



What public and private actions are needed to strengthen the impacts of agri-food value chains on nutrition?

Online Discussion Summary

Mar Maestre, Institute of Development Studies (IDS), UK

Rohit Parasar, M S Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF), India

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About this report

This short document summarises an online discussion event, hosted by LANSA. The [LANSA agri-food value chains](#) research teams have been investigating the effectiveness of different routes for delivering good quality nutrient-dense food to low-income and undernourished people with cases in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. This activity provided a platform for the researchers to engage with stakeholders around this specific theme of research.

For further information about the agri-food value chain work that LANSA carry out please visit the website using [this link](#).

About the discussion

The online discussion provided an opportunity for key stakeholders in the four focus countries to review the research framework and initial findings of the case studies, to discuss regional and country specific successes and challenges, and to share experiences and thoughts on wider systems challenges around agri-food value chains for nutrition, as well as ways forward to work together. The discussion was held over a two day period on April 25th and 26th, 2017 and was conducted using the Dgroups web platform. 91 individuals agreed to join, most of whom were based in the four focal countries (a handful were located elsewhere in the broader region or beyond). Over this period 99 messages were posted.

All those involved worked directly or indirectly on nutrition, and were purposefully invited as experts from a range of constituency groups: central and sub-national government; multilateral and bilateral development agencies; national and international non-governmental organisations; civil society organisations; private sector; and research institutions.

The specific objectives for the online discussion were:

- Allow stakeholders to provide critical comment and reflections on the findings
- Engagement with key stakeholders in country
- Cross country comparison and learnings

During the discussion participants explored different themed questions, described below:

1. The successes and challenges around delivering nutritious foods, where participants gave their feedback on the case studies shared, the research itself and the findings and recommendations – focus for Day 1.
2. Exploring cross-country comparisons, regional differences and similarities and ways forward from the recommendations presented, understanding how might the stakeholders use them and what type of products would be most useful for them – focus for Day 2.

This summary captures the main themes from the two days, but is not intended as a comprehensive note on all of the points raised. Please do share this with your colleagues and through relevant networks, as this will help us build commitment on these issues.

General reflections

The discussion started with comments on the successes and challenges around delivering nutritious foods in South Asia, particularly in [Afghanistan](#), [Bangladesh](#), [India](#), [Pakistan](#). Participants shared with us their thoughts and feedback on the case studies shared, and the [findings and recommendations](#), which will feed into a collection of articles to be published together as a bulletin.

Building effective linkages between food value chains and nutrition requires initiatives on multiple fronts. This new research on how to improve how agri-food value chains deliver nutrient-rich foods was welcomed by the participants. They found the case studies relevant, as one participant shared.

“The case studies from LANSA provide useful lessons that can inform and enrich food security and nutrition policies and serve as examples for public/private sector partnerships”

Another one reminded us of the recent online consultation hosted by FAO on “*How can value chains be shaped to improve nutrition?*”

Reflections on the case findings

Value chain interventions that aim to enhance access to, and consumption of, foods that are naturally rich in micronutrients

Several participants contributed examples of their work on value chains, all of them with a focus on the supply side of the chain. Examples were provided of good quality inputs such as seeds, or work focusing on the entire value chain like an integrated programme on the rice or the dairy value chain, or work on integrated farming systems. We also heard examples on livestock and vegetable value chains.

However, as other participants had raised, often these approaches do not guarantee that the nutritious food produced will be consumed by the vulnerable targeted populations, such as women and children. Some participants agreed that interventions must have nutrition targeted outcomes to ensure consumers eat the product and the nutrition outcome is achieved. As LANSA findings in the dairy value chain in Bangladesh show, 96% of milk producers often drink milk while only 20% of rural poor and 23% of urban poor do so.

“Understanding the agri-food value chain from ‘farm to mouth’ is important to intervene on the food quality, safety and nutrition.”

Distributing foods with increased nutritional value

Public distribution systems, like those showcased in the cases from India or Bangladesh present successful public-private partnership initiatives. These raised an interesting debate, with positive and negative reactions to them. Many warned of the risks of creating dependency, unsustainable value chains or removing agency from the consumer. However, other participants reminded us that public distribution systems have also been proven one of the most effective pathways to reduce undernutrition, when financing is available. When there are policies supporting them they tend to be more effective. Also, participants pointed out how public policy can be more nutrition sensitive by encouraging traditional nutritious foods like millets.

