders from the four focus countries to discuss progress, share research, and identify priorities.                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Multistakeholder meetings                                         | Research process and dissemination | 2023-2024 | —                               | CP IP SS  | —        | CP IP SS    | Conduct meetings that bring together core, implementing, and strategic stakeholders who intervene across the different E2E domains to discuss and review ongoing work across the full E2E spectrum.<br>Ex: multistakeholder meetings in Sri Lanka, Philippines                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Science meetings and conferences                                  |                                    |           | CP IP SS                        | CP IP SS  | —        | CP IP SS    | Share and examine evidence, innovations, and experiences on F&V availability, accessibility, affordability, desirability, and intake. Country-level science meetings brought together in-country stakeholders, researchers, and FRESH partners. One cross-country science conference in Tanzania (larger scale) also included students and FRESH partners from other focus countries.<br>Ex: Tanzania Science Conference, SL Science Meeting |

CP: Core partners IP: Implementing partners SS: Strategic stakeholders

The co-design of supply (all four countries) and demand (Tanzania only<sup>1</sup>) interventions took place amongst core, implementing, and strategic stakeholders. Implementing and core partners organized capacity sharing activities across the different domains (described further in a separate brief), and FRESH partners also participated in capacity-sharing efforts led by other stakeholders. Core and implementing partners in each country also participated in monthly virtual coordination meetings to discuss ongoing activities and foster coordination across the E2E domains. In addition, they met twice a year in person to review research progress, share findings, and jointly prioritize upcoming activities.

In Benin and Tanzania, FRESH engaged stakeholders across food system domains through existing multistakeholder platforms. In Sri Lanka and the Philippines, where such platforms were not available, FRESH organized multistakeholder convenings in 2023 and 2024 (Sri Lanka) and 2024 (Philippines). These meetings introduced the end-to-end approach and provided opportunities for stakeholders from different sectors to discuss its relevance, identify linkages and gaps across food system domains, and share perspectives on the planned research. The meetings complemented domain-specific engagement activities by facilitating cross-sectoral dialogue.

In 2024, FRESH organized science meetings or conferences in Tanzania, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines to bring core and implementing partners, strategic stakeholders, and other in-country actors, including students working on food systems or F&V, together to share evidence, innovations, and experiences related to improving the desirability, intake, availability, and affordability of F&V. A comparable event was not organized in Benin, given its smaller portfolio of activities and funding and time constraints.

## Lessons learned

A mixed-methods engagement study examining FRESH's progress on its intended stakeholder engagement and capacity sharing strategies was conducted from February to September 2025. The study sampled core partners, implementing partners, and strategic stakeholders, and consisted of an online survey (n=59; 39% response rate) and key informant interviews (KII) (n=30; 77% response rate) (**Table 2**). Both the survey and KIIs focused on core themes that cut across the “*Inputs-Processes-Outputs*” of the engagement TOC (**Figure 2**), with KIIs allowing more in-depth exploration of themes. This section summarizes the high-level findings of the study, including stakeholder perceptions of successes, barriers, and areas for improvement that have informed the continued implementation of engagement activities under BDN AoW3. The study received ethics approval from the IFPRI Institutional Review Board (No. 00007490).

**Table 2: Study sample by partner type**

| Partner type | Survey                      | Key-informant interviews |
|--------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|
|              | N(%)                        | N(%)                     |
| Core         | 25 (42)                     | 10 (33)                  |
| Implementing | 18 (31)                     | 11 (37)                  |
| Strategic    | 16 (27) <sup>2</sup>        | 9 (30)                   |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>59 (100)<sup>1</sup></b> | <b>30 (100)</b>          |

<sup>1</sup> The co-design of demand-side interventions was planned in Sri Lanka but had not yet begun at the time of the FRESH Initiative (2022-2024).

<sup>2</sup> Three strategic stakeholders out of the 16 reported not knowing FRESH and did not complete the relevant modules; therefore, analyses of FRESH-related questions are based on a sample of 56 respondents.

## High-level findings

**Engagement increased over time, with implementing partners and strategic stakeholders becoming more actively involved.** All implementing partners (100%) reported their involvement in FRESH in 2023 and 2024, with a broader range of engagement activities mentioned in 2024. Strategic stakeholders' involvement also increased over time (from 62% reporting engagement in 2023 to 85% in 2024). Implementing partners reported involvement in co-developing research ideas and implementing activities and trainings, while strategic stakeholders highlighted participating in FRESH stakeholder meetings and presentations, bilateral discussions, and field visits.

**FRESH was perceived as aligned with country priorities, with opportunities to strengthen alignment further.** Over 90% of survey respondents and most interviewees found that FRESH was well-aligned with country policy and program priorities. Most core (92%) and implementing (83%) partners and over two-thirds of strategic stakeholders who responded to the survey felt that FRESH was informed by local priorities through in-country Initiative launch events, close working relationships between partners and local stakeholders, and the co-design of interventions.



