

THE FUTURE OF FOOD ASSISTANCE FOR NUTRITION: EVIDENCE SUMMIT II SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS, KEY FINDINGS, AND CONCLUSIONS

Summary of a Report from the Food Aid Quality Review

BACKGROUND

During Project Year 3 of Phase III, the Food Aid Quality Review (FAQR) hosted a first *Food Assistance for Nutrition Evidence Summit* on June 27th and 28th, 2018 in Washington, DC, which focused on sharing of the state of evidence regarding food assistance for nutrition programming with a total of 250 attendees. [Priority action](#) items that emerged from this meeting include 1) more research funding is required for careful studies that document best practice for food assistance in all humanitarian contexts, 2) metrics of nutritional status need to go beyond physical growth of children to include brain development, gut health, and body composition to provide a physiological understanding of malnutrition, 3) multi-sectoral and multi-institutional collaboration and communication must be enhanced, 4) innovations should be promoted in product formulations, food packaging technology, food safety and quality, and food aid supply chain optimization tools, and investments should increase in advanced data systems to capture reliable and comprehensive food assistance trends.

At the request of the United States Agency for International Development Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (USAID/BHA), the FAQR team planned a second Evidence Summit in 2020 to showcase new evidence generated since the 2018 event, and also to emphasize what evidence is still needed to improve food assistance for nutrition. *The Future of Food Assistance for Nutrition: Evidence Summit II* was held from October 5th through 8th, 2020 and brought together practitioners, policymakers, industry professionals, program funders, and researchers to share and discuss new evidence from the past two years, prioritize future evidence needs, and consider how we can collaborate to support more cost-effective programming aimed at improving nutrition in the context of food assistance interventions of all kinds.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the *Evidence Summit II* was held live online, which allowed USAID/BHA and the FAQR team to reach a much larger group of participants from a wider range of organizations and geographic locations than the first Summit in 2018. The four-day event was attended by a total of 740 people representing 62 countries, including 43 low- and middle-income countries (LMIC), and featured 103 speakers from a wide variety of organizations engaged in food assistance for nutrition representing academic institutions, international organizations, non-governmental organizations, research institutes, and the private sector. The *Evidence Summit II* virtual event hub can be accessed at evidencesummit2.wordpress.com. Session recordings and presentation slides can be found on the virtual event hub and in each respective session within the full report. The following tables in this summary report are linked to each respective session recording.

PROGRAM FOR EVIDENCE SUMMIT II

The Summit opened and closed with welcoming remarks and keynote addresses from USAID/BHA senior staff members, including Assistant to the Administrator Trey Hicks and Acting Deputy Assistant to the Administrator Matthew Nims. The program also consisted of five plenary sessions related to new science, continuum of care, strategies, logistics, and knowledge gaps. A description of each of these sessions can be found in **Table I**, and more details about each of the presentations can be found in the **Plenaries** session summaries within the full report.

Table I: Description of Plenary Sessions at Evidence Summit II

<p>Plenary I: What Does New Science Tell Us about Food Assistance for Nutrition?</p> <p>This plenary was centered on novel scientific advances in our understanding of childhood malnutrition and considered evidence-based strategies for its treatment. The discussion detailed possible biological mechanisms that underlie deficits in the growth of children due to malnutrition. Highlighted themes included enteric health and the gut microbiome, as well as the role of protein as a biological promoter of child growth and nutritional supplementation designed to support cognitive development in the presence of acute malnutrition.</p>
<p>Plenary II: Continuum of Care, Wasting, and Avoiding the MAM/SAM Dichotomy</p> <p>This session focused on the emerging evidence base for simplified/integrated approaches for the treatment of child wasting along the spectrum of acute malnutrition. It highlighted recent research on assessing cost-effectiveness and noninferiority compared with standard treatment and the relationship between wasting and stunting using longitudinal data. Topics also included an overview of the family MUAC approach for detecting malnutrition, the perspectives on wasting programs, and the universal systems-strengthening approach.</p>
<p>Plenary III: Implications of Treatment and Prevention of Malnutrition Strategies for Food Assistance Programming</p> <p>This session reviewed the impact that new strategies for preventing and treating malnutrition have on programming for food assistance for nutrition. Discussions highlighted multi-sectoral programming strategies, addressing maternal undernutrition in pregnant and lactating women, and the relationship between wasting and stunting, especially focusing on the need for critical program and study designs to improve scaling and sustainability and targeting at different life stages.</p>
<p>Plenary IV: Adapting Programming and Protecting Logistics for Food Assistance during Pandemics and Other Crises</p> <p>This session reviewed challenges related to disruptions in the supply chain for food aid products faced during previous emergencies, which included conflict, natural disasters, limited infrastructure, and the Ebola crisis, and how lessons learned can be applied to the current COVID-19 crisis. Feature adaptations included simplified admission criteria, simplified dosage, reduced follow-up visits, treatment by CHWs, securing adequate supplies from a variety of new and existing suppliers, and rapid agricultural market assessments for the tracking of changes in conditions on the ground.</p>
<p>Plenary V: Food Assistance for Nutrition: What Do We Still Need to Know?</p> <p>This session summarized key information that participants had been exposed to over the course of the Summit and focused on gaps in the current evidence base related to programming for food assistance for nutrition. Themes discussed during this session consisted of evidence gaps for scaling up, coordinating policies and mandates to best assist beneficiaries, effective platforms and digitalized nutrition, and evidence being put into practice.</p>