In addition to nutrition specific intervention in public distribution, the nutrition sensitive interventions can provide support in creating awareness for healthy foods. For example, [nutrition gardening in schools](#) can provide a regular supply of vegetables. Additionally the initiative can sensitise communities about healthy diets, creating demand for nutrient dense food.

“...school meal initiatives can sensitize and mobilize parents, teachers and local communities...”

Participants also agreed that the cases showcased examples of how the local population can be linked to the different value chains in order to meet the dual objectives of providing adequate health and nutrition for vulnerable groups as also increasing the earnings of the local community members. Involving women’s groups in the food distribution programme like in India and Bangladesh have enabled integration of value chain actors in the informal sector in the larger value chain. Besides ensuring promotion of local foods, such linkages also contribute to efficient operation of different aspects of the value chain.

Producing foods with increased nutritional value via industrial fortification

Food fortification as another pathway also raised different perspectives. It was recognised by participants as a very effective tool, though with the warning that it could lead to standardisation. For example, Pakistan is embarking on a new large scale food fortification programme that aims to fortify commercial wheat flour and edible oil in the near future. Questions were raised around the targeting of this programme, as research shows that the rural poor often buy their food from informal and small mills, and these tend to have low capacity and low incentives to fortify, hence the more vulnerable risk not benefiting from the fortified products.

This large scale food fortification programme recognises that it would only cover roller flour mills - targeting around 57% of the population, as increasing coverage to the small and micro millers (*Chakki Atta*) is very challenging due to, among others, lack of government enforcing capacity, high costs involved with working with a dispersed group of processors. They aim to design strategies to overcome this. The main risk could be that the targeted undernourished population is that covered by the *Chakki Atta*, hence they may not benefit from the enhanced fortified wheat. One suggestion that came from the discussion was ‘*to link up Chakkis and roller mills so that fortified flour maybe sold through Chakki Outlets...*’, it is important to study functioning of informal actor of value chains.

Directly improving the food chain

Cold storage, processing and transportation facilities are missing for smallholders. As important is the need to start engaging and understanding the companies engaged on the ‘middle’ of the chains more, and the opportunities they present, particularly for local small and medium companies and the informal economy. Projects and programmes aiming to increase food security usually focus on increasing agricultural productivity, but most of the value created by the food system is post farm gate (50 to 70 per cent).

Some participants agreed that this could be an important barrier in some cases, though often not the only one. Stronger focus on local and territorial planning for sustainable development was highlighted as a missing area of action in South Asia, particularly looking at the role of cities in engaging with rural areas for more sustainable foods systems, which can help address some of these infrastructure gaps.

Regional learnings

The comparisons across countries and common threads came through clearly in the discussion. Common regional challenges were scalability, the role for local planning, or community engagement. The case in Pakistan of wheat fortification shares lessons on the challenges of working with the informal sector and SMEs. Finally, the public distribution models in Bangladesh and India show how success is achieved when all stakeholders are engaged (community growing vegetables and cooking, to the private sector providing supplies, government having a clear directionality and funding).

Across the region, questions relating to sustainability of the initiatives when they are donor driven, private sector led and state led, were raised. The School Nutrition Programme in Bangladesh, for instance, is donor driven with NGOs as implementing agencies. In India, the [Supplementary Nutrition Programme under the Integrated Child Development Services \(ICDS\)](#) are government

programmes with budgetary allocations and cost sharing between the central and state governments. In many states, the private sector has been involved by the state in the value chain of these food distribution programmes.

The need to focus on understanding better the gender aspects of access to food and household decision-making was another commonality across the countries. Cases from Afghanistan's Women's Economic Empowerment projects showed that women with increased income and improved awareness of health and nutrition may have better food security and diversity which leads to better health outcomes.

Understanding demand dynamics means also, moving beyond consumer awareness. Policy makers, practitioners and others should aim to understand the different consumer related barriers to food choice and access to nutrient-dense foods (lack of availability, affordability, acceptability or poor quality of the produce), as often consumers know the nutrition benefits of certain products but this awareness in itself is insufficient as products may be too expensive, not available during certain periods or too complicated to prepare. Also, for example, some participants mentioned a shift away from selling produce in villages in favour of transporting it to urban centres as they expect better markets there, reducing the availability of these

Challenges remaining to deliver nutritious foods

Many felt that when talking about private and public actions we need to think about a sustainable and profit making value chain and a nutritious product that consumers want and eat, this means thinking about sustainable food systems. The consumer and their needs would come first in such analysis, starting from a demand perspective and from the local level since this is where the different dimensions (environmental, economic and social) can be targeted.

