



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

The Office of the Administrator

February 8, 2021

Mark E. Keenum, PhD
Chairman,
Board for International Food and Agricultural Development
President
Mississippi State University
Lee Hall, Suite 4000
Mississippi State, MS 39762

Dear Dr. Keenum:

Thank you for sharing the Board for International Food and Agricultural Development's (BIFAD) findings, conclusions, and recommendations from the September 14, 2020, virtual public meeting on *COVID-19 and Nutrition: Impacts, Field Innovations, and the Way Forward*.

We greatly appreciate BIFAD's recommendations that the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) examine and strengthen food and health systems; influence political commitment; encourage a multi-sectoral approach; scale up data, research, and evidence-based policymaking; and accelerate leveraging digital technologies. USAID will take BIFAD's findings, conclusions, and recommendations into account as we review our current programs and develop future strategies in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The attached summary details how we have responded to the BIFAD recommendations.

USAID is committed to its support of U.S. land-grant universities and BIFAD, and we look forward to continuing to work with you. Again, thank you for sharing with us your very helpful findings and recommendations.

Sincerely,

Gloria D. Steele

Summary of Responses by the U.S. Agency for International Development to the Recommendations from the 182nd Public Meeting (Virtual) of the Board for International Food and Agricultural Development (BIFAD): *COVID-19 and Nutrition: Impacts, Field Innovations, and the Way Forward* (Public Meeting Date September 14, 2020)

Recommendations

BIFAD recommends that USAID build on a strong foundation of nutrition leadership and programming and use the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity.

1. **Examine and Strengthen Food Systems:** Support the identification of vulnerable components of food systems and strengthen them for greater resilience to shocks and stressors, using USAID’s influence and reach to examine the systemic elements of local and global food systems that failed during the pandemic. Programming should pursue policy and private sector strategies to make food systems more resilient and coherent to support achieving sustainable nutritious diets for more people and ending malnutrition in all its forms.

Agency Response:

- USAID strategically and intentionally invests in strengthening the capacity of a diversity of local actors—individuals, organizations, and networks—throughout the agri-food system, including governmental agencies, education and research institutions, private-sector firms, and others to increase the resilience of food systems; secure inclusive, sustainable access to nutritious food; and support countries on their Journeys to Self-Reliance. We support local ownership based on an inclusive multi-stakeholder or “whole-of-society” approach from decision-making and shaping of development priorities and strategies to implementation and shared learning.
- USAID developed the Food Systems Conceptual Framework this year to help us consider the interconnectedness of our work and identify the indirect impacts that we can and should have on diet in our designs and approaches. Within the past few months, the Senegal, Ethiopia, and Bangladesh Missions have begun using the framework to inform their work. We are leveraging our flagship nutrition project, USAID Advancing Nutrition, to map Mission activities within the framework and enable Missions to identify through the Food Systems Dashboard potential opportunities to intervene across food systems to improve diets, and thus nutrition. The high level of interest displayed by Missions in food systems and the RFS conceptual framework underscores the appetite and global shift in dialogue toward a food-systems approach. USAID will continue to integrate the framework in program design and will be key to our engagement around the UN Food Systems Summit in 2021.
- USAID continues to see examples from our partners, as highlighted during the September 14 meeting, that show their abilities to adapt and be responsive to needs on the ground, as they continue to work toward greater accessibility and affordability of safe, nutritious foods. Examples include increasing access to finance, ensuring access to markets for nutritious products, and strengthening supply chains.

2. **Examine and Strengthen Health Systems:** Support the identification of the most vulnerable components of the health system and strengthen them for more systematic delivery of nutrition-specific services, and particularly focus on strengthening the components for community health workers.

