



Feed the Future Ethiopia Growth through Nutrition Activity - Learning Document “Transforming Food System: Lessons Learned from Global and Local Experience”

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January 2021



Webinar Summary Report

In anticipation of the September 2021, United Nations Food Systems Summit, on December 1st, 2020, the Feed the Future Ethiopia Growth through Nutrition Activity –a 5-year, USAID-funded nutrition, wash and agriculture project, hosted a webinar event on “Transforming Food Systems: Lesson Learned from Global and Local Context.” The one-and-a-half hour webinar was attended by more than 60 participants and was moderated by Rahel Gizaw from Tuft University. The event included an initial presentation by Dr. Eileen Kennedy from Tufts University, highlighting the core elements of food systems, external drivers, and political economy issues that facilitate or impede important changes in food systems. The presentation also covered critical gaps in knowledge regarding the tradeoffs embedded in the SDGs, as well discussion of policies that can bring about dramatic changes in food systems. Following the presentation were expert responses and reflections focusing on the transformation of food systems in the Ethiopian context by Dr. Kaleab Baye from Addis Ababa University, and Dr. Namokolo Covic from IFPRI, Ethiopia. A Q & A session (Annex 1) following the commentary gave participants the opportunity to ask questions and reflect on the discussion and presentation.

Dr. Kennedy’s presentation on “Transforming Food Systems: The Missing Pieces Needed to Make Them Work?” emphasized the large number recent publications and high level panel reports as well as the United Nations Decade of Action (2016- 2025) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (especially Goal 1 and 12) which all speak to the recognition and attention given to the importance of transforming food systems in addressing global nutrition and diet problems. In line with this attention, the UN Food Systems Summit will be hosted in 2021 to discuss bold, innovative actions for using a food systems approach to achieve SDGs, exploring actions that are country-level, effectively utilize partnerships and establish principles to leverage food systems across the entire food chain.

She went on give a background overview of the ideas of a healthy and sustainable food system, one which ensures food security and nutrition for all, while not compromising the economic, social and environmental bases for the same promise to future generations, and the food environment, which is “the collective physical, economic, policy and socio-cultural surroundings, opportunities and conditions that influence people’s food and beverage choices and consumption.” While these definitions have been widely considered in recent years, attention is now is shifting to identifying concrete actions at the country level for transforming broken food systems.

In the context of Ethiopia, while there has been success in reducing stunting and underweight, and increasing agriculture production in the past few years, when taking into consideration a wider food systems approach, there are still gaps in need of further action. Dr. Kennedy showed data from a recent paper demonstrating the dominance of the production of roots grains and tubers (~12% of production growth and more than 86% of energy and nutrient production), and a decline or negative growth in the

diversity of food group production¹. This national-level data was also supported by regional-level evidence from the household decision making study conducted by Tufts University under the Growth through Nutrition project, which examined drivers of household decisions on production, consumption, purchase and sale of health foods in rural communities. The study found a focus and prioritization on staple crops for household consumption, and that diet diversity was not a top priority.

In referring to a model organizing national level action for transforming food systems, Dr. Kennedy also highlighted national-level action plans that transform food systems² address the four arms of availability, affordability, accessibility, and desirability of healthy diets. These arms are often interconnected and synergistic and actions in one area may influence another. One example of this is in social and behavior change communication (SBCC) strategies working to change community's knowledge about the importance of health diets (Desirability) which has the potential to affect production of health foods (Availability). While some actions may be synergistic, there is also the possibility of trade-offs and possible conflicts between outcomes which are not yet fully understood. Examples were given such as the possible conflict between environmental sustainability and increased production/consumption of animal source foods.

Lastly, she highlighted some key themes for going forward that require consideration in transforming food systems including ways for reinventing agriculture to address growing needs in a sustainable way, transforming the food environment for health diets (especially consumer preferences), mitigating climate change, engaging the private sector and influencing policy priorities through evidence. Dr. Kennedy concluded the presentation noting that food systems globally are rapidly changing and a business as usual scenario will not achieve SDGs, so dramatic changes in food systems are urgently needed.

