Setting the Stage

On June 16-17, 2021, the United States Agency for International Development’s Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (USAID/BHA) and the Food Aid Quality Review (FAQR) project managed by Tufts University’s Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy hosted an expert Dialogue on Research and Innovation for Future Food Assistance. This provided a forum that brought together a small group of invited high-level thinkers working on various domains of food assistance for nutrition to engage in discussions to continue defining the highest priority evidence and research needs with an eye towards the future of nutrition and food assistance. Participants focused on how to address research gaps collectively in a variety of areas, including programming, products, food safety and packaging, and other evidence needs. The agenda for this event and a full list of participants can be found in Annex 1 and Annex 2, respectively, of this report.

The format was formally structured with a facilitator, but it was aimed at supporting an informal dialogue. There were no formal presentations in hope of promoting a space for open-ended and open discussion. Each session designated a listener to provide feedback to outline actionable pathways forward; then the participants prioritized these actions via online polling. This was an informal way for the participants from a wide range of backgrounds to quickly see which topics are most important to others in the food assistance sphere.

This event was the last public meeting organized by FAQR (whose funding ends in July 2021), but the need for food assistance is not going away. Creating a space to identify future priorities for the research agenda going forward is key. Since the beginning of FAQR, the needs, approaches, and technology available to the food assistance community have changed, and the research community needs to ensure that its areas of focus respond to these evolving needs.

The dialogue built upon the successful event The Future of Food Assistance for Nutrition: Evidence Summit II, held virtually in October 2020, that brought together 740 practitioners, policymakers, industry professionals, program funders, researchers, and students from 62 countries to showcase new evidence generated since the first Evidence Summit in 2018 and to emphasize what evidence is still needed to improve food assistance for nutrition.
Existing Knowledge Gaps

The first session focused on known knowledge gaps and areas that the food assistance community needs to prioritize in coming years. Experts from USAID and the World Food Programme began the session by providing perspectives on current information and data gaps to stimulate dialogue among participants. One initial need identified was for better epidemiological evidence based on data from low- and middle-income countries. The current measures of nutrition needs and biological processes of nutrient absorption are largely derived from research on healthy children in high-income countries. Creating new knowledge and making better use of existing data sources through data mining will strengthen the community’s understanding of malnutrition in children and facilitate the development of the next generation of functional nutritious food products.

Another gap discussed was the need to understand more clearly the specific elements of context that affect all parts of the food assistance chain. Practitioners need to consider all elements of intervention design from the beginning stages of a program, especially the process of delivery, and continue to conduct program evaluations that address all of these elements and include process assessment. Related to the context of these programs, there is merit in understanding not only what healthy foods are consumed but also the unhealthy foods consumed. This information is also needed for school-aged children, a demographic group under-researched in the food assistance world. Research on the daily diets of this population could help direct school feeding programs and address nutrition issues among adolescents, especially of young women, a group for whom the need for effective targeting as part of an intergenerational approach to improving child nutrition is becoming increasingly clear.
There were calls for further study of the foods used in programs of food assistance for nutrition to understand, for example, whether two different isocaloric foods with similar micronutrient content can be considered interchangeable. More broadly, are findings exclusive to the specific products studied, or can they be assumed to be representative of a broader group of specialized nutritious foods?

A common approach to food assistance has been to provide a package of resources, for example, a monthly food ration as well as cash. The context in which these are used also needs to be scrutinized to ensure that the mix is appropriate and effective. The agencies also need to consider the delivery pathways for the different items included in a package, as they are often not delivered by the same method. Further, programs must consider whether the package of assistance is appropriate to the context. For example, if cash is provided, how well is the availability of nutritious food options understood in the local market? This level of detail needs to be considered before programming the same type of assistance across different areas and must be better understood in the analysis of results that compare like approaches in varying contexts.

At the end of this session, the designated listener summarized what was discussed into 11 action points which are presented in Box 1. Priority Knowledge Gaps in the Food Assistance Evidence Base.

