Feed the Future Ethiopia Growth through Nutrition Activity – Learning Document

“Bridging the Gap between Research and Policy & Programs”
BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN RESEARCH AND POLICY

The gap between research and practice in many areas of health care and public health is large and well-documented. The Research and Learning Landscape Assessment conducted by Growth through Nutrition project implementing partner - Tufts University in Ethiopia in 2017 showed that although there is an improved focus on usefulness of research, knowledge and learnings to inform programs and policies, there is a critical gap in consistent and adequate use of these findings to inform nutrition programs and policies in Ethiopia. In recognition of this gap, Growth through Nutrition - Tufts recently organized a panel discussion through the Project Research and Learning Working Group platform to discuss potential strategies and solutions to bridging the gap between research and practice/policy. The session brought together panelists representing civil society, academia, international research institutes and donors to discuss their respective, potential roles and contributions to address this gap. This report summarizes the key discussion points and recommendations for bridging the gap between research and programs/policy from the panel.

What are some of the barriers to the translation or application of research findings to practice (programs/policy)?

The barriers to translation and application of research findings to programs and policy are multi-dimensional in nature. One major barrier is the disconnect between researchers and policy and program managers. Both groups usually operate within their own arena, with researchers mostly focused on conducting rigorous research and publishing findings, while program and policy makers strive to make decisions based on evidence-based implementation science. While there is increased demand from programs and policy makers for evidence-based program and policy decisions, this is not always well supported by researchers. This disconnect between researchers and policy makers also creates limited awareness and appreciation of the potential of research findings to influence programs and policies. Thus, researchers frame their study questions with limited priority given to responding to critical program and policy implementation questions. The disconnect between policy makers and researchers also leads to researchers’ unfamiliarity with the policy making procedures, and policy makers’ lack of understanding of the research process, thus creating tension between the two and limiting their ability to work in tandem. In situations where research has the potential to influence program and policies and is disseminated on a timely basis, the findings are often communicated using scientific and technical terminology, making it difficult for program and policy individuals to easily digest the information and apply it to their work. The lack of adequate skill and/or interest on the side of the researcher to adequately disseminate important research findings in an easily understandable manner, i.e. as a policy brief or similar, further hampers the translation of research to practice. In the few
instances when policy briefs are well prepared, they tend to not be disseminated properly or reach the program and policy managers through the correct platforms. In addition to these barriers, the time-dependent nature of research and programming can affect the full utility of using research for program and policy purposes. Programs often have limited life spans of 3-5 years on average, however, rigorous research can take a very long time. Policy makers need research to respond to policy questions on a timely basis in order to inform program and policy in an effective manner. Finally, research studies that have the potential to be published in reputable journals are mainly those that are experimental (case – control) studies, but these do not necessarily reflect real life situations, limiting their applicability and effectiveness to resolve existing problems. These barriers not only impede the translation of research to practice, but also result in the duplication of efforts and resources among the research community in Ethiopia and elsewhere.

What can be done to address these barriers? How could the existing national research and learning platforms support the translation of research to program and policies?

Overcoming the barriers to translating research to policy requires concerted efforts from researchers and policy makers. The existing gap between researchers and policy makers could be narrowed by creating new or using existing platforms to encourage dialogue between policy makers and researchers, such as the Reproductive Maternal Newborn and Child Health (RMNCH) – Research Advisory Committee(RAC), National Information Platform for Nutrition (NIPN), Project Research and Learning working group, etc. This could create a better understanding of both policy making and research procedures among the two groups, help to establish good relationships and trust, and help researchers gain familiarity with program and policy questions, cycles, and environment. In addition, collaborative platforms would give policy makers and researchers an opportunity to plan and work together in tandem. However, this will be a futile effort unless researchers are trained and encouraged to present their findings in a way that is easily understandable to non-academic audiences, and policy makers clearly communicate research needs and create incentives for researchers to engage in studies to inform policy making. Capacity building is also of paramount importance for researchers to communicate and present findings (i.e. policy briefs, research advocacy skills, etc.) and policy makers and program managers to employ research findings to inform policy and programs. Inter- and intra-collaboration between local and foreign research institutions is another way to build local capacity for research. The required shift in thinking of the scientific community away from focusing exclusively on research for publication purposes to focusing more on relevant research that has the potential to immediately address community problems should be emphasized. This will require that scientific committees adopt an expanded research approach that includes experiential research which is invaluable in understanding applied research and implementation issues. In the longer term, donors at the country level can also advocate for increased support for research activities with potential to inform policies and programs.
How can each sector contribute to making research more relevant and applicable?

