Key Recommendations for Improving Nutrition through Agriculture: establishing a global consensus

Anna Herforth$^1$ and Charlotte Dufour$^1$

$^1$ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Rome, Italy

§ Corresponding author. Email: anna@annaherforth.net

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Introduction

Currently, both agriculture and nutrition have the world’s attention. Since the 2008 food price crisis, investments have been rising in agriculture, increasingly focused on smallholder and women farmers. At the same time, as the prevalence and consequences of malnutrition on human capital have become clearer and more widely recognized, 50 countries have committed to improving nutrition as members of the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement, launched in 2010. Because malnutrition has multiple determinants, the SUN Movement calls for two kinds of actions to improve nutrition: those direct or nutrition-specific interventions that affect the immediate determinants of nutrition (food/nutrient intake and disease); and nutrition-sensitive interventions that affect the underlying determinants of adequate nutrition, to which a major contributor is agriculture (SUN 2010).

Given this background, national governments and operational staff in donor and nongovernmental agencies have increased their requests for assistance and guidance from the international development partners on how to improve nutrition impact through agriculture. For example, through the inclusion of nutrition as Pillar 3 in the Comprehensive Africa Agricultural Development Programme (CAADP), African nations focus attention on this area. At the Nutrition for Growth Summit in June 2013, 48 countries committed US$ 19 billion to nutrition-sensitive actions, primarily through agriculture (DFID 2013). But in contrast to the direct interventions, which have been reviewed in detail in the Lancet series on Maternal and Child Nutrition in 2008 and 2013, little clear guidance has been accessible on what to do to improve nutrition through agriculture.

In recent years, however, a consensus has taken shape, captured by the Key Recommendations for Improving Nutrition through Agriculture described here. These recommendations are already being employed in a number of efforts around the world, thereby bringing to bear the best of collective organizational knowledge and experience. They represent a well-vetted current consensus among development partners about what can be done in agriculture to have the highest likelihood of improving nutrition. For reasons discussed below, these recommendations are principles applicable across contexts, rather than specific interventions.

In order to provide some context to the recommendations, this paper describes the process that led to their development, notes how they are currently being used, and discusses opportunities for their further use and development. In collaboration with many others, the authors of this paper led the process of developing the recommendations.$^1$

Developing the Recommendations

Part 1: Discovering an implicit consensus

In the last several years, many development institutions sought to answer the question of what can be done in agriculture to improve nutrition, to guide their own investments or provide technical assistance. Many papers and strategies have recently appeared on the topic, in addition to a spate of meetings, symposia and other events. In 2010, an Agriculture–Nutrition Community of Practice (Ag2Nut CoP) was formed, as an informal, unaffiliated, volunteer forum to meet and discuss how we, and our respective institutions, were approaching agriculture–nutrition linkages. At first consisting of only a few development professionals meeting face-to-face in the Washington DC area, the group has grown organically and ex-
ponentially, mainly through word of mouth, to over 900 members from 67 countries by 2014, and holds regular discussions through electronic fora. Based on this group’s initial conversations, many different people and institutions appeared to approach agriculture–nutrition linkages in a similar way. Thus there was an opportunity to make transparent the ideas already being promoted by development partners around nutrition and agriculture and to examine critically whether there was or was not a common vision.

In response, FAO agreed to sponsor a report to identify and analyse current agriculture–nutrition guidance and strategies of international development institutions. Ag2Nut CoP members, many of whom had personally contributed to such documents in their own work, were a primary source of information. Through this effort, 53 publications were identified that had been published by over 30 development institutions on the theme of linking agriculture and nutrition, almost all within the last five years. These included several kinds of reports: guidance documents containing widely applicable principles or lessons learnt; UN interagency guidance that reflects consensus across many multilateral organizations; statements and strategies of institutions’ own approach to the issue; manuals for field staff to operationalize the linkages; and explorations of the evidence base. All the documents explicitly sought to be based in evidence and field experience. The resulting report, the Synthesis of Guiding Principles on Agriculture Programming for Nutrition, was published by FAO in 2013.

The main conclusion was that a strikingly strong consensus exists among development institutions on a discrete set of principles for how nutrition can be improved through agriculture. The review identified 20 themes that came up in the guidance documents of almost every institution (FAO 2013a, 2013b). Of the 20 themes identified: ten were discussed by 90–100% of institutions; eight were discussed by 75–80% of institutions; the remaining two were discussed by 60% of institutions. These common themes emerged as guiding principles for agriculture’s key roles in improving nutrition.

