Dear colleagues and friends,

We are pleased to publish our 10th and final newsletter informing you about progress in the research and advocacy project “Improving the dietary intakes and nutritional status of infants and young children through improved food security and complementary feeding counseling” (IMCF). Research was carried out in the context of the FAO IFSN\(^1\) and MALIS\(^2\) food security and nutrition projects in Cambodia and Malawi from 2011 to 2015. Our objective has been to strengthen the evidence base of how agriculture – when combined with nutrition education – can improve young children’s diets and to disseminate this knowledge to inform future programme design and implementation.

This newsletter presents highlights, lessons and insights from five years of programming and research on integrating agriculture and nutrition education for improving children’s nutrition with a specific focus on the complementary feeding period from 6 to 23 months of age. This is the most crucial time to meet children’s nutritional requirements for growth, development and future health. Recent reviews of complementary feeding interventions highlight the essential role of nutrition education or behaviour change communication as an intervention strategy for improving the nutritional status of children in developing countries\(^3, 4\). However, in many communities where food security is a constraint, nutrition knowledge and skills need to be combined with improved production and access to a wider variety of foods that provide the nutrients needed for good nutrition and health. This is especially important to prevent malnutrition in populations that are most at risk, such as young children under two years and women of reproductive age.

This newsletter also concludes five years of successful collaboration with our research partners: the Institute of Nutritional Sciences, Justus Liebig University (JLU), Giessen, Germany; Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources (LUANAR), Malawi and Mahidol University, Thailand. FAO would like to thank our government partners, including the ministries of agriculture, health, women and social affairs and the non-governmental organizations that collaborated with us in Cambodia and Malawi for achieving the outcomes that are described in this newsletter. We wish to express our appreciation to the FAO staff and consultants who supported the IMCF and the IFSN and MALIS projects in Malawi and Cambodia. We are grateful to the members

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2. MALIS: Improving Food Security and Market Linkages for Smallholders in Preah Vihear and Ogdar Meanchey.
of the technical advisory committee for their guidance and technical expertise. We highly appreciate the generous financial support of the German Ministry of Food and Agriculture (BMEL) without which the IMCF project would not have been possible. Last but not least, we wish to express our appreciation to the Government of Flanders and the European Union for funding the IFSN and MALIS projects, respectively.

Over the past several years a very active nutrition landscape has evolved and there is rapidly growing interest in making agriculture work better for nutrition. The central role of agriculture and food systems is increasingly recognised in improving diets and contributing to greater reductions in malnutrition and poverty. We look forward to an intensification of efforts that will ultimately put healthier, more diverse foods, representing all the food groups, on people’s plates, leading to healthier families and more vibrant and productive communities and nations. We hope that future programmes can build on the lessons and insights generated through the IMCF project to help build the capacity of governments and local development partners to design and implement high quality preventive food and nutrition interventions that have a lasting impact on families’ diets, especially for young children.

We wish you all the best in your future endeavours and look forward to receiving your comments and feedback.

Ellen Muehlhoff
Senior Officer/Team Leader
Nutrition Education and Consumer Awareness Group
Nutrition and Food Systems Division

FAO has distilled a set of Programme Lessons from the experience of the IMCF and partner programmes. These are available on our website.

The research findings will be published in international peer reviewed journals in 2016. For more information, please check our website or contact us via email:

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Participatory nutrition education is a catalyst for dietary diversity

The IMCF research has produced compelling evidence showing that agriculture coupled with participatory nutrition education on infant and young child feeding (IYCF) significantly improved children’s diets and can have a positive impact on child growth. The research reveals that where nutrition education was applied, dietary diversification and consumption of animal source foods, legumes and vegetables increased significantly.

In Malawi, nutrition has been integrated into agricultural production and extension services for a long time but integrated programmes continue to be underfunded and small-scale. We hope that our evidence will contribute towards stronger government actions to shape agriculture and food systems in ways that improve the production and consumption of nutritious diets by poor rural smallholders in particular.