### Box 1. Priority Knowledge Gaps in the Food Assistance Evidence Base

- Make use of epidemiological studies for causes and treatment of moderate and severe acute malnutrition; use improved analytic capabilities to do “data mining.”

- Understand the biology of metabolism of foods in the context of malnourished individuals (requirements, metabolism mostly studied in healthy populations).

- Context matters, but we need to know what specific aspects of the context matter and for what outcomes—and recognize that context evolves over time.

- Elucidate pathways of delivery and impact.

- To what extent is fine-tuning of products needed, and what aspects of the food need to be addressed?

- Understanding school-age diets and the roles of schools in providing healthy diets.

- Evidence on the effectiveness of different modalities (food, cash, other) depends on the specifics of the program and the context—who receives what, how much, how often.

- Understanding how to address concurrent wasting and stunting.

- Can we improve the impact of programs by addressing stunting and wasting together (not as separate issues)?

- Developing metrics for assessing “healthy diets.”

- Expanding the definition of malnutrition beyond anthropometry.
Programming and Operational Perspectives

The second session focused on programming issues relating to food assistance aimed at improving nutrition among beneficiaries. A nutrition advisor from USAID began the session by describing the challenges faced in programming from the perspective of a large donor. The advisor summarized the greatest challenge as having multiple dimensions – how to reach more women and children in need; how to achieve more efficient recovery to move wasted women and children out of the window of danger; in a world constrained by resources, how to ensure those most in need are reached; and how to prevent the undernutrition toward which food assistance is directed from occurring in the first place. Both countries where the FAQR ‘four foods’ studies were conducted demonstrated that the type of food provided to children mattered less for treatment and prevention of malnutrition.\(^1\) What mattered most is that they actually consumed those foods. Effectiveness of programmatic approaches depends on far more than simply a formulation of a specific product. A deeper understanding of the protective and aggravating factors of a household or community environment as well as the details of the programming elements beyond the provided food items are needed to move forward and better understand differences in program outcomes. A more refined understanding of cognition as it relates to malnutrition was highlighted by citing the FAQR work on neurocognitive function in young children in wasting treatment programs.

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\(^1\) Comparative Cost-effectiveness of Four Supplementary Foods in Preventing Stunting and Wasting in Children 6-24 months in Burkina Faso
Comparative Cost-Effectiveness of Four Supplementary Foods in Treating Moderate Acute Malnutrition in Children 6-59 Months in Sierra Leone
After these initial points were raised, participants were invited to discuss them. One area of programming that received a lot of attention was delivery channels. Current food assistance can be given in a range of forms (e.g., in-kind food, cash, specialized food products), but these require different modes of delivery and storage. The communities that are most in need of assistance tend to have weak health systems or community structures which can make delivery of food challenging.

Those same communities also may not have nutritious options in the local market, and therefore assistance in the form of cash may not be as useful as assistance in the form of a food product and could even lead to less diet diversity in some contexts. Another potential pathway for future food assistance is more engagement with the private sector in the target communities to help them produce nutritionally dense foods locally. Dietary diversity of the target population is also critical when, for example, considering the potential harmful neurocognitive side effects from cyanide found in a diet with a large amount of cassava, which could be offset if the diet also contains animal-source foods.

The context of programming was also a high-priority topic. One participant suggested that international donors need to make programming 'smarter' by more precise targeting, which requires more impact evaluations that include cost-effectiveness assessment.

Many of these challenges and ideas overlap, but an overarching point is that the food assistance community must continue what they are doing, as the need is increasing, but should also take a step back to develop innovative new solutions to the barriers they face.
At the end of this session the designated listener summarized what was discussed into seven key takeaways. Then participants were asked to rank these by importance, as well as to suggest other priorities related to the session theme. The final result of this poll can be found in Figure 1.

