

# Nutrition CRSP Stakeholder Meeting: Selected Conclusions on Research Priorities for Nepal

## Introduction

In the context of commitments shown by the Government of Nepal to addressing the country's nutrition challenges, the National Planning Commission, in collaboration with the Nutrition Collaborative Research Support Program (N/CRSP), organized a two-day stakeholders' forum to discuss research priorities in nutrition, health, and agriculture. The forum (held on November 21/22 2011) brought together 115 participants from across Nepal's Government (National Planning Commission, Ministry of Health and Population, Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives, Ministry of Education, and Ministry of Local Development), as well as key development partners, including USAID, UNICEF, and WFP and a range of non-governmental and academic institutions. The specific aims were to gain insights on challenges and opportunities from a wide variety of stakeholders working in research and programming, and to identify priority knowledge gaps. This report synthesizes the presentations and discussions of the forum and outlines the research and capacity building priorities as determined by the participants. A fuller proceedings document is available at [www.nutritioncrsp.org](http://www.nutritioncrsp.org).

## Background

Nepal has made remarkable progress in improving the nutritional status of its women and children. According to DHS data, stunting in children under 5 years of age has dropped from roughly 49% in 2006 to 41% in 2011. Similarly, sustained high coverage of vitamin A supplementation, use of iodized salt, and increasing coverage iron/folic acid and deworming coverage have all resulted in improved micronutrient status and health outcomes for women. Deservedly, Nepal has been recognized as an 'Early Riser' as part of the Scaling-Up Nutrition movement. Despite these admirable achievements, the government of Nepal has not rested on its laurels. Accepting that nutrition problems in Nepal are still alarming, the government and its partners have adopted a multisectoral approach to tackling malnutrition, leading to formulation of a Multi-Sectoral Nutrition Plan of Action (MNSP).

## Knowledge Gaps

Ambitious in scale and vision, the MNSP builds on the prior assessments of nutrition needs and intervention options. However, important knowledge gaps continue to impair effective design and implementation of the complex (multi-sectoral) actions proposed. Following a set of presentations on nutrition trends in Nepal, recent study findings, and planned research, forum participants were asked to discuss and identify broad and specific domains of research that could address significant issues. These are briefly described below, in no particular order of significance:

1. Learning "how" interventions work. It was noted that while it is *relatively* easy to determine efficacy of single interventions, and *relatively* easy to target simple behavior change messages or delivery of single resources, the delivery of complex messages and complex (inter-sectoral) programming is hugely challenging, regardless of context. While there are "lessons" to be

learned from practitioners, there has been no systematic assessment of approaches to allow for an enhanced understanding of cost-effectiveness of multidimensional programs at scale.

2. Learning about contexts (of interventions) matters as much to successful intervention as specifics of inputs delivered. The success or failure of much program delivery lies with the presence or absence of a facilitating environment for intervention. Factors such as policy frameworks, sociocultural norms, local perception of past attempts at induced change, and local institutional strengths or weaknesses must all be taken into account in seeking to rigorously assess potential constraints to scale-up and cost-effectiveness.
3. Learning about how best to leverage agriculture to support enhanced nutrition. The upsurge in interest in promotion of agriculture to promote nutrition remains poorly informed empirically. There are some good studies demonstrating how certain kinds of investment in, say, home gardens, small ruminants, or crop diversification, can translate into certain defined nutrition outcomes. However, overall, rigorous studies are few and far between. Results have been shown to be mixed globally, and research in Nepal specifically is lacking.
4. Learning about the viability of food systems. Concerns about potential losses of nutrients along the value-chain (through processing), food safety (linked to over/misuse of pesticides, mycotoxin spread, etc.), and rapidly changing urban diets, were all raised by multiple participants concerned not just with production or consumption, but with the integrity of systems involved in crop protection, marketing, and storage.
5. Learning about the cost of policy alternatives for nutrition. Demonstrating efficacy of individual nutrition interventions is a necessary but insufficient basis for deciding on the design of potential actions at the national level aimed at improving nutrition. Many questions remain about trade-offs (between long-term and short-term actions), real costs (at scale rather than at a pilot level), the opportunity and other costs of collaboration (versus specialization), and packaged (combined) delivery platforms versus separate vertical chains.
6. Learning about behavior change communication—at all levels. Behavior modification is an important goal in nutrition improvement, and not only at the household level. While the measurement of effective actions to achieve sustained changes within households is important, so too is assessment of knowledge and behavior change among service providers at community level, district level program managers, line ministry professionals, and national policymakers.

## Conclusions

Sustaining recent gains in nutrition at the national level requires Nepal's researchers to deliver policy-relevant knowledge that goes beyond pilot programs and efficacy trials. Promotion of high standards of study designs, focused less on 'what to do' than on 'how to do it,' gains increased urgency as Nepal's government rolls out its national MNSP. Annual sharing of scientifically-rigorous evidence within Nepal should be promoted. Wide local collaboration on research to tackle these kinds of questions has the potential for large positive benefits on nutrition actions across the country.