Ms Mzondwase Mgomezulu⁶, Deputy Director, Department of Agricultural Extension, Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Water Development (MoAIWD) remarked that FAO and MoAIWD have worked together to successfully advocate for more emphasis on agriculture, which can prevent malnutrition and reduce the need for medical treatment. “The research findings have come at the right time when the Department is reviewing its policy and strategic plan and results would therefore help come up with interventions that have been tried and shown to be effective,” mentioned Mr Victor Sandikonda, Deputy Secretary, Department of Nutrition, HIV and AIDS. “We are ready to listen and discuss openly to improve the impact of our nutrition programmes in Malawi and bring them to scale.”

While Cambodia has a strong policy environment for investment in nutrition, programmes that link agriculture and nutrition are relatively new. Despite progress, lack of personnel and capacities in nutrition hamper the implementation and scaling up of integrated strategies.

His Excellency, Dr Ty Sokhun⁷, Secretary of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) highlighted the Government’s commitment “to increasing diversification and modernisation of agriculture in order to address the issue of malnutrition. We want to make sure Cambodian people have increased food security and enough food for good nutrition and health.”

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⁶ Ms Mzondwase Mgomezulu and Mr Victor Sandikonda spoke at the joint FAO/JLU dissemination meeting in February 2015 in Lilongwe/Malawi.

⁷ Dr Ty Sokhun spoke at the join FAO/JLU dissemination meeting in March 2015 in Phnom Penh/Cambodia.
Key messages from the IMCF research

- Complementary feeding nutrition education is effective in improving the quality of children’s diets and IYCF practices, provided that it is participatory and builds on community support.
- The greatest improvements in children’s dietary diversity and nutritional status were achieved through a combination of both food security and IYCF nutrition education.
- Sustained improvement in children’s height-for-age Z score are harder to achieve given the multiple factors that need to be addressed over time.
- The timely provision and targeting of agricultural support and access to markets is crucial towards ensuring that families can gain access to nutritious, safe and affordable foods.
- A good understanding of the socio-economic context and the cultural factors is needed, including the gender division of labour and men’s and women’s time constraints, to enhance the adoption of healthy dietary practices.

The IMCF research project studied the process and outcomes of providing training and agricultural support in conjunction with practical nutrition education for mothers, grandmothers and other caregivers. The research focused on behaviour change communication and food demonstrations to improve IYCF practices during one of the most critical life stages, the first 1,000 days of a child’s life.

Complementary feeding has many important elements that must be conveyed to families through well-designed hands-on nutrition education, including food variety, giving thick enriched porridge, feeding age-appropriate quantities, food safety and hygiene, and feeding sick children. FAO has developed a set of training and educational materials for community nutrition promoters and farmer field schools that are readily available for others who wish to build on this approach.
Preliminary results of the IMCF research project

The final results will be published in peer reviewed journals during the course of 2016. Preliminary results are shown below.

Malawi

In Malawi, the proportion of the study population benefitting from combined food security and IYCF nutrition education interventions was 17 percent at mid-term and 7 percent at impact.

During the study period, breastfeeding remained at approximately 100 percent and Minimum Meal Frequency (MMF) remained stable. Minimum Acceptable Diet (MAD) and Minimum Dietary Diversity (MDD) improved in the intervention area only. There were no differences in mean Height-for-age Z-score (HAZ) between intervention and control at baseline while, at mid-term, mean HAZ in the intervention group improved significantly due to the combination of agriculture and IYCF nutrition education interventions; these changes were not significant at endline. However, these are important results, considering that they represent cross-sectional data at community level. Being a beneficiary of an IFSN agriculture intervention (i.e. participation in FFS) showed an indirect effect on Child Dietary Diversity Score (CDDS) while participation in a IYCF nutrition education intervention had direct effects on CDDS. The study concluded that the combination of food security and IYCF nutrition education improves children’s nutritional status and dietary diversity at the community level.

Qualitative research showed that adoption of improved IYCF in Malawi was facilitated through: (1) increased knowledge; (2) children enjoying the taste of enriched porridges; (3) seeing an improvement in child health; and (4) having supportive grandmothers, fathers and other non-family members. Barriers included unsupportive communities and food shortages. Analysis of the longitudinal study showed that children of caregivers who participated in all IYCF nutrition education sessions (i.e. nine sessions plus the graduation ceremony) had better growth than those who attended fewer sessions.

