# Feed the Future Learning Agenda

## Objective of the Learning Agenda

USAID's Bureau of Food Security will develop Feed the Future's (FTF) Learning Agenda, which includes key evaluation questions related to the FTF Results Framework (see Annex I). These questions will be addressed through rigorous impact evaluations. The Results Framework maps linkages between program/projects and their intended outcomes as they relate to the overall goal of sustainably reducing global hunger and poverty. The Results Framework assists in both designing effective programs/projects and measuring progress by providing a structure against which to determine strategies for country-specific programs/projects and by outlining causal pathways toward FTF's end goal.

There is evidence to support the causal relationship between planned FTF investments and the impact pathways leading to FTF's overarching goals. However, there remains much to learn about which interventions have the greatest impact in a given context, which interventions are most cost effective, and what combination and or sequence of interventions/investments have the greatest impact on the multiple objectives of improving agricultural growth, reducing poverty and reducing malnutrition. It is also necessary to develop a Learning Agenda to determine related effects of FTF interventions on women's empowerment, vulnerable populations, farm and off-farm employment for males and females, effects of global climate change and improved natural resource management that sustains livelihoods and resources for future generations. The FTF Learning Agenda is a set of strategic questions for which the Initiative intends to produce evidence, findings, and answers primarily through impact evaluations and also through other methods, such as performance evaluations and policy analysis. Through the Learning Agenda, FTF will contribute to the body of knowledge on food security to improve the design and management of interventions in the agriculture and nutrition sectors.

## Dimensions of the Agenda

As the Learning Agenda questions are based on the FTF Results Framework, the questions have been segmented into six general categories as follows:

1. Improved Agricultural Productivity
2. Improved Research & Development
3. Expanded Markets, Value Chains and Increased Investment
4. Improved Nutrition and Dietary Quality
5. Improved Gender Integration and Women's Empowerment
6. Improved Resilience of Vulnerable Populations

## I. Agricultural Productivity

FTF has already identified a host of important issues in the field of agriculture productivity. There are a few additional areas where more knowledge could potentially lead to increased agricultural productivity such as exploring and examining the following: a) Approaches to motivating and monitoring agricultural extension workers and testing various theories about the content of agricultural extension; b) Adoption of technology with fixed costs; c) Increased use of fertilizer, irrigation, and improved seeds in environments where use seems suboptimal; d) Better utilization of labor (hired, or household,) over the year; e) Addressing contract enforcement issues that inhibit contract farming; f) Improved agricultural product quality, including certification programs and introduction of technologies for verifiable quality assessment; g) Enhanced strategies for helping land and labor move out of agriculture to alternative uses that are more efficient; and h) address how best to incorporate household animal interventions linked to crop or horticulture systems that provide the greatest impact on household food security and use of household resources such as family labor.

Key Questions:

1) What are characteristics of effective, efficient and sustainable vehicles for promoting adoption of innovation (technology, practices, behaviors) and diffusion of products and new technologies among the poor, women, and socially marginalized? What are the most binding constraints in promoting technology adoption and the most effective interventions for dealing with these constraints?
2) What are approaches that successfully address long-term natural resources management objectives while effectively increasing productivity and profitability?
3) To what extent do agricultural productivity interventions in the staple and non-staple crop value chains lead to the generation or improvement of on-farm and off-farm employment?
4) Which agricultural productivity interventions have had the greatest impact on resilience of households and individuals to recover from (regain consumption levels and rebuild assets) or withstand (maintain consumption levels and protect assets) common and extreme shocks?
5) Does including nutrition education (social and behavior change communication) in agriculture extension services lead to reductions or elimination of household hunger and improved dietary diversity?

## II. Improved Research & Development

One distinctive challenge in this thematic area is that rigorous impact evaluations for this thematic area need a counterfactual. A counterfactual requires a comparison or control group, but when the support is to national systems—the national research institute for example—there is no comparison group and thus no counterfactual. This does not mean we have to give up on evaluating these programs; we just have to tailor our methods and use different methods to answer different questions.