In response, Dr. Kaleab Baye gave a short commentary that focused on the food system and levels, trends and drivers of local diet in Ethiopia. The presentation shared a variety of data on local diet indicators, including low diet diversity of children (although there has been improvement, the majority of improvement has come at the higher wealth group), low diet diversity for women including extremely low fruit and vegetable consumption, and very high salt intake. In addressing the drivers of the food system, two drivers of diet quality on the consumer side highlighted for this discussion were nutrition literacy and cultural/religious barriers. These drivers both have the potential to be shaped by SBCC from health and agricultural extension and religious leaders, however there are several challenges to achieving this. Data shown demonstrated inequality in access to healthcare for poorer and rural households in Ethiopia. In order to ensure that messaging reach those that need it most, access to healthcare will need to be extended to the poorest and most remote areas. In addition, these frontline workers have a huge workload and don't have additional time to give to nutrition messaging.

¹ Baye K, Hirvonen K, Dereje M, Remans R (2019) Energy and nutrient production in Ethiopia, 2011-2015: Implications to supporting healthy diets and food systems. *PLoS ONE* 14(3): e0213182. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0213182>

² Webb et al. The Urgency of Food Systems Transformation is Now Irrefutable. *Nature Food*. 1:584: 2020.

From the drivers of the Food Environment on diet quality, Dr. Kaleab pointed to affordability of nutrient dense foods as one of the most important. Data on affordability showing the share of income needed to meet recommended fruit and vegetable intake in Ethiopia indicated that the poorest segment of the population would need to spend almost a third of their income to meet the guidelines indicating that promoting consumption alone is not enough if households can simply not afford to do so. Additional data on the changes in food prices compared to inflation demonstrated that while prices of nutrient dense foods such as legume, fruits, vegetables and animal source foods have increased in real prices, while some of the less nutritious foods such as oils and fats, and honey and sugar have had large decreases. This shift in prices has an impact of diet quality and chronic disease, but can also in part be explained by the reduction in diversity of food crops being produced, creating the difficulty in making these foods affordable.

As Dr. Kennedy outlined some of the potential areas for tradeoffs, Dr. Kaleab also suggested that there may be some win-win solutions. An example of this came from a paper by Benfica & Thurlow in 2017, where they suggest implementing an economy-wide model to identify value chains whose expansion would be effective in generating economic growth, reducing national and rural poverty, creating jobs and diversity diets, and they suggested that fruit and vegetable chains hold promise for this.

In conclusion, Dr. Kaleab summarized his key points on the challenges in the areas of consumer behavior, such as the gap in access to nutrition messaging and high burn out of health workers, in the food environment such as the unaffordability of nutritious foods, and loose regulation, and in the food supply, because of the emphasis on cereals.

Dr. Namokolo started her comments by stating that transformation in the food system is evitable due to the continuous changing of people's livelihoods, economy, etc. She clarified that when discussing food systems transformation, we are talking about steering that transformation in a positive direction for nutrition and health outcomes, learning lessons from other food systems about what has and has not worked. For example, what lessons from industrialized food systems can we take into consideration in developing the food processing industry in Ethiopia which is in its infancy? Leveraging the existing policy environment in steering the food system in a positive direction is also very important and Ethiopia has a very rich policy environment in regards to the food system in order to do so.

She also gave many examples of ways in which targeted actions can integrate lessons learned and drive positive change. In response to the previous discussion around the need for increased consumption of nutrient rich foods whose increasing prices are rendering unaffordable for many people, in the fruit and vegetable value chain, a limited seed sector is a major challenge and area for potential transformation. In a shift to more hybrid crops where seeds have to be purchased new each season and when there is a situation such as the COVID-19 pandemic where markets and value chains are disrupted preventing purchase of seeds even if they were available and necessary, speaks to a need to address resiliency of the system at the same time. Dr. Namokolo also explained that Ethiopia is currently developing new food-based dietary guidelines (led by EPHI). In recognition of the fact that availability of a more nutritious food basket is a challenge, the guidelines have a secondary objective to target food system actors to

catalyze actions to diversify and improve affordability. Since the processing industry is in its infancy, good practices for nutrition can be built into its development, such as ensuring that preservation is not just dependent on increasing fat and sugar levels, or protections regarding salt levels (since the data showed that salt consumption is already too high).