In addition to the plenaries, six concurrent panel sessions delved into a range of topics related to food assistance for nutrition, including micronutrients and animal source foods, packaging, alternative formulations, food safety, supply chains, and non-food interventions. A description of each of these sessions can be found in **Table 2** and more details about each of the presentations can be found in the **Panels** session summaries within the full report.

Table 2: Description of Concurrent Panel Sessions at Evidence Summit II

<p>Panel 1: Intakes of Micronutrients and Animal Source Foods for Nutrition Outcomes</p>	<p>Panel 2: Packaging of Food Assistance Products: Challenges and Outlook</p>
<p>This session reviewed current scientific evidence related to micronutrients and animal source foods for nutrition. The discussion identified that the use of animal source foods, rich in essential nutrients important for child growth and development and maternal health, can serve as an effective method for meeting unique nutrient needs of vulnerable populations. Additional focus was on how food fortification provides an opportunity to bring these nutrients into the available foods that we know have an impact on health outcomes and how to assess the most effective ways of integrating different kinds of product options into programs.</p>	<p>This session reviewed new and ongoing challenges related to packaging for food aid products, including efforts to make packaging more environmentally sustainable throughout the entirety of the supply chain as well as packaging solutions for extending the shelf life and reducing infestation and waste of food aid products. Panelists highlighted how consideration and development of specialized packaging earlier in the process can provide an opportunity to best tailor the packaging materials to the properties of the food aid products to promote safer and more impactful assistance; however, there is a need for engagement with stakeholders across all sectors and all of the humanitarian supply chain to overcome these challenges.</p>
<p>Panel 3: Alternative Formulations for Food Assistance for Nutrition Products</p>	<p>Panel 4: Food Safety and Naturally Occurring Contaminants in Food Assistance Products</p>
<p>This session covered recent advancements in alternative formulations for food aid products used for the treatment of acute malnutrition. The discussion defined alternative therapeutic foods, provided an overview of the various formulations for specialized nutritious foods (SNFs) that have been scientifically evaluated in recent years, discussed alternative protein sources to be considered in SNFs, and covered details regarding specific novel formulations. Themes of cost-effectiveness and acceptability relating to specifications of these products and implications for programming and policy were considered.</p>	<p>This session examined food safety concerns related to naturally occurring contaminants and the most effective ways of monitoring them. Panelists spoke on recent incidents and subsequent work that has been successful in tracking and regulating these contaminants. Continuous emphasis was placed on the importance of proper risk assessment management and open communication surrounding the evolving nature of naturally occurring contaminants.</p>
<p>Panel 5: Food Assistance Supply Chains and Traceability</p>	<p>Panel 6: Non-Food Interventions and their Impact on Nutrition Outcomes</p>
<p>This session explored recent technological and programming advances related to optimizing humanitarian supply chains for food aid products and improving the ability of suppliers, donors, and implementing partners to track and trace products throughout those supply chains. Considering these current supply chain and traceability efforts, panelists acknowledged it is essential to identify ways to make data accessible for analyses and call upon the necessary stakeholders to implement changes resulting from these efforts.</p>	<p>This session investigated the design and integration of complementary activities in programming for food assistance for nutrition, with an emphasis on emerging evidence on best practices for nutrition outcome optimization in nutrition-sensitive, systems-level approaches. Panelists spoke to specific interventions that showed promising results for the improvement of nutrition outcomes, but also highlighted the challenges faced during development and implementation.</p>

Three special sessions rounded out the program, including a marketplace for new tools and resources, lightning talks related to emerging evidence, and an online poster session. A description of each of these sessions can be found in **Table 3** and more details about each of the presentations can be found in the **Special Sessions** summaries within the full report.