Cambodia

In Cambodia, the proportion of the study population benefitting from combined food security and IYCF nutrition education interventions was 27 percent at impact.

There was evidence of behavioural change and improved health in the intervention areas. We also found increased capacity among the trainers and volunteers working at the village level as well as increased knowledge and skills among mothers and caregivers, resulting in statistically significant improved MDD in children in the intervention villages (agriculture and IYCF nutrition education) and not in the control villages (agriculture only). No statistically significant impact on children’s mean HAZ was identified in the intervention villages.

Qualitative research showed that knowledge and behaviour of caregivers significantly increased after IYCF nutrition education sessions. The longitudinal study also showed that after the IYCF nutrition education sessions, 25 percent of caregivers prepared enriched porridge (bobor khap krop kroeung) in the nutrition education intervention areas compared to 6 percent in the comparison areas. In addition, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) indicated that obstacles to improving IYCF practices were women’s workload, attitude to child feeding, food availability and access as well as their ability and motivation to integrate the newly acquired skills into every day practice.
Achievements and factors of success in the field

Our achievements in building the capacity of national and regional governments to implement food security and nutrition education activities have resulted in improved infant and young child feeding.

**Interventions on linking food security and nutrition education for improved young child feeding**

**Food security**
- Farmer Field Schools (FFS),
- Farmer Business Schools (FBS) *(only in Cambodia)*
- Junior Farmer Field and Life Schools (JFFLS) *(only in Malawi)*
- Agricultural fairs *(only in Cambodia)*

**Nutrition Education**
- Training of Community Nutrition Promoters (CNPs)
- CNPs training caregivers in participatory nutrition education sessions and cooking demonstration
- 7-free enriched porridge distribution *(only in Cambodia)*

**IFSN in Malawi (2011-2015)**

**Objective:** Contribute through policy and programme advisory services to the achievement of the Malawi Government’s Development goals by improving food security and nutrition of vulnerable population in Mzimba and Kasungu district.

**Output:**
- **Food Security**
  - FFS: 46 000 farmers were trained
  - JFFLS: 3 300 students were trained

- **Nutrition education**
  - 1 100 CNPs were trained
  - 12 000 mothers, grandmothers, fathers and traditional leaders trained (reaching 9 700 children aged 6-18 months at enrollment)

**MALIS in Cambodia (2012-2015)**

**Objective:** Improve the food security and nutrition of vulnerable rural families who depend primarily on agriculture of their livelihood in Oddar Meanchey and Preah Vihear Provinces.

**Output:**
- **Food security**
  - FFS: 2 900 smallholder farmers were trained (reaching 3 700 households)
  - FBS: 20 agricultural cooperatives and farmer groups were trained with a total of 320 participants (reaching 2 500 households)
  - Agriculture fairs: 3 800 smallholder farmers participated

- **Nutrition education**
  - 153 CNPs were trained
  - 1 400 mothers, grandmothers, fathers and traditional leaders trained

_Counsellor and young child in Cambodia_
How did we achieve this?

Our findings provide a solid foundation for future global efforts to reduce the burden of malnutrition and build healthier futures for children. **How did we achieve this?** **What programming principles were applied?** Below you find results and quotes of the process review reports from Malawi and Cambodia that provide answers to these questions.

**Strengthening multi-sectoral collaboration and existing delivery mechanisms.** We facilitated dialogue and close collaboration between agriculture, health, education and gender stakeholders on community, district and national level. Almost all sectors have a role in nutrition and each needs to be strengthened and to complement each other’s work (i.e. harmonise targeting of agriculture and health activities and implement as a package). We supported existing delivery mechanisms for sustainability and scale up through strong partnerships with the Governments, which helped to promote ownership of the project.

“We have also extended our horizons. Instead of just knowing our [colleagues] from Mzimba only, we are able to interact with communities from Kasungu and other partners during the stakeholders meetings.” (Senior AEHO8, Interview, Malawi).