*The beauty of FRESH is to lean on the stakeholders already involved in the activities [...] even if [this phase of] FRESH is finished, we do not feel that it has ended because [it] aligned well with the policies and activities in the country. And if you align yourself with ongoing activities, you make more impact than if you come suddenly with something new ... And even if it has ended well, the actions, the impacts are still ongoing. (Implementing partner, Benin).*

A small number of survey respondents (n=3/56), representing both implementing partners and strategic stakeholders, perceived that FRESH was not informed by local priorities, citing limited engagement at the beginning of the Initiative, targeting a select group of stakeholders, and insufficient sharing of research results. In KIIs, implementing partners and strategic stakeholders also recommended greater institutionalization of FRESH findings within country policies and programs to support sustainability.

**Collaboration was viewed positively, particularly between core and implementing partners. Many actors, however, also reported room for improvement.** Most core partners (88%) reported excellent or above average collaboration with implementing partners. Meanwhile, all implementing partners and 85% of strategic stakeholders reported excellent or above-average collaboration with FRESH, noting positive working relationships and close alignment of FRESH with existing institutional or project objectives. The small number of strategic stakeholders (4%) who reported below average or poor collaboration in the survey cited that this was due to poor communication.



*... the FRESH Initiative worked well in fostering collaboration among diverse stakeholders, promoting knowledge-sharing, and providing actionable insights on integrating fruits and vegetables into food systems. The interactive sessions and expert contributions were particularly valuable in addressing real-world challenges and identifying opportunities for improvement (Strategic stakeholder, Tanzania).*

Despite the positive views on collaboration, many implementing partners (61%), core partners (72%), and strategic stakeholders (77%) noted in the survey that there was room for improvement, including strengthening integration across E2E domains, longer implementation timelines, more frequent and sustained engagement to maintain momentum, and strengthened knowledge sharing and feedback mechanisms.

**Stakeholder engagement through FRESH contributed to strengthened networks, capacity, and learning.** Eighty-three percent of implementing partners reported that their involvement in FRESH led to other collaborations in research, intervention planning, policy discussions, capacity development, and manuscript writing. Around a third of strategic stakeholders reported similar benefits. All core and implementing partners and 92% of strategic stakeholders also reported learning new information through their engagement in FRESH, particularly technical content (e.g., sustainable agricultural practices), new technologies (e.g., soil moisture detection), data collection and analysis methods (e.g., photovoice, food consumption indices), as well as project management and stakeholder engagement approaches. In KIs, some partners and stakeholders (n=6) emphasized the multi-directionality of capacity sharing, as partners/stakeholders learned from one another. Some partners and stakeholders (n=7) recommended more intentional integration, clearer definition, and stronger monitoring of capacity-sharing activities.



*... there's all the kind of technical type capacity that we seek to strengthen [...] with research partners, with vegetable value chain actors. And then there's the idea of the end-to-end approach, strengthening capacity through people to be working in this sort of interdisciplinary multi sectoral coordinated way. I feel like that's key, to my understanding, the contribution that FRESH is seeking to make. So, we're not just building capacity in individual components of the food system, but we're building capacity in systems-based approaches to food related issues (Core partner).*

**Engagement led to jointly produced outputs,** such as research publications and training materials, for 92% of core and 75% of implementing partners who responded to the survey. Reflecting their more direct roles in research and implementation, joint production was more common among these partners than among strategic stakeholders. Only three strategic stakeholders (23%) interviewed reported being involved in joint production of outputs.

**Stakeholders identified several facilitating factors that supported effective engagement, while also highlighting challenges that limited it.** Implementing partners and strategic stakeholders emphasized FRESH's participatory approach, systems approach, multisectoral collaboration, integration of research and policy, and opportunities for networking and knowledge sharing as key facilitators. Core partners also emphasized the value of regular coordination meetings such as country monthly meetings, biannual meetings, and country-specific science meetings for sharing ideas and findings, as well as the commitment and positive relationships with in-country partners. On barriers or what did *not* go well, implementing partners and strategic stakeholders highlighted delays in funding transfers that impacted implementation and tight activity timelines. Core partners similarly highlighted funding transfer delays and, particularly, coordination of activities across the different E2E domains, which limited the full integration of the E2E approach as was intended by design. Some strategic stakeholders also recommended engaging a broader range of stakeholders from the outset and maintaining more consistent communication and follow-up throughout implementation.

## **Applying the lessons: Adaptive actions for BDN AoW3**

The perspectives shared by core partners, implementing partners, and strategic stakeholders provide an opportunity for reflection and strengthening of the stakeholder engagement approach. Although the assessment was conducted after the first two years of FRESH, when partnerships, research activities, and engagement processes were still being established across the four contexts, the findings highlight important lessons that remain relevant for the continuation of the work under BDN AoW3. The context of funding and governance changes in the CGIAR must be noted, as this affected funding flows and, therefore, collaboration and implementation with implementing partners in-country, a key challenge for these partners as shown by the results.