Table 3: Description of Special Sessions at Evidence Summit II

Emerging Evidence Lightning Talks
<p>This special session consisted of diverse topics that highlighted the most recent research related to food assistance for nutrition. Topics discussed included the ongoing research on the use of Microbiota-Directed Complementary Foods (MDCFs) in the treatment of children with moderate acute malnutrition (MAM), complementary feeding using novel sorghum-based extruded fortified blended foods (FBFs), a decentralized model that uses Community Health Workers (CHWs) in the treatment of SAM, and biomarkers of environmental enteric dysfunction (EED) and its effect on growth and recovery from MAM in Sierra Leone.</p>
Tools and Resources Marketplace
<p>This session included an overview of various food assistance tools and resources for improved efficiency and effectiveness in the field of food assistance for nutrition to demonstrate how these tools can add value to attendees' work. Tools and resources featured included the FACET4SNF tool, the REFINE database, the Conditional On-Demand Assistance (CODA) application, and the Cost of Not Breastfeeding Tool.</p>
Online Poster Session
<p>All posters that were displayed during the Evidence Summit highlighted research developed or published within the past two years to help provide relevant and new topics to enhance the evidence base and inform participants on clinical research related to the prevention and treatment of wasting and stunting, development and innovation of specialized nutritious food products, programming strategies and policy implications for food assistance interventions, and novel tools and technologies to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of food assistance for nutrition outcomes.</p>

KEY FINDINGS FROM EVIDENCE SUMMIT II

- I. Quality standards and common variables are needed so that results can be compared across studies.

 - Data standardization should have transparency and data sharing agreements to ensure future ability to make use of data and prevent miscommunication.
 - Attention to vulnerable groups, such as pregnant and lactating women and adolescent children, requires cohesive work across all sectors to effectively target and reach those in need.
2. Cost-effective programming is important when trying to secure the most impact possible with limited resources.

 - Better understanding of the totality of programmatic costs can show which cost factors can be reduced and which costs are essential to reach and treat the most children.
 - New tools and resources targeting cost-effective planning and programming have the potential to assist stakeholders throughout all stages of program design and implementation.

3. Food safety and packaging are essential to the quality of food assistance delivery.

- Packaging should be considered throughout the development process in order to best suit the properties of the product and improve the shelf life for the duration of the supply chain journey.
- Monitoring and testing of contaminants in food assistance products need to be performed regularly and adapted to potential new risks.

4. Complementary activities could help when food aid products alone are not sufficient.

- Addressing underlying drivers of wasting and stunting in the community through non-nutrition sectors can increase the potential impact of food assistance programming.
- Understanding the local context and resources for complementary activities can be worthwhile and be sustainable after a program ends.

5. Increased efficiency is possible when the flow of product is optimized throughout the entire supply chain.

- Supply chains should be adapted to respond to emergencies while maintaining relevant standards, with adequate planning and risk assessment.
- Traceability efforts are continuously needed to ensure safety through the last mile.

CONCLUSIONS FROM EVIDENCE SUMMIT II

The Evidence Summit II also illuminated key gaps in the current evidence base:

1. **New evidence is needed.** Cost-effectiveness, specifically assessing value for money, is one of the key drivers of forward thinking and has to be understood in terms of empirical evidence of impact under key conditions. The strength of transparency, comparability, and rigor of evidence allows for optimal use in future dialogues.
2. **Dissemination of research.** Practitioners must be involved with disseminating key questions and answers, including additional information needed to better understand relapse.
3. **Increased effectiveness of interventions.** Focus is needed on how to increase impact and decrease the gap between the current state and full effectiveness.
4. **Product formulation and dosage.** Innovative product formulation and dosage specifications need to be explored, including the use of animal source foods and other fortification methods for essential nutrients.
5. **Metrics are needed for measuring nutrition.** Additional approaches for measuring recovery from undernutrition need to be explored, such as body composition and neurocognitive function, to understand the true meaning of full recovery and the potential for relapse.
6. **Continuum of care.** It is critical to think more holistically about programming approaches by breaking down silos between prevention and treatment, wasting and stunting, maternal and child nutrition, and emergency and development responses, as well as the cost-effectiveness of alternatives and added value of complementary activities.