An extensive consultative process ensured that the report’s conclusions were based on an accurate representation of what contributing organizations had published. Inputs and feedback to the final report came from over 70 individuals from over 30 organizations, including authors of the original guidance notes reviewed, members of the Ag2Nut CoP, FAO internal review, and others.

Part 2: Consultative process toward an explicit consensus

The FAO Synthesis Report (FAO 2013a) established that there was indeed a common vision among development institutions for how agriculture could improve nutrition. However, there were also gaps identified, partly based on the fact that the 20 principles in the report reflected only those institutions that had published guidance. In order to address the gaps in existing guidance, and increase ownership among a broader range of stakeholders, the authors undertook a series of consultative activities toward a concise, co-owned statement. The series of consultative activities included:

- Three conference calls in the Ag2Nut CoP. Members contributed comments (verbal and written) to a one-page draft consensus statement based on the FAO Synthesis Report, which was revised iteratively based on each of the calls and comments submitted via email.
- An online open discussion titled Making agriculture work for nutrition: Prioritizing country-level action, research and support, on the Food Security and Nutrition Forum in November 2012. Further emphasis was placed on environmental sustainability and

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1 The authors were involved in this process in terms of participating from the beginning in the Agriculture–Nutrition Community of Practice discussions, guiding the work done under the sponsorship of FAO, and continuing the activities needed to produce the Key Recommendations. Anna Herforth was the lead consultant in compiling the inputs and producing the FAO Synthesis Report as well as the recommendations. Charlotte Dufour was the project manager for the work done, providing strategic direction and shepherding the process.

2 As of February 2013, these institutions included: A2Z (USAID-funded project now closed), ACDI/VOCA, ACF, AED (now closed), AGRA, AVRDC (The World Vegetable Center), Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Bioversity International, CGIAR, Concern Worldwide, EC, DFID, FANTA (USAID-funded project), FAO, Fintrac, GAIN, HKI, ICRW, IDS, IFAD, IFPRI, IYCN (USAID-funded project now closed), The McKnight Foundation Crop Collaborative Research Program, Save the Children UK, USAID, The World Bank, WFP, WorldFish Center, World Vision International, UN HLT, and UN-SCN. Since the publication of the Synthesis report in February 2013, other institutions may have joined this list.

3 The FAO Synthesis Report focused on in-depth analysis of the guidance documents and UN interagency guidance. These guidance reports were published by ACF, Bioversity International, European Community, FAO, FANTA Project (USAID-funded), IYCN (USAID-funded), IFPRI, Save the Children, World Bank, World Vision International, UN HLT, and UN-SCN.
solutions appropriate for local contexts, including underutilized crops.

- Presentation and discussion of the principles at four Global Learning and Evidence Exchange workshops (AgN-GLEEs) organized by USAID’s Strengthening Partnerships, Results, and Innovations in Nutrition Globally project (USAID-SPRING) from November 2012 to June 2013. These workshops focused on strengthening USAID’s Feed the Future investments to improve nutrition in 19 countries. Interactive discussions with USAID country mission staff underscored the issues most applicable for staff faced with designing and implementing nutrition-sensitive projects.

- Presentation of the principles for discussion at USAID’s Board for International Food & Agricultural Development meeting in 2012, and the 2012 meeting of the Association for International Agriculture and Rural Development.

- Presentation of the principles for discussion at the Meeting of the Minds on Food Systems and Nutrition, held by the UNSCN in March 2013. Participants emphasized that it would be useful to have a brief policy/advocacy statement, in addition to the programming principles.

The result of all these discussions was a co-owned statement reflective of the stakeholder input received, including ten key recommendations for agriculture programming, and five for policy. The focus on programming as well as policy represents the current consensus that agriculture can improve nutrition through two levels: (1) Improving conditions for nutritionally vulnerable producer households directly, and (2) Improving the food system so that nutritious diets are easier to obtain for all consumers.

One of the limitations of the Key Recommendations is that because there was a desire to make them concise, there is little detail supporting each recommendation. Many institutions, however, have elaborated their experiences and recommendations for implementation. The original FAO synthesis paper is a helpful reference document to support the Key Recommendations, because it synthesizes what has been written about each theme. It also provides an annex of references and tools related to each theme.

At present it is not possible to estimate the impact of following each recommendation independently or in combination. Impact will depend on the policies or interventions used to implement the principles, how well-fitted they are to the context, and how well they are carried out. This is related to the fact that the recommendations are not specific interventions, but rather commonly agreed principles.