**Developing context specific IYCF nutrition education material.** We conducted formative research on complementary feeding and used findings that address specific behaviours, to ensure that caregivers’ voices are properly reflected in the IYCF nutrition education materials. We took into account seasonality, availability and affordability of food when developing the material and emphasized the use of local foods for improved complementary feeding practices.

**Sensitisation and capacity building among existing extension Government services.** Our training and capacity-building activities reached community agriculture and health extension workers. These trained Community Nutrition Promoters (CNPs) then supported improved feeding practices through IYCF nutrition education sessions with cooking demonstrations among caregivers, including mothers, fathers and grandmothers.

**Engaging key influencers.** We engaged key influencers as partners – rather than viewing them as barriers – to increase support for improved nutrition within the household and community level. Involving fathers, grandmothers and traditional leaders in comprehensive community-based programming increased the understanding of their roles in influencing caregiver feeding practices. Husbands from Malawi appreciated their wives’ participation in the IYCF nutrition education sessions, because childcare practices had improved.

“My wife attended, too. For all of us it was the same way, in a village setting when you are the head, it’s your responsibility to be at every meeting that takes place and it’s also the responsibility of the wife to the Village Head to be present at every women gathering. Therefore when this programme was introduced, every Village Head had to go to witness for themselves what was taking place. And it wasn’t on the basis that you have been selected, but to encourage the participants because our presence is a motivation.” (Group Village Heads, FGD, Malawi)

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8 AEHO: Assistant Environmental Health Officer
Creating a practical learning environment. We followed the participatory and community-based approach to enable mothers/caregivers to put their knowledge into practice. Through participatory cooking demonstrations mothers/caregivers increased their confidence to prepare enriched porridge at home.

“During the cooking session ... I really wanted to cook something because the things that I have cooked I cannot forget. Even my child from her marriage [daughter-in-law] – when she comes I would teach her and demonstrate to her.”
(IYCF Grandmothers, FGD, Malawi)

Involving grandmothers in the IYCF trainings increased their advocacy for improved childcare and feeding practices. Observing visible improvements in the children’s health helped ease caregivers’ and grandmothers’ doubts, and confirmed that feeding children enriched porridge was beneficial.

“After providing the bobor khap krop kroeung to my grandchild, it seems that it doesn’t get sick as frequently as before. In previous times, we normally had to go to the health centre in order to get the child treated. However, now my grandchild is healthier.”
(Grandmothers, Phase one, FGD, Cambodia)

Wider promotion of motivating factors to cook enriched porridge. We promoted enriched porridges in the community to raise awareness on the importance of improved child feeding. Communities were gathered to inform them about the benefits of enriched porridges and invited to taste the porridge.

“Grandmothers and all the small children got the chance to not just taste the different types of bobor khap krop kroeung, but we actually ate them. We thought that it was really good as they contained various nutrients that could help our grandchildren grow well.”
(Grandmothers, Phase one, FGD, Cambodia)

Assisting the Government of Malawi in strengthening nutrition in all aspects of agriculture: We supported a variety of approaches to assist the Government of Malawi in building understanding and consensus around policies, programmes and strategies in the agriculture sector with regard to recognizing the significance of the sector’s role in improving nutrition.

If you wish to learn more about the different aspects of programme implementation (what worked well, and what did not work so well), please view the IFSN and MALIS process reviews. These provide detailed information regarding the factors that motivate dietary change and how to address the barriers to achieving positive behaviour change.
What are the IMCF Programme Lessons about?

In July 2015, a Technical meeting was jointly convened by FAO and JLU which was held at the FAO headquarters in Rome. A draft version of the Programme Lessons “Integrating Nutrition Education and Agriculture for Improved Young Child Nutrition” was one of the main outputs from this Technical meeting. These were subsequently revised through an iterative process with a subgroup of meeting participants and reflect the experience of a group of practitioners working to improve young child nutrition through integrating agriculture and nutrition education.

Guidance for programme designers/managers: The Programme Lessons provide guidance on how to design and implement integrated agriculture-nutrition education interventions with the specific objective of improving household access and utilisation of diverse, fresh, healthy foods that enhance family and young child nutrition in low-income countries.

Integrated programmes require staff trained to be proficient in more than one discipline.