A larger debate about sustainable diets and competition between local value chains that can take into account nutrition from local biodiversity and larger value chains that would necessarily be standardised and homogeneous was raised as well. LANSAs experience during the course of the ongoing research on [markets for nutrition](#) has also thrown up these issues and challenges.

Ensuring food security for populations does not necessarily lead to improved nutrition security. Available data shows the region is facing the new "nutrition transition", where people have less time to cook and more disposable income, and are thus relying on more processed foods. This is leading to increased intakes of calories often from sugars and fats, leading to the "triple burden" phenomenon of undernourished children and micronutrient deficiencies, co-existing with overweight and obesity.

Other challenges raised were the debate between scaling up programmes –noting that scale up risks standardization, which is not always positive- but also the difficulties due to lack of funding. In scaling up an initiative, appreciating the regional variation is crucial. For example, the provincial level Government of Indian states follow different models of providing fortified premixes under the Supplementary Nutrition Programme (SNP).

Some open questions left unanswered were about the incentives required to make private business in the food industry have a sustained nutrition focus. The UK campaign on salt reduction, with a multi-phased approach seemed like a good example to learn from. It involved educating consumers while working with the government and industry to set targets for salt reduction in processed foods. An effective tactic was to 'name and shame' brands with high levels of salt.

Key lessons

Some of the opportunities and challenges identified by the participants resonate with our research:

- Research on food and nutrition tends to be supply-focused –we need more research on the demand dynamics for nutrient-rich food in rural and urban poverty pockets, including nutrition outcome data.

“Some fundamental conceptual changes are needed to do this. For example, the need to target smallholders not just as producers but as consumers also; the need to, not only meet existing demand, but also stimulate demand for nutritious foods, etc..”

- The ‘street food’ chain must be part of any analysis. The informal sector and SMEs play a key role in delivering food to vulnerable populations, and we need to learn how to engage with them effectively.

“With reference to Tara’s suggestion on integrating street vendors in the analysis, I think it is very relevant. Increasingly we observe the phenomenon of SCOWT (Stunted Child and Overweight Mother) ... This happens as the mother eats unhealthy food (possibly from vendors) ... which is inexpensive but unhealthy”

- Strong institutional environment and nutrition targeted public policy (nutrition awareness, advocacy, direct delivery of foods) is important –dependency on private sector’s actions to target nutrition is not necessarily sustainable long-term.

“I feel for successful delivery of nutritious food, public-private partnership is a must. However, it needs to be regulated... to some extent, Amulspray provides a good model”

- Local market players in most situations are not fully integrated into the local food systems.
- We need a stronger focus on the role that women, both farmers and consumers, have: supply of food, access to food (mobility, time available), household decision-making (who decides what proportion of household resources are spent on food, what types of foods are purchased, and who gets to eat it) to have successful policies and interventions.

Ways forward

Building effective linkages between food value chains and nutrition requires initiatives on multiple fronts. In order to improve how agri-food value chains deliver nutrient-rich foods there must be a comprehensive understanding of how these work and the roles that public and private actors play in making them work more effectively. By looking at the limits of what business can and cannot achieve in a given market environment, actors will be more capable of creating an appropriate institutional environment that shapes how these value chains operate for the benefit of vulnerable target groups.

Perhaps the key to sustainable food systems is decentralised planning and management and procurement. This calls for awareness at all levels of decision making within the different actors, public, private and civil society, for promotion of nutrition sensitive agri-food value chains. There was a clear need for continuing the regional conversations outside the e-discussion.

This discussion will influence our regional synthesis work and policy uptake. A special issue of the IDS bulletin in early 2018 will focus on LANSAs research on agri-food value chains in South Asia. The bulletin will be open access and have papers based on the case studies and also a regional synthesis that draws out the common threads across the studies in the three countries. We believe this will be a useful resource for anyone who is interested in markets for nutrition.