Some of the identified challenges in this area are as follows: a) If an individual does not know that a technology exists, does not know about its benefits, or does not know how to use it effectively, then the technology will not be adopted; b) Technologies that carry a large risk of a loss may not be worth large expected gains if risks cannot be offset. Socio-economic or cultural issues around risk decisions can further effect adoption levels or rates; c) Many farmers have difficulty accessing credit and face high interest rates, which prevent investment in profitable technologies. Financial decisions may be difficult for farmers without high levels of financial literacy; d) New technologies need different types and timing of labor input. Restrictions on labor mobility and high costs in the

labor market will interfere with adoption opportunities; e) In settings where land tenure is weak and property rights insecure, farmers may not have an incentive to invest in beneficial technologies; f) Problems with infrastructure and with supply chains make it more costly for farmers to access input and output markets; and g) there is remarkably little evidence on the effectiveness of short-term or longer-term training improving the effectiveness of agricultural institutions in supporting and sustaining agricultural productivity or service delivery or impacts on food security. Also, there is little evidence on the effectiveness of short-term types of training on improving farmers/producers farm productivity, adoption of technology and or improved cultural practices at the household level; or improving household resiliency related to food security.

Key Questions:

1) What partnership mechanisms are most productive, efficient, effective and sustainable for carrying out agricultural research to positively benefit resource-poor farmers and food security?
2) Which R&D programs have had an impact on the policy or enabling environment?

## III. Expanded Markets, Value Chains and Increased Investment

While USAID has invested substantially in agricultural value chain and market development, meeting the FTF goals requires learning how to create pro-poor value chains that are market led by reaching further down the wealth continuum to involve resource poor farmers in the uptake of new technologies and market opportunities. Once this first challenge is solved, a second challenge will be to create a cargo net or other graduation pathway that will allow the poorest households to build the minimum assets needed to participate in pro-poor value chains. While the minimum asset threshold for effective participation in value chain programs is far from clear, it is apparent that the participation of small farms in new technologies, local and regional markets, and value chains is stunted by low knowledge, risk and uncertainty. What measures can one take to improve the enabling environment to encourage private investments in access to local or integrated regional markets?

Regarding risk, development economics has long been preoccupied with the notion that one of the biggest costs of risk is that it induces farm households to 'income smooth' and shy away from riskier, new technologies and economic opportunities that offer improved incomes on average. In addition, risk stunts the development of rural factor and product markets, compounding the adoption problems for liquidity-constrained farm households. Finally, risk and the absence of deep credit markets create consumption variability that contributes to the intergenerational transmission of poverty, lessening the long-term human development impacts of even those incomes and growth rates that are achieved. Plumbing these problems deeply to identify an optimal value-chain deepening strategy will likely require an integrated programming and pilot project research agenda which may involve self-finance through savings, savings-secured loans or group credit.

Key Questions:

1) What types of investments in value chain market led development result in poverty reduction and improved nutrition among even the lower income quintiles in areas where value chain work is taking place? Which kinds of investments and in which value chain functions have generated increases in income and opportunities for employment among the poorest quintile, women, and other vulnerable groups?

2) Have interventions in agricultural value chain development led to development of local institutions and systemic behavior change? What are effective pathways for generating that change?
3) What types of interventions (policy and regulatory reform; institutional strengthening; market development; public-private partnerships, etc.) have attracted private sector investment in agriculture?
4) To what extent do different sources (domestic debt, FDI, guarantees, etc.) of investment in value chains lead to new income and employment opportunities for vulnerable populations?
5) What has been the impact of infrastructure interventions on poverty reduction? What is the impact when infrastructure investments are used in combination with more traditional value chain or productivity enhancing interventions?
6) To what extent has the expansion of intra-regional trade in staples increased market access and regional availability and reduced price fluctuations and year-to-year local shortages?

## IV. Improved Nutrition and Dietary Quality

The 2007 World Bank/IFPRI review concluded that agricultural programs are most likely to have an impact on nutrition outcomes when they move beyond a narrow focus on agriculture for food production, toward broader consideration of people's livelihoods, gender equality and assets, and when they incorporate specific nutrition goals and interventions targeted to the most vulnerable household members such as mothers and young children. When health and agricultural interventions are implemented in tandem, there are several pathways by which agriculture interventions can impact nutrition: (1) food production for own consumption; (2) increased income from sale of agricultural commodities and greater farm productivity; (3) women's empowerment; (4) lower food prices resulting from increases in food supply; and (5) macroeconomic effects of agricultural growth. However, rigorous evaluations of agriculture programs are urgently needed to better understand the real potential of agriculture to improve nutrition.