**Why principles, and not interventions?**

The Key Recommendations demystify what can be done in agriculture to improve nutrition. Achieving consensus on issues that touch livelihoods, equity, and common goods (as agriculture does) commonly requires significant discussion or even negotiation. It is a rare situation where there is such broad agreement on a complex issue, informed by values as well as science, among many stakeholders. This presents countries and their development partners with immediate opportunities to start acting on the consensus.

Still, these recommendations are not nearly as specific as the direct nutrition interventions recommended in the Lancet series on Maternal and Child Nutrition (Bhutta et al. 2013) and the SUN Framework. “Empower women” is a principle, while “vitamin A supplementation for children age 6–59 months” is an intervention. The latter is certainly easier to plan and budget for. Some partners have wondered, what then are the most effective intervention(s) in agriculture to improve nutrition, and can they be scaled up?

The consensus developed around principles, rather than specific interventions, primarily because principles represent the only generalizable evidence relevant to all the various environments where agriculture policies or programmes could be implemented. The appropriateness and effectiveness of interventions will vary by context, while the principles are seen as valid across all contexts.

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4 These gaps are enumerated in the Synthesis Report (FAO 2013a). They included the need for increased collaboration with agriculture professionals, and greater attention to (i) food policy, (ii) improving market access for smallholders, (iii) reducing post-harvest loss, (iv) environmental sustainability, (v) effective delivery of nutrition education. Operationally, gaps in practice-based evidence (i.e. delivery science), costing, capacity, and incentives were identified.

5 In Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Washington DC.
Key Recommendations for Improving Nutrition through Agriculture

Food systems provide for all people’s nutritional needs, while at the same time contributing to economic growth. The food and agriculture sector has the primary role in feeding people well by increasing availability, affordability, and consumption of diverse, safe, nutritious foods and diets, aligned with dietary recommendations and environmental sustainability. Applying these principles helps strengthen resilience and contributes to sustainable development.

Agricultural programmes and investments can strengthen impact on nutrition if they:

1. **Incorporate explicit nutrition objectives and indicators into their design**, and track and mitigate potential harms, while seeking synergies with economic, social and environmental objectives.

2. **Assess the context at the local level, to design appropriate activities to address the types and causes of malnutrition**, including chronic or acute undernutrition, vitamin and mineral deficiencies, and obesity and chronic disease. Context assessment can include potential food resources, agro-ecology, seasonality of production and income, access to productive resources such as land, market opportunities and infrastructure, gender dynamics and roles, opportunities for collaboration with other sectors or programmes, and local priorities.

3. **Target the vulnerable and improve equity** through participation, access to resources, and decent employment. Vulnerable groups include smallholders, women, youth, the landless, urban dwellers, the unemployed.

4. **Collaborate and coordinate with other sectors** (health, environment, social protection, labor, water and sanitation, education, energy) and programmes, through joint strategies with common goals, to address concurrently the multiple underlying causes of malnutrition.

5. **Maintain or improve the natural resource base** (water, soil, air, climate, biodiversity), critical to the livelihoods and resilience of vulnerable farmers and to sustainable food and nutrition security for all. Manage water resources in particular to reduce vector-borne illness and to ensure sustainable, safe household water sources.

6. **Empower women** by ensuring access to productive resources, income opportunities, extension services and information, credit, labor and time-saving technologies (including energy and water services), and supporting their voice in household and farming decisions. Equitable opportunities to earn and learn should be compatible with safe pregnancy and young child feeding.

7. **Facilitate production diversification, and increase production of nutrient-dense crops and small-scale livestock** (for example, horticultural products, legumes, livestock and fish at a small scale, underutilized crops, and biofortified crops). Diversified production systems are important to vulnerable producers to enable resilience to climate and price shocks, more diverse food consumption, reduction of seasonal food and income fluctuations, and greater and more gender-equitable income generation.

8. **Improve processing, storage and preservation** to retain nutritional value, shelf life, and food safety, to reduce seasonality of food insecurity and post-harvest losses, and to make healthy foods convenient to prepare.

9. **Expand markets and market access for vulnerable groups, particularly for marketing nutritious foods** or products vulnerable groups have a comparative advantage in producing. This can include innovative promotion (such as marketing based on nutrient content), value addition, access to price information, and farmer associations.