PARTICIPANT SURVEY RESPONSES

Participants were invited to provide feedback through an anonymous online survey both at the end of each day of the program and through a final post-event survey, yielding a total of 5 survey collections. Quantitative and qualitative analytics from survey responses can be found in Annex 3: Participant Survey Analytics. These analytics created an illustration of participant representation by organization, role in relation to food assistance for nutrition, and country of residence, as well as attendance by session. Approximately 96 percent of survey respondents reported they would attend a virtual Evidence Summit similar to this again, with comments stating that the virtual format allowed for greater attendance from those unable to travel to conferences; however, several cited the lack of personal interaction and small-group discussions of in-person events. 98 percent of respondents found that the topics covered in the Evidence Summit were important to understanding food assistance for nutrition, but the opportunity for discussions in breakout rooms was commonly mentioned as a missing piece of connecting participants to fuel constructive learning environments.

Several key takeaways emerged from open-ended survey responses, providing insight for future food assistance research and FAQR activities. Impactful findings from participants included the breadth of expertise available related to food assistance for nutrition from around the world, the importance of continuum of care considerations in food assistance for nutrition programming, the latest efforts to implement family MUAC in the context of COVID-19, the critical role of micronutrients and amino acids in specialized nutritious foods, and the challenges posed by knowledge gaps and related to responding to changing circumstances. Respondents looked forward to building on discussions related to complementary programs, lessons learned from adapting programs during the pandemic, and interventions to address the nutrition needs of other vulnerable groups, including pregnant and lactating women, people with disabilities, and the elderly, during future events related to food assistance for nutrition.

Participants emphasized that there remains a gap between high-quality research regarding targeted food supplementation and the formulation of evidence-driven programmatic recommendations to guide policymakers. Respondents expressed an eagerness to share information from the Summit with their colleagues and to apply lessons learned in their work, including taking into greater consideration the preferences of recipients when developing or programming food aid products, new alternative product formulations, integrating the latest cost-effectiveness research into designing and implementing programs, and exploring new tools presented at the conference.

FULL REPORT:

Cohen, Mary Kathryn; Cabrera, Kristin; Karabayinga, Audrey; Thompson, Lauren; Witham, Gabrielle; Volin, Natalie; Bibliowicz, Anna Leigh; Ciarlo, Kristen; Van Fossen, Christine; Rogers, Beatrice; Webb, Patrick. 2021. *The Future of Food Assistance for Nutrition: Evidence Summit II Summary of Discussions, Key Findings, and Conclusions*. A Report for the Food Aid Quality Review. Boston, MA: Tufts University. https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00XHPC.pdf

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The Future of Food Assistance for Nutrition: Evidence Summit II

AGENDA THEMES

PLENARIES

- I – What Does **New Science** Tell Us?
- II – **Continuum of Care** (Avoiding the MAM/SAM Dichotomy)
- III – Implications of Treatment and Prevention of Malnutrition **Strategies**
- IV – Adapting **Logistics** during Pandemics and Other Crises
- V – Food Assistance for Nutrition: **What Do We Still Need to Know?**



