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Discussion Paper BRIEFS

Food Consumption and Nutrition Division of the International Food Policy Research Institute

Cultivating Nutrition: A Survey of Viewpoints on Integrating Agriculture and Nutrition

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Agriculture-based strategies have been proposed or used to address malnutrition problems for over two decades. However, in the last 10 years, donors have increasingly favored approaches such as micronutrient supplementation and food fortification to address malnutrition, despite the potential for agriculture-based approaches to provide more sustainable nutrition outcomes and other development benefits.

This study explores the perceptions and beliefs of a diverse group of stakeholders on addressing malnutrition in low-income countries. Specifically, the aim is to identify their views regarding the value of—and constraints related to—gender-sensitive, nutrition-oriented agriculture strategies. It examines stakeholders' viewpoints on a broad range of approaches to address malnutrition, including food-based approaches. This study aims to elucidate the viewpoints of stakeholders and to facilitate dialogue on whether and how to effect cross-sectoral and institutional collaboration to improve nutrition.

Background

Chronic energy, protein, and micronutrient deficiencies continue to affect children in the developing world, particularly in Africa. Undernutrition results from direct causes (inadequate care, insufficient food consumption, and poor health) and indirect causes (household food insecurity, unemployment, and low status of women). It seems only logical that addressing such diverse causes demands cross-sectoral and institutional collaboration.

Programs and policies to reduce malnutrition have employed various strategies, such as improved caregiving, health interventions, and increased access to food. However, efforts to address issues of food access, care, and health simultaneously are rare. Research indicates that food-based interventions at the community level can yield timely nutrition benefits if they begin by addressing gender issues and making investments in women. However, despite this demonstrated potential, such interventions have been isolated and small-scale.

It is unclear why the donor community appears to prefer food fortification or nutrient supplementation to address malnutrition approaches. Agricultural strategies for addressing malnutrition are potentially more sustainable, and integrated strategies that combine care, health, and agriculture can confer a range of other benefits in addition to improved nutritional outcomes. Thus, more information is needed to understand the reasons for the shift away from agricultural strategies.

Methodology

An analytical approach known as the Q methodology is used to identify viewpoints and explore the nuances among them by asking participants to sort a set of statements that represents the range of views on multisectoral, gender-sensitive, nutrition-oriented agriculture strategies to improve nutrition. Respondents were asked to indicate their degree of agreement or disagreement with each of the 48 statements in the “Q sample.” The sorted statements were then analyzed to identify distinct viewpoints, or factors, that sorted the statements in a similar way.

For this study, participants were selected to represent diverse perspectives by disciplinary specialization, institutional affiliation, type of work performed, and geographical location. Researchers, program practitioners, policymakers, and advocates in the areas of nutrition, health, gender, economics, and agriculture were selected. These individuals were based in national governmental agencies, multilateral agencies, international finance organizations, private institutions, private voluntary organizations, and nongovernmental organizations.

Results

Based on the Q sort, three main viewpoints, or factors, emerged. The “multi-benefit” viewpoint (Factor 1) holds that development and its related economic benefits emerge from the improved nutritional status of populations that strong linkages between agriculture and nutrition can produce. Food-based strategies can yield multiple benefits and are therefore integral to development activities. When developing food-based approaches to improve nutrition, gender is a critical element to be considered, and the linkages

themselves can improve women's access to resources. While this viewpoint agrees that some contexts require using traditional public health strategies for certain segments of the population, this concern is largely overshadowed by the commitment

to multi-outcome programs. Finally, this viewpoint believes that these linkages have not been implemented more widely because of a lack of political and administrative will to fund such programs.

The “context-specific” viewpoint (Factor 2) holds that poor nutritional status of populations should be addressed by choosing from among a range of approaches. Specifically, it is not convinced that food-based approaches should be the primary focus for addressing malnutrition, although it

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recognizes that it has a role to play. This viewpoint perceives limits to the utility of agricultural approaches for improving nutrition. Yet the agricultural approach is appreciated for the range of benefits it confers and acknowledges that poor nutrition affects communities from the household to the national levels. While this viewpoint advocates increased funding to develop synergies between nutrition and agriculture, it also acknowledges that this will not happen without increased lobbying and awareness-raising. This viewpoint is particularly sensitive to gender issues, and expresses the critical role gender awareness has in terms of reducing malnutrition.

Finally, the “sustainability-oriented” viewpoint (Factor 3) holds that agriculture is preferable to other possible approaches because it generates additional benefits to the communities employing these strategies. It also considers agricultural interventions to be workable solutions to addressing poor nutrition. However, the sustainability of agricultural interventions is contingent on concurrent nutrition education. While one statement did acknowledge the potential of employing nonfood-based approaches when necessary, the bulk of statements that define this factor actively promote agricultural approaches in coordination with nutrition education strategies. This factor is also concerned that cross-disciplinary ignorance exists among people because of current structures in academic training; therefore, curricula need to be developed to educate people across disciplines. Although gender is less of a focus in this viewpoint as compared with the others, there is a degree of sensitivity to its importance in the process of improving nutrition.

Discussion

Among the three emergent viewpoints, there was general agreement on the value of linking agriculture, nutrition, and gender, and on the other beneficial outcomes that result from these linkages. This agreement indicates that designing and developing policies and programs that support gender-sensitive agricultural approaches to improve nutritional well-being may be possible. The reasons for a lack of linked

agriculture and nutrition programming and supportive policies for addressing malnutrition may result more from different priorities across the three viewpoints than from a general lack of interest in agriculture. Each viewpoint emphasizes different policy and program objectives and methods to achieve them.

Notwithstanding the survey respondents’ apparent loyalty toward agriculture-based approaches, a gap remains between evidence that demonstrates their effectiveness and efficiency, and support for them. One explanation for the lack of sustained commitment to agricultural strategies to address malnutrition may lie in the sorting of the “donor support”-related statements in the three factors. This indicates that donor preference may be largely responsible for the lack of substantial adoption of programs engaging these linkages. In addition to the differences in priorities expressed in the three factors, the sustainability-oriented viewpoint indicated that the absence of linkages might stem from a lack of cross-disciplinary education and training.

African respondents loaded most significantly on the multi-benefit viewpoint (Factor 1), which may demonstrate that they see nutrition within the broader context of development. Therefore, developing agriculture-based strategies to improve nutrition appears to be consistent with the goals and interests of African professionals because of the additional benefits that come from agricultural interventions. For African professionals, a regionally focused team of development workers could be assembled to develop an advocacy strategy to increase investments in and use of linked strategies.

The evidence from this survey has demonstrated that among a range of stakeholders, there is potential to develop interventions that cut across disciplinary boundaries to improve nutrition. Further advocacy and promotion of these strategies should be pursued both to improve nutrition and to enable communities to benefit from the array of positive outcomes that are associated with agricultural strategies.

Keywords: nutrition, agriculture, gender, Q methodology

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