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LANSA Leveraging Agriculture for Nutrition in South Asia

▲ Two Afghan farmers using cattle to plough the fields.
PHOTO: LANSA

Despite agriculture being the mainstay of Afghan society, little attention has been given to its potential to address undernutrition.

The Leveraging Agriculture for Nutrition in South Asia (LANSA) research programme consortium aims to enhance the impact of agriculture on maternal and child nutrition in Afghanistan. LANSA activities in Afghanistan have included, mapping of stakeholder perceptions of sectoral policies and programmes, primary research, secondary data analysis, policy dialogue, capacity strengthening, research uptake and dissemination.

The research in Afghanistan has been led by staff of the University of London International Development Centre (LIDC) in collaboration with a range of organisations in Afghanistan: Afghanaid, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), Ecology and Conservation Organisation of Afghanistan (ECOA) and BRAC.

LANSA work

The LANSA team started work in 2015 on mapping the policy landscape and the interrelationships among key organisations[1] in agriculture and nutrition in Afghanistan. This included evaluating the local evidence base linking agriculture to nutrition as well as the perceptions of decision-makers[2] about the capacity, priorities and financial resources for improving nutrition through the agri-food system. This research identified a disconnect between the organisations working on food security, agriculture and nutrition, and also found that Afghan policies and programmes mostly address issues of nutrition and agriculture separately. The focus is predominantly on therapeutic approaches to nutrition given the conflict situation, rather than food-based approaches and promoting nutrition-sensitive approaches in the context of poverty.

The LANSA team also worked with Afghanaid to analyse a recent intervention concerning women's economic empowerment that included a dairy development project in Badakhshan. An analysis[3] of the food value chain of the dairy project concludes that building effective value chains can leverage dairy production for better human nutrition.

Further research into dairy consumption and value chain development has been undertaken to understand further how to maximise the potential of dairy production to address nutritional needs, particularly

[1] https://areu.org.af/archives/publication/1725#

[2] http://lansasouthasia.org/sites/default/files/Stakeholder%20Perceptions%20of%20Agriculture%20and%20Nutrition%20Policies%20and%20Practice%20Evidence%20from%20Afghanistan.pdf

[3] http://bulletin.ids.ac.uk/idsbo/article/view/2940

taking into account the seasonal climatic extremes and the national concern to develop an indigenous dairy sector to meet local demand.

LANSA Evidence[4] also shows that higher sheep ownership and mutton consumption was associated with lower levels of anaemia among adult women. Initiatives to promote livestock ownership and consumption could help to address the high levels of anaemia prevalent in the country.

Research was conducted which explores the role of irrigation[5] in dietary diversity. Results show that possession of irrigated land and garden plots are positively associated with household dietary diversity. Irrigation facilities could be important but not sufficient conditions in addressing dietary diversity among smallholders in Afghanistan. A multi-sectoral approach including initiatives to strengthen market integration and provision of education to farmers to grow nutritious crops is called for.

Policy challenges

Where policies do, in theory, touch upon agriculture for nutrition, knowledge and practical value of these policies is limited at the implementation level. The policies themselves were said to be often donor-driven, ill-designed through top-down processes, with insufficient knowledge and awareness of local realities and heterogeneity of context.

The challenges for efficient and effective policy processes remain, only partially helped by the managerial complexity of the intersectoral governance structures envisaged, for example, in the Afghanistan Food and Nutrition Security Agenda (AFSeN). The AFSeN is an appropriate policy framework for linking interventions in agriculture and health. It can facilitate a multisectoral approach, integrating development sector policies and programmes for tackling undernutrition. To be effective, it requires leadership from central Ministries in Kabul, and close coordination within sub-national governance structures in Provinces and Districts. The AFSeN involves ten ministries and a wide range of other stakeholders and will have to overcome serious management challenges at the central level. The Citizen's Charter provides a framework for decentralising policy processes to the Provinces, but will face equally daunting challenges in achieving efficient vertical coordination from the centre in Kabul right down to Community Development Councils at sub-provincial level. Provincial-level or sub-national governance would result in policies that are context-specific, and with fewer inappropriate projects and policies created centrally or copied from other countries.

Stakeholder engagement

Throughout the programme, LANSA has sought to engage with stakeholders at national, provincial and community levels, to include them in the research process, share findings and discuss ideas for taking forward strategies for integrating agriculture and nutrition in policy and practice. A final knowledge exchange workshop[6] held in Bamyan with ECOA also sought to gather inputs from community beneficiaries, inputs from other INGOs, government stakeholders and UN clusters on the issues of food security, nutrition and agriculture, and to develop an integrated strategy for agri-nutrition policies and practices. This workshop was also significant as it was the first time women from this community had participated in external meetings of this nature, an important step in including women in decision making.

LANSA work has contributed by raising the profile of nutrition with key organisations working in Afghanistan, and helped to promote coherence among national and international stakeholders in addressing the challenges of undernutrition in the conflict-ridden diverse regions. This strategy has facilitated a discursive space for dialogue between agriculture and nutrition stakeholders at different policy making and policy influencing levels, bringing the spotlight on nutrition. Within this complex context, there is much work left to do. LANSA's limited time to work in Afghanistan has enlightened a few areas: we have found that agri-nutrition initiatives alone are not sufficient and a more multi-sectoral approach that looks at the harsh realities in conflict-ridden countries is necessary to meet sustainable objectives.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Through this work in Afghanistan we have developed the following recommendations for enhancing agriculture to improve nutrition:

1. Greater decentralisation of policy making to provincial levels.

2. Improved information flows and knowledge management between central and provincial governments.

3. Investment in infrastructure for agriculture and nutrition to create the conditions for successful domestic markets and enterprises.

4. Link more efficiently short term humanitarian and long term development policies.

5. A donor and stakeholder conference which synthesises perspectives and policies of all stakeholders, linked to the decentralisation agenda.

6. Increased investment in departmental government capacity within the agriculture and health sectors.