**Figure 1. Priorities for Action Related to Programming**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Priority</th>
<th>Rank</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expanded knowledge and understanding of <strong>delivery channels</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Holistic appreciation of intervention impacts</strong>, as well as engagement (beyond &lt;5 yrs)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Moving <strong>beyond growth and anthropometry</strong> to cognition and other outcomes</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;Smart&quot; programming: targeting and enhanced matching of intervention to context</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bringing in <strong>different actors for delivery</strong> – appreciating varied incentives at play</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Nutrition curricula for health professionals</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Mental health support</strong> for mothers and infant nutrition</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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**Other Suggested Priorities**

- **Maximizing the use of locally-grown ingredients** to better integrate product supply with prevention and increasing resilience
- **Dietary diversity** and the advantages offered in terms of countering toxicity, etc.
- Moving **beyond anthropometry** in measuring nutrition outcomes
- **Combination of interventions** for any one to be effective
- Technical and business assistance for small producers (e.g., eggs) to create food hubs that have both a nutritional and economic impact
- Trying to engage countries in developing **social safety nets**
- Understanding the **agriculture and economic policies** in the type of foods that are being produced
- Looking at **institutional and organizational gaps**, in terms of looking eye-to-eye when designing food assistance programs in a more collaborative and integrated way
Food Products

The last session the first day focused on food products used in the context of food assistance interventions. A technical advisor from USAID with expertise in maternal and child health as well as nutrition began the session with thought-provoking questions. The advisor noted that even with the vast amount of evidence generated by FAQR, implementers are still left with questions about what kinds of products should be used, how those products should be coordinated, and what can be done to improve the nutritional impact of the products in other ways.

The participants engaged in a lively discussion about how to improve the next generation of food assistance products to support more cognitive development, including discussion of specific nutrients and how they interact with one another in ways that can impact the effectiveness of the food. One example given was how the form of iron used and its ratio to zinc, as well as the level of vitamin B12, can interact to alter the nutrients’ effect. Broadly, these details led to the suggestion that one product cannot be fit for all children because the nutrients for brain development differ from those needed for linear growth; therefore, products may need to be more specialized in parallel with child development milestones.

There was also a discussion on local procurement and production of products, noting that this faces challenges as well. To sustain local production, there must be enough demand, but that production also must meet the high-quality standards required for foods used in assistance programs. Once again, the context matters. Some ingredients may not be locally available in some places, which could affect the cost significantly. Plant-based formulations of ready-to-use food products have been developed with local ingredients in countries with low dairy production.
Additionally, the point was raised that the micronutrient powders currently in use are not very different from what they were decades ago. This calls for more basic nutrition science to help refine these products and test them through both effectiveness and efficacy trials.

At the end of this session, once again the designated listener summarized the priorities for action into 12 points that were then ranked by participants. These can be found in Figure 2. Priorities for Action Related to Products.

**Figure 2. Priorities for Action Related to Products**

- Gen 2.0 products for **child development**: nutrients for brain development vs linear growth
- **Innovations around cost** of production, packaging, delivery, e.g., private sector, local
- Evidence from **effectiveness at scale** for products
- Leveraging the **most recent science** in formulation of premix
- **Engaging all stakeholders** so they can learn from and feed off each other
- **Quality** is always an issue
- **Animal-source foods**, particularly important at certain times in life, e.g., 6-11 months
- Facilitating programs that provide **income** as well as improved products
- **Ecological, systems approach**: Why are we considering the individual nutrients?
- Need for continued **development and refinement of micronutrient powders**
- **Interaction of micronutrients** and the matrix (form of iron, vitamin C)
- **Local production** in countries without much dairy (animal feed=plant-based amino acids)