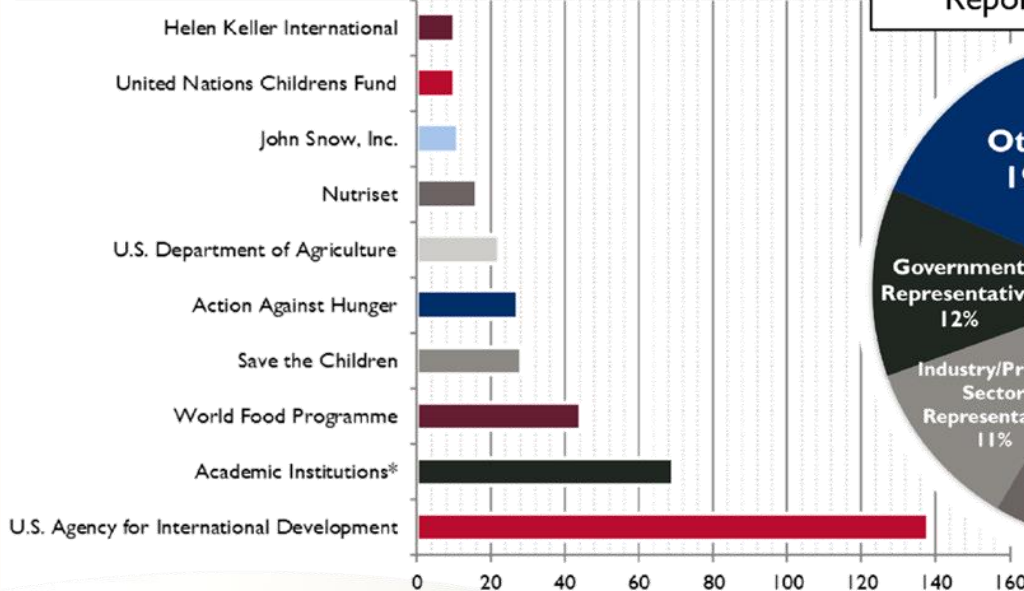
PANELS

- 1 – Intakes of **Micronutrients** and **Animal Source Foods**
- 2 – **Packaging** of Products: Challenges and Outlooks
- 3 – **Alternative Formulations** for Food Assistance
- 4 – **Food Safety** in Food Assistance Products
- 5 – Food Assistance **Supply Chains** and **Traceability**
- 6 – **Non-Food** Interventions and Nutrition Outcomes

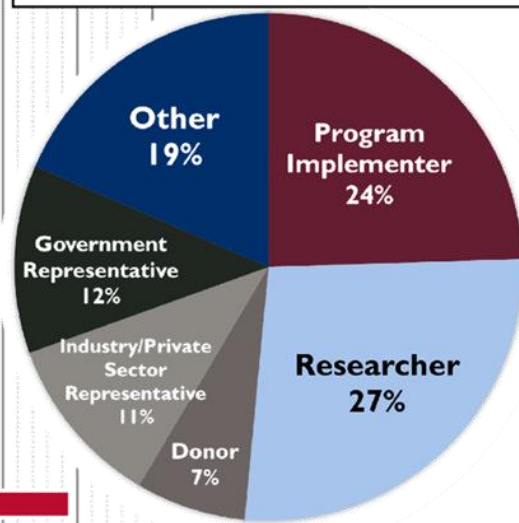
SPECIAL SESSIONS

- Opening Keynote Address
- Tools and Resources Marketplace
- Online Poster Session
- Emerging Evidence Lightning Talks
- Closing Keynote Address

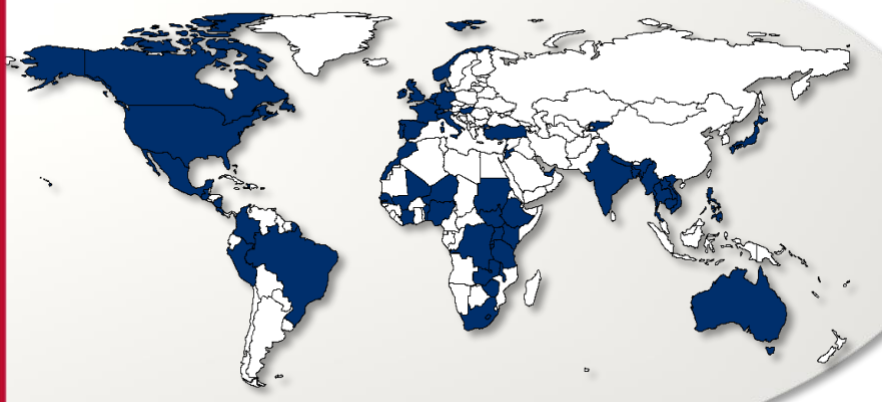
Top 10 Organizations in Attendance



Reported Participant Roles



Attendance by Country



The Evidence Summit II included:

740 Unique Attendees

103 Speakers

62 Countries

43 Low- and Middle- Income Countries

RESOURCES

Visit evidencesummit2.wordpress.com for Access to Event Information, Session Recordings, and Presentation Slides
Contact FAQR at tuftsfqr@gmail.com