The Programme Lessons highlight good practices and issues to consider in the project cycle to improve the design and implementation of integrated interventions and enhance their nutrition outcomes. They cover the following six topics: (1) Programme Planning and Design; (2) Capacity Development; (3) Implementation; (4) Supervision; (5) Monitoring and Evaluation; and (6) Sustainability and Scaling up. Good practices are listed under key points for each of these topics and issues to consider are provided, where relevant.

Ongoing, regular supervision and support, by all sectors, is essential to sustain the quality of nutrition education sessions and encourage community-level staff and volunteers.

Participatory Nutrition Education can empower mothers and other caregivers to improve diets.

Good practices:

- Use active and culturally-appropriate learning approaches including hands-on practice and visual stimuli in every session, with a focus on skill building and active sharing of good practices, dialogue, experiences and problem solving among caregivers and other household members.

Issues to consider:

- Trainees should learn to focus on what mothers/caregivers do in nutrition education sessions: they need to listen, ask questions and encourage mothers/caregivers to speak and observe, as much as they need to speak themselves.
International appreciation of food-based approach for complementary feeding

IMCF team members presented project results and programme lessons at a joint UNICEF/Government of Maharashtra meeting on First Foods: A Global Meeting to Accelerate Progress on Complementary Feeding for Young Children, held in Mumbai, India, on 17–19 November 2015.

Ms Stacia Nordin, former FAO Malawi Nutrition Officer, shared findings from the Malawi IFSN project. She explained that children who attended all of the 10 two-hour practical nutrition education group sessions over five months, coupled with four food demonstrations, had better growth compared to children who attended fewer sessions, suggesting that the number of contacts and length of exposure resulted in better feeding and hygiene practices. Access to different foods, especially legumes, vegetables, groundnuts and animal source foods throughout the year, was one of the main constraints to achieving greater dietary variety. Ms Nordin underlined the importance of food security and the need for a greater diversification of nutrient-rich foods through agriculture, with special attention to indigenous species, becoming available and affordable all year round.

Dr Ramani Wijesinha-Bettoni, FAO Nutrition Consultant, shared outcomes of the FAO/JLU technical meeting on Integrating Agriculture and Nutrition Education for Improved Young Child Nutrition. She highlighted the contribution that FAO can make to influence policy and decision makers in the food and agriculture sector to harness their support for designing policies and programmes that have a greater impact on nutrition. She talked of the ways agricultural programmes may jeopardise nutritional goals, for example by focusing too narrowly on cash crops and productivity increases, or by increasing women’s workloads to the detriment of their health and that of their children. She introduced the Programme Lessons which generated a high level of interest from participants, who acknowledged FAO’s contribution to the development of evidence-based technical guidance on food-based nutrition.
Dissemination activities

Berlin/Germany 16–18 September 2015; “Tropentag”, a meeting of agricultural scientists. Dr Irmgard Jordan gave an oral presentation, and showed that “Improvements in infant and young child feeding practices through nutrition education despite food insecurity” were possible in Malawi and Cambodia.

Berlin/Germany 30 September–2 October 2015: Annual Meeting of the German Society for Epidemiology. Dr Irmgard Jordan gave a presentation on “Improving infant and young child feeding practices through nutrition education with local resources – results from a longitudinal study in Malawi”.

Ithaca/New York 11–14 October 2015; Global Food Security Conference. Dr Irmgard Jordan presented “Improving infant and young child feeding with local resources in Malawi and Cambodia”.

Berlin/Germany 20–23 October 2015: 12th European Nutrition Conference – a meeting of the Federation of the European Nutrition Societies. Dr Jordan presented a poster on “Effect of a one-year nutrition education intervention on child dietary diversity”.

Mumbai/India, 17–19 November 2015: First Foods- A Global Meeting to Accelerate Progress on Complementary Feeding for Young Children.