**Other Suggested Priorities**

- **Sustainability in the long term** – to have populations be able to provide sustainably for themselves rather than ongoing food assistance
- **Maternal products and their development** – pushing our understanding forward for **products specifically targeted to women**
- Creating **sustainable change in behavior** so effects persist when we no longer deliver products
- In terms of maternal nutrition, the importance of **fruit and vegetables during pregnancy**, and how we might incorporate them into emergency assistance
- **Working with retailers** to ensure that they have the supplies, in good quality, and available when people come to redeem their voucher
Food Safety and Packaging

The second day of the two-day event began with a discussion of food safety and packaging. A USAID food technologist began this session with a few points of interest. An obvious but important concept for the food assistance community to keep in mind is that food that is not safe is not food. This simple statement highlights the importance of food safety and packaging. The chain of food, farm-to-fork, has risks at every level including but not limited to the raw materials production, processing, transportation, and storage. The food assistance community must work hard to minimize risks along this chain.

Packaging, even with the healthiest ingredients, affects the ability to deliver safe food. Important challenges include leakage and infestation, as well as efficient storage warehouses in adverse climates along the supply chain. In addition to ensuring that the food is kept safe, packaging needs to be designed in consideration of environmental sustainability and the need to minimize waste.

After these initial points of concern related to this topic, the participants began a lively discussion. One participant with expertise related to food safety informed the group of a World Health Organization working group aimed at studying the human burden of disease caused by common foods, including microbial and mycotoxin contamination. The burden from these issues is highly underestimated in the world, and the group is developing models to estimate these risks more accurately. The intersection of foodborne toxins and malnutrition is currently being studied within the Feed the Future Innovation Lab for Nutrition and is an important area for researchers. These potential toxins also affect pregnant and lactating women themselves and risk exposing children in utero or as infants to these same toxins.
Another participant whose expertise lies in packaging brought up other issues, including considering the materials used, their availability in specific locations, and the costs associated with procuring those materials. Other considerations from the program side of packaging are whether the rations are provided in bulk or in individual portions, which would also have an environmental impact. Ideas to make packaging reusable, for example, as receptacles for water or plants are useful but affect the cost of packaging. However, a small increase in cost to keep the materials from becoming litter may be worth it in the end. Additionally, packaging must protect the food from impact, vibration, weather, and insects to keep it edible.

Attention then turned to labels on specialized nutritious foods, which tend to be generic since the same product is often shipped to multiple countries. But more tailored packaging could be more appealing to some beneficiaries. Local designs would be ideal, but without local partners to produce these, it becomes extremely costly for U.S. producers to have multiple labels for the same product, dependent on its destination. The donor agencies also must keep in mind that field testing for product labels is important. One participant shared an anecdote about a product package featuring an image of a child surrounded by sunrays that some beneficiaries mistook for nails or stars, which caused them to reject the product. The size of the package is another point of discussion. Some products, such as lipid-based foods, are delivered in small sachets, which require more packaging than bulk goods but are less prone to contamination than larger packages that are regularly reopened to obtain additional servings.

The priorities for action were summarized by the designated session listener and once again ranked by the participants. The results of this poll can be found in Figure 3. Priorities for Action Related to Food Safety and Packaging.

Figure 3. Priorities for Action Related to Food Safety and Packaging

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Priority</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Environmental impact of packaging</td>
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<td>Packaging size and portioning while designing packaging</td>
<td>![Packaging size and portioning]</td>
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<td>Partnering with the private sector</td>
<td>![Partnering with the private sector]</td>
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<tr>
<td>Estimating the burden of food safety on health and nutrition</td>
<td>![Estimating the burden of food safety]</td>
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<tr>
<td>Using packaging design for messaging and targeting end-user</td>
<td>![Using packaging design]</td>
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<td>Other</td>
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Other Suggested Priorities

Beyond estimating burden of foodborne disease, we need interventions broadly applicable globally to **REDUCE food contaminants** (much of it involves drier, colder storage)

Understanding **how the packages are used** (and exposed to degradation and contamination) in the home

Packaging is critical to maintain safety and the quality of the products in the package to **prevent and reduce degradation** of the content of the package
Additional Evidence Needs

The next session of the day took a step back from the discussions focused on predetermined themes related to food assistance to broaden the discussion to other areas where new evidence is needed. One of the directors of the FAQR project recapped some of the top evidence needs identified in previous sessions, which can be found in **Box 2. Priority Evidence Needs**.