A key strength of the assessment is that it was conducted during an ongoing research program, allowing findings to inform and strengthen stakeholder engagement as activities evolve. By combining an online survey with key informant interviews and engaging actors across the different stakeholder groups represented in the program, we were able to capture diverse perspectives on stakeholder experiences. The online survey, however, had a low response rate. The survey was available only in English, which may have posed a barrier for respondents for whom English was not their first language. Lastly, while the findings reflect the context of a single research program, they offer insights that may be relevant to other research programs that integrate stakeholder engagement throughout the research process.

Based on these findings from the FRESH experience, BDN AoW3 has identified the following priority adaptive actions to strengthen stakeholder engagement, support the co-production and exchange of knowledge, and ensure that research and interventions remain responsive to country priorities. While some challenges, such as funding cycles and disbursement processes, remain beyond the program's control, these actions focus on areas where BDN AoW3 can strengthen collaboration, communication, and engagement.

1. **Strengthen the integration of E2E domains (demand, food environment, supply, and enabling environment):** While integration is a core feature of the E2E approach, findings highlight the need for stronger operationalization in practice. AoW3 will promote closer coordination and co-location of activities as interventions roll out in the focus countries. Integrated country plans and meetings, rather than domain-specific plans, will be used to address the co-location and integration of activities, target populations, and opportunities for collaboration across domains, where appropriate.
2. **Broaden types of actors engaged and strengthen collective engagement:** As AoW3 advances in the co-creation and implementation of demand and food environment interventions, and continues implementation of supply-side activities, the team will adopt a more intentional and systematic approach to engage a broader range of stakeholders, including consumers and communities, farmers, vendors, media, private sector (e.g., input suppliers), and other actors identified as essential to the E2E approach. It will also aim to create more opportunities for collective engagement across these different stakeholder groups (e.g., science meetings, collaboration through multistakeholder platforms). For science meetings, country-level science meetings are a lower-cost, more replicable format, while a cross-country science conference requires more planning and funding and is likely to be feasible less often. The team will also seek to more actively include community representatives (e.g., farmers, vendors, women), including by using context-appropriate engagement approaches such as meetings in local languages or seeking community feedback in advance and integrating these perspectives into convenings, where feasible.
3. **Develop and share a stakeholder engagement strategy and annual plans to support communication and coordination:** BDN AoW3 will develop detailed stakeholder engagement strategies and annual country engagement plans that identify priority stakeholder groups, the objectives of engagement, and appropriate engagement approaches based on stakeholder roles and intended outcomes. These plans will guide coordinated engagement and communication activities, support regular sharing of progress and research findings with stakeholders (as funding allows), and strengthen alignment across core and implementing partners. Sharing these plans across the AoW3 team (core and implementing partners) will also help to strengthen coordination and alignment across domains and country teams.
4. **Strengthen mechanisms for capturing, sharing, and using stakeholder feedback:** AoW3 will try to establish more systematic processes for documenting and sharing stakeholder perspectives across the program. This will help ensure that the insights from different stakeholders are communicated to research teams, even when individual researchers are unable to participate directly in engagement activities outside of their bilateral engagement activities. Practical mechanisms may include developing and sharing concise memos of stakeholder feedback following key engagement activities to the AoW3 team, including during biannual meetings.

Strengthening these feedback loops will help ensure that stakeholder perspectives are considered throughout the research process and across E2E domains.

5. **Clarify and consistently communicate the capacity sharing approach.** Develop and regularly share a simple framework that defines the capacity sharing approach of AoW3, how the activities are monitored, and share results on this with the different partners. This approach would help ensure that there is a shared understanding of capacity sharing across partners and stakeholders and improve the visibility of the activities and results.

## Conclusion

We found that integrating stakeholder engagement into research can strengthen alignment with country priorities, improve collaboration, and support shared learning through the co-production of evidence and interventions. At the same time, complex funding and administrative processes, tight timelines, and the challenge of coordinating across multiple partners and institutions can create many challenges. The findings also highlight that operationalizing the E2E approach requires strong coordination across diverse domains and sustained efforts over time. In addition to program monitoring and evaluation, including implementation research, specifically assessing stakeholder engagement throughout a research program, and from the perspective of stakeholders themselves, is important for identifying what is working, where adjustments are needed, and how engagement strategies can be strengthened and shared to inform future implementation. Meaningful stakeholder engagement in food systems research requires time, sustained commitment, and ongoing reflection to strengthen shared understanding of roles, improve coordination across partners, and adapt engagement approaches as implementation evolves and new lessons emerge.

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