- Ms Stacia Nordin presented lessons from the IFSN project on the integration of agriculture-nutrition education interventions.
- Dr Ramani Wijesinha-Bettoni presented the programming lessons and shared them with meeting participants
- Dr. Irmgard Jordan answered questions about the IMCF project at the market stall.
Remarks by Ellen Muehlhoff, Nutrition Education and Consumer Awareness Group, Nutrition and Food Systems Division

The Role of Food Systems and Improving Family and Young Children’s Diets: What the IMCF project has contributed to our understanding

By joining the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) movement and endorsing the UN Secretary General’s Zero Hunger Initiative, many Governments have committed themselves to eliminating stunting. To achieve this, special efforts are required to address the nutritional needs of mothers and children during the first 1,000 days of life. Changing dietary behaviours is complex and demands a good understanding of the context in which people conduct their daily lives. To achieve success, an understanding is needed of the barriers faced by families and caregivers, such as culture and traditions, beliefs, attitudes, gender relations, food availability, cost, income, caregiver’s time constraints, and the specific local and individual factors that may facilitate and motivate dietary change. We believe that the IMCF project has contributed to a better understanding of the contextual factors and the nutritional improvements that are possible using local food resources. We have demonstrated that community-based learning sessions can equip caregivers and communities with the knowledge, skills and the confidence to cook nutritious recipes and feed their children well, thus forming positive eating habits that can last a lifetime.

Because the emphasis on making agricultural development projects work to improve young child nutrition is new, key knowledge gaps exist with regard to project implementation and approach. For this reason, programme actions need to be closely monitored and evaluated to gather the evidence that is needed to understand pathways to change. Our work indicates that careful planning is essential to achieving a balance between production for the market and for family consumption, requiring harmonized targeting between the agriculture and nutrition/health sectors to ensure that agricultural programmes can enhance the diets of vulnerable families with young children. Other solutions include linking farmers with markets to generate income and improve their livelihoods, while concurrently increasing the demand, through information and education, for diverse, nutritious foods, including indigenous species, and intensifying efforts to expand market access for poor families and women farmers.
A preventive food-based approach that focuses on improving access to and consumption of good quality diets calls for strong partnerships, intersectoral collaboration and a well trained workforce that is capable of delivering high quality services at district and community levels. However, our work shows that despite some improvements the main challenges remain: implementing effective integrated interventions requires a level of coordination and a capacity that are often absent. High quality training for front line extension staff in agriculture and health, as well as programme managers and policy makers in diverse sectors, is essential to build the knowledge, skills and capacities required to implement integrated nutrition-sensitive interventions at scale.

To help address this challenge, FAO has developed a series of educational and training resources for different users. Manuals, guidelines and e-learning courses are available on nutrition-sensitive agriculture and food systems designed for practitioners working on policy formulation and programme development.

The ICN2 Framework for Action recommends that countries “Build nutrition skills and capacity to undertake nutrition education activities, particularly for front line workers, social workers, agricultural extension personnel, teachers and health professionals.” However, relevant training for carrying out effective nutrition education and communication is lacking in most countries. To address this gap, FAO developed the ENACT course (Education for Effective Nutrition in Action) which provides training in nutrition education and is targeted at undergraduates. It is relevant to all who have the professional need to handle nutrition education in some form, such as students in universities and medical school, agriculturists, district nutritionists, health service managers, rural development workers, IEC specialists and NGO staff. ENACT aims at promoting long term improvements in diet through an active approach based on identified needs, with attention to social and environmental contexts, all relevant sectors and the whole food cycle (production, processing, marketing and consumption). The course materials are mostly related to Africa but the broad principles and activities are relevant to any country which needs to upgrade capacities in the field. The online course will be available shortly and will be taught by international and national African training institutions.

We are convinced that investing in the capacities of people and systems is essential for accelerating and scaling up efforts to bring about nutritional improvements more rapidly.

Important references:

- Key Recommendations for Improving Nutrition through Agriculture
- FAO Infant and Young Child Feeding website
- FAO ENACT (Education for Effective Nutrition in Action) course in nutrition education
- Designing Nutrition-sensitive Agriculture Investments
- e-learning modules on Basic Concepts of Nutrition, Food Security and Livelihoods” and “Agreeing on Causes of Malnutrition for Joint Action”

A series of e-learning modules on designing nutrition-sensitive food system policies and programmes is under development.
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