10. **Incorporate nutrition promotion and education** around food and sustainable food systems that builds on existing local knowledge, attitudes and practices. Nutrition knowledge can enhance the impact of production and income in rural households, especially important for women and young children, and can increase demand for nutritious foods in the general population.

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One of the Key Recommendations, indeed, is to assess the context and ensure participation, a critical step to design feasible actions to enhance nutrition.

Principles also have the potential to be far wider-reaching than interventions. Specific interventions might appear as only a small portion of agricultural actions and budgets, while principles can be integrated across the agriculture and food sector. Virtually all agriculture policies and programmes will have some effect on food environments, women’s empowerment, or health and sanitation environments, whether or not the effects are intentional. The principles can help ensure that these impacts are more likely to be positive for nutrition.

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How the Key Recommendations are being used

The Key Recommendations usefully articulate what nutrition-sensitive agriculture is. The recommendations have already been employed to build awareness and as a framework or checklist for policy and programme design and analysis. For example:

a) Awareness-building and training:

- The Key Recommendations have been used to advise ministries of agriculture in selected countries in their nutrition-related planning, in particular through the NEPAD-led CAADP Nutrition Capacity Development Initiative (see Dufour et al., this issue).
- They are being used to help inform staff in USAID’s Feed the Future programme, following the AgN-GLEE workshops in 2012–2013, in a series of briefs (Herforth and Harris 2014) and seminars, and through technical support provided by SPRING.
- Civil society organizations (CSOs), such as World Vision International and ACF International, have used them for informing and training staff.

b) A framework or checklist for policy and programme analysis:

- The UNSCN supported analyses in eight countries to describe the nutrition sensitivity of relevant national food and agriculture policies and used the Key Recommendations as a guide or checklist.
- ACF International applied the five policy principles in country case studies on agriculture policy.
- USAID’s SPRING project used them in a landscape analysis of Feed the Future projects in all 19 countries where the programme is operating, to understand the potential for current projects to improve nutrition.
- The Secure Nutrition platform, housed by the World Bank, has used them to categorize projects from around the globe that have bridged agriculture and nutrition.
Opportunities for future use and improvement

These Key Recommendations reflect the desire for a systemic shift in agriculture and food systems to support human well-being and environmental sustainability more fully. Implementation, however, will not be accomplished in a matter of a year or two. Major barriers to implementing the recommendations are gaps in information, capacity and incentives. Information on diverse food affordability and consumption patterns is lacking in many countries, making it difficult to plan agriculture strategies and investments in line with consumer needs. Furthermore, even where there is interest in creating more nutrition-sensitive agriculture policies and programmes, there is a lack of awareness of agriculture–nutrition linkages, and a paucity of professionals who combine expertise in nutrition and agriculture to provide technical support. Most importantly, incentives within the agriculture and food sectors are primarily for the maximization of income. Sustainability and scale will come when incentives for producers and agri–food firms to supply diverse, nutritious foods are aligned with consumer needs.

The Key Recommendations will continue to be made available to country governments and development institutions through various networks, and are freely available as a public good.

FAO plans, as part of its strategic planning, to develop and disseminate guidelines and good practices for improving nutrition through agriculture based on the Key Recommendations, and to promote their use at global, regional and national levels. The Recommendations are being used in the CAADP Nutrition Capacity Development process follow-up, which will facilitate their use in country investment planning. There are other opportunities for dissemination, such as through the SUN Movement, agricultural technical agencies and the Second International Conference on Nutrition (ICN2). They could form the basis of a core training for agriculture–nutrition consultants, to support policy and programme development, monitoring and evaluation.

There is space for strengthening operational guidance on the basis of the Key Recommendations. Sponsored by FAO, the authors are developing a guidance checklist tool based on the Key Recommendations, which could be used to guide the design of agriculture programmes and investment portfolios and to assess their nutrition sensitivity.

There are also opportunities to draw attention to the policy recommendations. For example, a critical data need is to monitor dietary consumption and access to safe, diverse and nutritious foods. Such data are not currently collected in any coordinated way to inform policy, yet they are essential to assessing the effects of food system changes on nutrition. This major food data gap merits advocacy, particularly with regard to the Post-2015 Development Agenda.

By establishing a consensus around a common vision, the Key Recommendations on Improving Nutrition through Agriculture are a significant step toward changing food systems for better nutrition. They can be used to support changes in incentives, information, and capacity for improving food and nutrition security for all—and alignment in how stakeholders can support that vision.

References