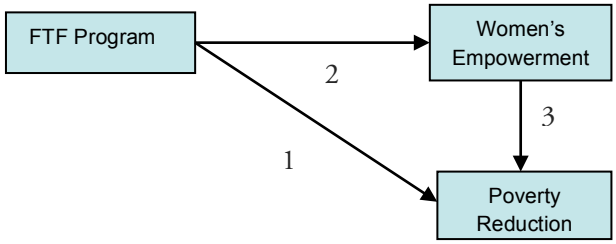
Many FTF interventions that propose to improve nutrition and diet quality are typical nutrition-specific interventions that address the direct causes of under-nutrition, but none of its underlying causes. Similarly, many agriculture-focused interventions are typical interventions to improve agriculture productivity, income, access to markets for the poor, but by failing to link to specific nutrition interventions, they are likely to be missing a unique opportunity to improve nutrition and diet quality. Therefore the recommendation is to: a) Identify and examine synergies among direct nutrition interventions and agricultural programs. b) Clearly articulate nutrition goals and interventions if agriculture, horticulture, and food security programs are expected to improve nutrition.

Key Questions:

1) What have been the impacts of different approaches linking Agriculture, Nutrition and Health (ANH) on dietary diversity and nutritional status (i.e. geographic co-location of programs, integration of interventions, what combination of A, N, and H)? Have programs to increase farmers' incomes resulted in improved nutrition when not coupled with nutrition programming?
2) What activities have enabled value chain investments to lead to improved consumption of diverse diets?
3) Which agriculture technology interventions have improved diets and nutrition outcomes?
4) What investments in human and institutional capacity development have effectively generated large scale nutrition outcomes?

## V. Improved Gender Integration and Women's Empowerment

The FTF learning agenda highlights key questions in the area of gender integration and women's empowerment. Impact evaluations of FTF programs would ideally show how the programs affect women's empowerment, but also how improved women's empowerment precipitates poverty reduction, hunger alleviation, and malnutrition. This suggests a model such as the one below:




The Learning Agenda seeks to understand all three arrows in this diagram. This would certainly maximize our understanding of how women's empowerment is a pathway through which to attain program objectives such as hunger reduction and improved food security. The methodological challenge that arises is separating the direct effect of the program (arrow 1) on poverty reduction from the indirect effect coming from women's empowerment (arrows 2 and 3). In order to do so rigorously, program implementation would need to be altered so that different versions of the same program affect women's empowerment differentially while not changing the direct effect.

An alternative question would be whether programs that emphasize women's empowerment are more effective at reducing poverty and improving food security than programs that do not emphasize empowerment/gender integration. This question would also require that different versions of the same program would be implemented, but without the additional challenge of designing the program, so that the different versions have the same direct impact. Examples of this approach are discussed below in the context of specific FTF interventions.

Key Questions:

1) Have agriculture productivity interventions reduced gender gaps in use of production inputs?
2) Have agriculture and nutrition projects or approaches effectively improved women's empowerment, specifically in terms of agricultural production, decision-making over and access to credit, control over income, leadership in the community, and time use?
3) Have capacity-building and increased leadership/management opportunities for women led to increased participation of women in leadership roles in the community?
4) Have interventions advancing commercialization in value chains affected access to paid employment or types of employment for men and women? Have they led to increases or decreases in unpaid work for men or women?
5) Have programs that emphasize gender equality and the empowerment of women led to reduced poverty and hunger? Does empowering women lead to reduced poverty and hunger?