Different sectors can help ensure that research findings better inform programs and policies. Some suggestions include that donors make a concerted effort to support research areas and programs identified and prioritized in national policies and programs (i.e. National Nutrition Program and Nutrition Sensitive Agriculture). Donors can also help improve capacity for local universities and research institutions by promoting links between local research institutions and foreign universities to support transfer of knowledge and capacity building efforts. Donors can also provide flexible funding to support high priority national research agendas – in one example a large amount of research funding was eventually returned to donors because the funding was specifically earmarked for research areas that were not relevant or a priority for the country. Donors need to pursue overall better alignment of their research focus with national research agenda priorities. While this may take some time to implement, the effort and initiation needs to begin in order to see results in the future. In the meantime, the government sector needs to take a leadership role in guiding donors towards funding high priority research areas, have a willingness to appreciate the research done by NGOs, and fully appreciate the potential impact of research findings when implemented at scale. Civil society involvement in the policy formulation process and establishing alliances with political leaders can help to improve the perception and relationship of government towards civil society. It can also increase government uptake of research findings coming from civil organizations. In addition, building the capacity of civil society on how to advocate and communicate research findings and learning using the appropriate forums and communication channels for program and policy purposes would also be a significant contribution. Also, although research findings can take a long time to finalize and publish, thus preventing researchers from reporting in time for policy cycles, they could still engage by providing available evidence and data to assess trends and support project findings and/or trigger policy discussions. Awareness should be created among the scientific research community for improved appreciation of implementation research that reflects real life situations. Criteria for awarding funding for research should also take into account potential impacts of research findings on program and policies in addition to scientific rigor of the study and its potential to be published in a reputable journal. This shift in thinking of the scientific community will help to change the mind set of researchers to focus more on research findings use for program and policy purposes.

What is the expected outcome once we’ve overcome these barriers?

A number of outcomes were mentioned as a result of improved translation of research for program and policy purposes, including that research studies will be well aligned to respond to policy and program questions and results will be utilized to inform policies and programs. Programs and policies will become more effective as they are more informed by evidence. As the focus of the research environment changes to conducting more impactful research in addressing societies challenges/problems, there may also be minimization of duplication of effort and more efficient use of financial resources to address critical policy and program gaps. Another
anticipated outcome would be better appreciation for research coming from projects for potential scale up and use to inform national programs and policies. Overall, there will be more innovative policy decision making and research contributing to the development of the country, and betterment of its population.

Summary

Based on the discussion, Growth through Nutrition has compiled the following learnings and actions points for the project to continue contributing to bridging the gap between Research and Policy:

- Growth through Nutrition should continue to invest in building the capacity of the research community on various topics including the national policy formulation process; communicating research findings to policy makers in an easy understandable manner i.e. policy briefs and creating promotion strategies to disseminate research findings, etc.
- Growth through Nutrition should continue implementing the Small Grant program to build research capacity of local researchers to implement operation research with the potential to inform the nutrition program and policies. The project should also encourage the dissemination of research products using various platforms including project website, project research and learning working group, local and international conferences, NIPN platform, EPHI’s Monitoring, Evaluation and Research Steering Committee (EPHI-MER) platform etc.
- The project should continue to encourage sharing of key research findings and learnings and dialogue between research and policy makers by using the existing project research and learning platform. In addition, the project should continue to actively support and participate in the existing national research and learning platforms including National Nutrition Technical Committee (NNTC), RMNCH - RAC and EPHI MER platforms, to support and align program operation topics with the national research topics and to also support the formulation and implementation of national policies, strategies and programs.
- The project should continue to prioritize operation research questions that have the potential to inform the program as well as national nutrition program.
- Growth through Nutrition/ Tufts University should continue demonstrating the important role that learning agenda plays in informing nutrition program and policies; and should share the project learning agenda implementation experience with other projects and donors to support inclusion and funding of learning agenda on various nutrition projects. Tufts leads the learning and knowledge management thematic area of Ethiopian Civil Society for Scaling Up of Nutrition (ECSC-SUN) for sharing research findings, new knowledge and lesson learns among projects and academia to minimize duplication of effort among the research community and advocate to create awareness on the need of the shift in the thinking of the scientific community to focus more on research findings use for program and policy purposes.
- Pre-service component of the Growth through Nutrition activity should continue to prioritize and advocate for students/researchers to get internship placement on various nutrition projects, so researchers have more familiarity on project implementation cycle and align their research topics with program and policy research priority areas.