Agency Response:

- USAID works with host-country governments to strengthen existing health systems in its priority countries, including improving the quality of nutrition services at both the facility and community levels.
 - One of USAID's priorities in nutrition is to strengthen the capacity of healthcare providers to deliver nutrition services and apply effective and high-quality social and behavior change (SBC) interventions, such as promotion of exclusive breastfeeding for infants zero to six months. Community health workers are often responsible for the complex task of changing individual, group, and community behaviors to improve health and nutrition. Through our global nutrition project, USAID Advancing Nutrition, we are developing tools to assess, strengthen, and evaluate SBC skills among community health workers to help program implementers identify the key gaps that need to be addressed.
 - USAID is also working with UNICEF to analyze existing nutrition data to be able to strategically prioritize and target potential malnutrition hotspots in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This will include describing the vulnerabilities for nutrition as well as exploring the commonalities of children with malnutrition who may also have other risk factors that make them vulnerable to the negative effects of COVID-19.
3. **Influence Political Commitment:** Use USAID's strong leadership and influence to increase investment in and political commitment to nutrition, especially in advance of the UN Food Systems Summit and the Nutrition for Growth Summit, both scheduled for 2021. USAID's commitment to elevating nutrition to a higher level of policy attention is commendable, but we need to continue reaching higher and raise our expectations of what is possible.

Agency Response:

- USAID is committed to ensuring U.S. leadership during the Year for Action for Nutrition for Growth, the UN Food Systems Summit, and the launch of Scaling Up Nutrition 3.0 to drive evidence-based commitments and resources to high-impact nutrition actions from donors and country governments, especially given the additional undernutrition burden from the pandemic.
- In addition, USAID is active in the development of the USG Global Nutrition Coordination Plan 2.0 to accelerate global nutrition goals and increase all-of-government responsiveness to emerging evidence, opportunities, and threats, which will also contribute to the refresh of the Global Food Security Strategy. Both strategies are key to ensuring nutrition remains a central focus of the work we do in terms of programming, metrics, and policies.
- At the bilateral level, we are committed to using our country presence and influence to elevate nutrition to a higher level of host government policy attention.

4. **Encourage Multi-Sectoral Approach:** Continue to encourage a strong multisectoral foundation in the programming that USAID supports. This current crisis has underscored the interdependent roles of government, civil society, and business that should be leveraged to build sustainable solutions.

Agency Response:

- USAID recognizes that nutrition is a cross-cutting issue that requires collaboration, coordination, integration, and technical support with and from multiple operating units, including Missions, multiple Centers within RFS, the Bureau for Global Health (GH), the Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA), and Regional Bureaus. The new Nutrition Architecture within the Agency establishes a Nutrition Leadership Council (NLC) and Center for Nutrition. The NLC provides a high-level forum for the Agency to elevate, coordinate, and provide leadership on strategic technical issues, programming, and financial resources. The Center for Nutrition is responsible for strengthening linkages between USAID's multi-sectoral nutrition programming. The intra-agency Nutrition Technical Working Group (NTWG) has been operating for several years and provides a multi-sector structure in areas such as technical coordination, balancing of equities, and policy recommendations, as well as for sharing sector-specific research that informs the practice of other operating units in the Agency.
 - USAID recognizes the role we must play in the private-sector engagement and nutrition space. We recognize the critical roles businesses play in transforming food systems to deliver safe, nutritious food year round. Their increased investment is essential to improving access to and affordability of healthy diets. With this in mind, USAID's Center for Nutrition is prioritizing a robust work stream dedicated to private-sector engagement. We are also committed to ensure the engagement of the private sector bilaterally through our in-country USAID missions.
5. **Scale Up Data, Research, and Evidence-Based Policymaking:** Scale up efforts to collect and disseminate nutrition data and look beyond more readily available nutrition data for children and pregnant and lactating women. More data are needed for other vulnerable population groups, such as adolescents, to better inform the design of nutrition programming and to support modeling of nutrition outcomes. USAID should support public agricultural programming, R&D, and public-private partnerships to shape strong policies, improved programming, and better preparation for future crises.