## VI. Improving Resilience of Vulnerable Populations

The wellbeing and livelihoods of many poor rural households is in constant jeopardy due to their extreme vulnerability to a wide variety of adverse shocks. The high level of insecurity that characterizes these households often limits their ability to connect to new economic opportunities. This is true for ill-health and injury, harvest failure, terms-of-trade deterioration, reduced access to work, and violence and conflict. Risk degrades assets and impoverishes the most vulnerable. Effective measures to strengthen the resilience of these insecure households require much further investigation. Value chain investments in markets with lower risk and lower entry barriers is one means through which FTF programs are encouraging the participation of poorer rural households in expanding economic opportunities. More limited attention is being focused on productive safety nets that build capacity within food insecure households to assume greater risk. Analysis of the impacts of these efforts will significantly contribute to improving our understanding of effective measures to achieve inclusive agriculture led growth.

Key Questions:

1) What interventions improve the ability of vulnerable households to withstand (stable consumption and protected assets) common and extreme shocks affecting their economic activities? In what ways?
2) What interventions strengthen the ability of vulnerable households to recover (regain consumption levels and rebuild lost assets) from common and extreme shocks?
3) To what extent do different interventions to promote market access (such as promoting access to markets with lower risks and lower entry barriers) generate the participation of poorer households?
4) What interventions on both the "Push" (social protection) and "Pull" (value chain deepening) sides improve the participation of the poor in value chain activities?
5) Do safety net programs promote greater participation of poorer households in prudent risk taking and more remunerative economic activities?
6) Have interventions changed risk-reduction strategies pursued by men and women to cope with shocks (health-related, agro-climatic, economic, socio-political)?
7) Have FTF strategies to generate overall economic growth improved livelihoods of the poorest and most vulnerable populations? What are the most effective economic growth strategies for incorporating the poor and vulnerable?

# Feed the Future Goal: Sustainably Reduce Global Poverty and Hunger

Indicators: *Prevalence of poverty & Prevalence of underweight children*

## First Level Objective: Inclusive agriculture sector growth

Indicators: -Agriculture sector GDP
- Per capita expenditures of rural households
- Empowerment of Women in Agriculture Index

## First Level Objective: Improved nutritional status (women & children)

Indicators: -Prevalence of stunted children
-Prevalence of wasted children
-Prevalence of underweight women

### Improved agriculture productivity

Gross margins per unit of land or animal of selected product

# of has of natural resources showing improved biophysical conditions

### Expanding Markets & Trade

Percent change of value of intra-regional trade in targeted agricultural commodities

Value of incremental sales (farm-level)

### Increased investment in agriculture & nutrition-related activities

% national budget invested in agriculture & nutrition

Value of new private sector investment in agriculture sector or value chain

# of local firms & CSOs engaged in food security operating sustainability

### Increased employment opportunities in targeted value chains

Number of jobs attributed to FTF programs

### Increased resilience of vulnerable communities and households

Prevalence of households with moderate to severe hunger

### Improved access to diverse and quality foods

Women's Dietary Diversity

Percent of Children 6-23 months that received a MAD

### Improved nutrition-related behaviors

Prevalence of exclusive breastfeeding under six months

### Improved use of maternal and child health and nutrition services

Prevalence of anemia among women and children

Programs and policies to support agriculture sector growth

*AVAILABILITY*

Programs and policies to increase access to markets and facilitate trade

*ACCESS*

Programs and policies to reduce inequities

*STABILITY*

Programs and policies to support positive gains in nutrition

*UTILIZATION*

# FTF Whole-of Government Common Indicators

| | |
|---|---|
| Improved Agricultural Productivity (output) | • Number of individuals who have received USG supported short-term agricultural sector productivity or food security training. |
| Improved Agricultural Productivity (outcome) | • Number of farmers and others who have applied new technologies or management practices as a result of USG assistance |
| Improved Agricultural Productivity (outcome) | • Number of additional hectares under improved technologies or management practices as a result of USG assistance |
| Improved Agricultural Productivity (output) | • Number of private enterprises, producers organizations, water users associations, trade and business associations, and community-based organizations (CBOs) receiving USG assistance |
| Improved Agricultural Productivity (outcome) | • Number of private enterprises, producers organizations, water users associations, trade and business associations, and community-based organizations (CBOs) that applied new technologies or management practices as a result of USG assistance |
| Expanding Markets and Trade (output) | • Kilometers of roads improved or constructed |
| Expanding Markets and Trade (outcome) | • Value of Agricultural and Rural Loans |
| Expanding Markets and Trade (outcome) | • Number of households with formalized land |