**Box 2. Priority Evidence Needs**

- Improved understanding of basic science about metabolism and the biology of food consumption of malnourished populations.

- Broader consideration of cost-effectiveness, such as the potential cost-effectiveness of reusable or recyclable packaging that may be more expensive than other alternatives but could provide additional benefits to recipients without increasing waste.

- Additional research related to how contaminants enter food products and the potential effects of certain toxins.

- Dialogue and harmonization among donor agencies but also with national governments, implementing partners, and the private sector.

- Further study of the determinants of relapse and review of the methods of measuring malnutrition beyond anthropometrics.
Participants were asked to submit up to 12 words or phrases describing additional evidence needs that had not yet been considered or sufficiently discussed during previous sessions. A word cloud was generated with these contributions, which can be viewed in **Figure 4. Evidence Gaps That Require Further Research**. Evidence needs related to cost-effectiveness, sustainability, relapse, and gut health topped the list of participant priorities and the results of the word cloud sparked a lively discussion about additional evidence needs that fed into the final session on consolidating priorities for the future.

**Figure 4. Evidence Gaps That Require Further Research**
At the end of the session, the listener of the session summarized the discussion into 12 key takeaways ranked by participants in Figure 5. Priorities for Action Related to Additional Evidence Needs, with cost-effectiveness once again topping the list.

**Figure 5. Priorities for Action Related to Additional Evidence Needs**

- **Cost-effectiveness**: considering all net effects, not just specific program outcome
- Developing **field-feasible metrics** for cognition, immune function, etc.
- **Basic biology research** for malnourished populations and contaminated environments
- Understanding the **combination of interventions** needed for any one to be effective
- Understanding contextual (not just individual) **determinants and prevention of relapse**
- Measuring **sustainable change** through food assistance programs (longitudinal cohorts)
- Political economy of **interagency harmonization** (shift incentives for collaboration)
- Measuring **food system contribution** to undernutrition (systemic action vs targeted)
- **Better use of available data** from programs and from donor-funded research studies
  - Expanding the definition of nutrition outcomes **beyond anthropometry**
  - **Influencing behavior** in household that affects health and nutrition outcomes
  - Identifying specific **contextual components** that affect program effectiveness

**Other Suggested Priorities**

- **Gender-based** food production, food purchases, and food decision-making, and how this might affect food systems challenges and solutions
- Tracking outcomes and inputs **beyond the 1000 days** – long-term effects of improved nutrition after age 2, long-term effects of intervening before pregnancy
Consolidating Priorities

To wrap up the two-day discussion, the organizers asked participants to prioritize the top three poll results from the programming, products, food safety and packaging, and additional evidence needs sessions. This ranking was done twice, first asking the participants to identify the top priority for ‘today’—meaning something that could be done fairly quickly and still have a positive impact—and then asking them to identify the top priority for ‘tomorrow’—meaning something that may require more planning, funding, and/or time for data collection. The final results of these polls can be found in Figure 6. Priorities for Action: Today and Tomorrow.

Figure 6. Priorities for Action: Today and Tomorrow

The top short-term priority voted by participants was improved assessment of cost-effectiveness, including net effects rather than just specific program outcomes, and alternatives beyond individual products or approaches. This stimulated a discussion about how effectiveness is defined and the lack of a common definition. A handful of participants from the academic sector emphasized the importance of thinking more broadly and holistically about cost-effectiveness, such as factoring relapse rates or the environmental impact of packaging waste into cost-effectiveness analyses, while others emphasized the importance of considerations of program context and engagement with local governments to enable lasting change through social protection programs.