Agency Response:

- We continue to work with the interagency and our partners to integrate and improve population- and participant-based metrics that we know are important to nutrition outcomes. We are excited about the recent improvements and progress we have made and continue to commit resources to ensure continued momentum in the short and long term.
- The Agency's Food Systems Conceptual Framework will give us the necessary foundation to improve nutrition-sensitive interventions and metrics that are more responsive to agriculture and food-system determinants of nutrition and consequently public health.
- We have established a Division for Food Safety within the Center for Nutrition to address the heavy and undervalued health and economic burdens of foodborne disease. In low- and

middle-income countries, consumption of unsafe foods disproportionately leads to increased disease burden and premature deaths, especially among children, and results in an estimated \$110 billion in productivity losses and medical expenses. Through managing food-safety risks in supply chains we are protecting the health and nutritional status of the world's most vulnerable.

- We are testing new approaches for financing small and medium enterprises that comprise the bulk of local food systems, while partnering in new ways with the private sector.
 - The Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) core questionnaire was updated with substantial new nutrition content including the addition of data on maternal diets and coverage of nutritional counseling, nutrition data quality significantly improved, and new modules (e.g., food security) were added. In the near future, the DHS Service Provision Assessment (SPA), which is a health facility assessment, will be revised with more nutrition indicators as well.
 - We are working to build a return on investment case for USAID nutrition-specific investments.
 - We are also building in-country capacity to monitor and evaluate USAID nutrition programs through training for Missions and partners, and the development of tools to enhance rigorous performance monitoring and program evaluations.
 - USAID will continue to use nutrition- and market-based indicators in predicting coming food-security and nutritional crises in order to act quickly and prevent future loss of human development status and lives. For example, USAID supports AKADEMIYA2063 to monitor the impact of COVID-19 on food accessibility and affordability at the subnational level in Feed the Future target countries in Africa; the Feed the Future Nutrition Innovation Lab and the Feed the Future Sustainable Intensification Innovation Lab/Rutgers Policy Research Consortium Associate Award are monitoring the impacts of COVID-19 on the cost of a nutritious diet.
 - We support national agriculture and nutrition data systems to build a stronger evidence base for improved policy- and decision-making. Our work with national policy research institutes focuses on improving research for policy impacts. In Africa, an emphasis in 2021 will be supporting country collection of the more than 260 indicators that comprise the Biennial Review, ensuring that despite COVID-19, countries can collect accurate data to inform policy and investment decisions.
6. **Accelerate Leveraging Digital Technologies:** Examine the multiple adaptations of digital technologies for social and behavior change, real-time data collection, remote supervision, and transmission of key public health information to inform future investments that will bring efficiencies and scale to current programs as well as prepare for future crises. Where necessary, develop affordable and appropriate digital technologies in order to expand coverage to marginalized populations and provide them access to digital platforms and services.

Agency Response:

- USAID is committed to developing the digital ecosystem, as evidenced in our Agency's [Digital Strategy](#), which we released in 2020. The strategy has two core, mutually

reinforcing objectives: improve measurable development and humanitarian-assistance outcomes through the responsible use of digital technology in USAID's programming; and strengthen the openness, inclusiveness, and security of country-level digital ecosystems.

- Digital platforms already exist that can be scaled up to reach more people. For example, using a smartphone-based application called eNutrition, health workers in the United Republic of Tanzania tailored treatment to children with severe acute malnutrition based on the child's past weight, past treatment, and guideline targets. Calculations and guidelines for each child's case helped virtually eliminate errors, which previously had been as high as 45 percent, within the first three months.
- Adaptations of digital technologies are already taking place in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, the Feed the Future Scientific Animations Without Borders (SAWBO) Responsive Adaptive Participatory Information Dissemination (RAPID) Scaling Program creates educational animated video messages to mitigate second-order economic impacts from COVID-19 as they relate to food security. Using animations in local languages and familiar imagery, SAWBO RAPID identifies critical food-security topics and delivers knowledge to remote and marginalized communities, bridging borders, cultures, and literacy levels.