The top long-term priority that could be a gamechanger in international food assistance, as voted by participants, was additional basic science research related to biology and metabolism, including...
the gut microbiome, for malnourished populations and within contaminated environments. Participants discussed some recent research relevant to this topic before entering into a discussion related to the importance of approaching food assistance as a system. One participant noted that researchers often focus on one small area of interest that they may not apply in a broader context. Therefore, research funders should consider investments in a more systematic way to generate needed evidence.

In conclusion, representatives from USAID and the Food Aid Quality Review shared their thoughts on the discussions of the two days. It was acknowledged that in order to be able to work more broadly (e.g., using more local partners, understanding more nutrition science, studying cost-effectiveness holistically), more sectors must be involved in the food assistance chain. Current food assistance efforts must be continued and expanded in order to respond to increasing need around the world while thinking about how to provide food assistance shifts in the future. This new thinking needs to be done more systematically because food assistance is a response to systemic problems related to food systems, health systems, and political systems, among others. The food assistance community also must attain a better understanding of what level of impact is possible to achieve with the commodities available, which requires a better understanding of the basic biology of the target population. Lastly, the approaches from different agencies must also continue to be harmonized, and agencies must work together so they all may be more effective in the goal of feeding those most in need.
Annex 1. Agenda

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Annex 2. Participants

Session Leaders

Tufts University
Beatrice Lorge Rogers
Professor of Economics and Food Policy and Co-Principal Investigator, Food Aid Quality Review

Patrick Webb
Alexander McFarlane
Professor of Nutrition and Principal Investigator, Food Aid Quality Review

USAID
Eric Anderson
Nutrition Advisor

Judy Canahuati
Nutrition Advisor

Rufino Perez
Senior Food Technology Advisor

Facilitator

Jane Badham
Managing Director
### Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DSM</th>
<th>Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health</th>
<th>Helen Keller INTL</th>
<th>Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hector Cori</td>
<td>Sheila Isanaka</td>
<td>Rolf Klemm</td>
<td>Parul Christian</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nutrition Science</td>
<td>Assistant Professor of Nutrition</td>
<td>Vice President for Nutrition</td>
<td>Professor and Director, Human Nutrition</td>
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<td>Director, Latin America</td>
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<th>MIT Lincoln Laboratory</th>
<th>Michigan State University</th>
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<tr>
<td>Marko Kerac</td>
<td>Diana Twede</td>
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<tr>
<td>Associate Professor, Public Health Nutrition; Course Director, Nutrition for Global Health</td>
<td>Professor Emeritus</td>
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<th>NIH</th>
<th>SickKids</th>
<th>Tampere University</th>
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<tr>
<td>Felicia Wu</td>
<td>Dan Raiten</td>
<td>André Briend</td>
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<tr>
<td>John A. Hannah Distinguished Professor in Food Safety, Toxicology, and Risk Assessment</td>
<td>Nutrition Program Director, National Institute of Child Health and Human Development</td>
<td>Research Professor</td>
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<tr>
<th>UC Davis Department of Nutrition</th>
<th>Washington University in St. Louis Brown School</th>
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<tr>
<td>Michelle Jimenez</td>
<td>Corey Watts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Senior Programme Associate</td>
<td>AAAS Science &amp; Technology Policy Fellow</td>
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<th>World Food Programme</th>
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<tr>
<td>Paul Alberghine</td>
<td>Diane de Bernardo</td>
<td>Saskia de Pee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior International Program Specialist</td>
<td>Food Security and Nutrition Advisor</td>
<td>Chief, Systems Analysis for Nutrition, and Senior Technical Advisor, Nutrition</td>
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<tr>
<th>Lora Iannotti</th>
<th>Kyle King</th>
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<tr>
<td>Associate Professor and Associate Dean</td>
<td>International Program Specialist</td>
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The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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