In conclusion, she notes that the role of trade in transforming food systems in Ethiopia should also be considered, ensuring that standards take into account nutrition and sustainability. This is being done now, with many discussions taking place to inform an Ethiopian position at the UN Food Systems Summit, developing a roadmap engaging stakeholders. It is important that the position is informed both by the challenges and lessons learned elsewhere to ensure that the proposed transformation is one that focuses on nutrition and health and ensures sustainability.

Conclusions

It is promising to see the efforts being made to move beyond a consensus on the importance and role of food systems and environments to focus on country-level specific actions needed to drive positive food system transformation. The UN Food Systems Summit should be an exciting culmination of the work and input of many stakeholders to shape understanding of the challenges and opportunities for transformation. While change in the food system is always happening, shaping the transformation based on lessons learned and local context will be required to ensure a focus on nutrition and sustainability. The process for identifying these actions is often complex, and an understanding of both the complementary and conflicting nature of actions and outcomes is needed. Sometimes multi-level action will be needed, as addressing one challenge may have a root in another. Ethiopia has a rich policy environment in regards to food systems and with its industrial growth still at an early stage, there is a great opportunity for positive transformation in the food system to improve nutrition, health, and economic wellbeing. We hope the upcoming UN Summit will have an important role to play in informing and solidifying countries' commitment and efforts to transforming food systems.

Annex 1: Q & A Session

Q1. Are unhealthy foods considered or addressed in the healthy food system? If so, how?

EK: All types of foods are involved in the transformation of the food system, healthy and unhealthy foods. The impression that processed foods across the board are unhealthy need not be true. There are enormous opportunities, especially in Ethiopia where the food processing industry is still in its infancy, to learn from other countries who have had major success in making healthful foods more nutritious and affordable. One good example is in Rwanda, where the government partnered with the World Food Program and private sector in building a factory for producing affordable nutritious complimentary foods available in a tiered pricing model. Another aspect to think about is the private sectors response to consumer demand and how can working in the food environment create consumer demand for healthier foods. The other undervalued approach is to use fortification policy to improve nutrition quality.

Q2. Can we even think of diet diversity without achieving food security? The WHO recommends five servings of fruits and vegetable in a day. Is it achievable, even in a developed country like the US and in Western Europe?

KB: I don't recommend decoupling food security and diet diversity as it is possible to address both at the same time. There is a possibility that interventions can address multiple outcomes without necessarily compromising on other targets. The previous example in my presentation of the fruits and vegetable value chain and its impacts on income, job creation and income while also diversifying diet, improving nutrition and diversifying production demonstrated this type of win-win intervention. So, it is possible to address multiple goals at the same time.

By the numbers, it's true that Ethiopia is very far from achieving the WHO-recommend 5 servings of fruits and vegetables a day, even for a more moderate recommendation of 3 servings a day. This is in part due to the production system, with not enough supply and high prices, so it is not just a behavioral change issue, but transformation is needed on the production side with market linkages to reduce postharvest loss and also shortening the value chain to keep prices low. It will require multisectoral interventions.

Q3. What can we do then if access to nutrition education is not optimal yet? What can be done because of the high burnout of the extension workers?

KB: The Health Extension Program has done a marvelous job in the last decade, but with increasing number of modules added to the program, it has made effective nutrition education very difficult. Attention is needed to reassess this model and look at innovations such as using multiple platforms and also using respected people in the community, community leaders, religious leaders and engaging them in the process, making sure that nutrition messaging is natural and relevant and contextual to that community. Consuming 5 servings of fruit and vegetables could be one form of messaging, but we need not to just focus on what the behavior is, but also how to get there.

EK: Agree on the importance of looking at different messaging strategies, such as the Virtual Facilitator tool, and a whole household approach to messaging. Identifying the message and the targets are a part of this, and will be discussed further in future events.

Q4. Can you elaborate on the tradeoffs between farmers income risk and willingness to diversify production? What are the successful strategies to shift agricultural production toward diversification when that has not at all been the policy direction?

EK: One example of this the example of early fortified foods like orange-fleshed sweet potatoes, where it was important to guarantee households that yields would not go down from a production standpoint, but also included targeting of consumption of these crops by preschoolers to drive demand and generate income for women. This total package addressing not just behavior change (consumption) was important here and in the context of Ethiopia.

Q5. Regarding project activities such as Growth through Nutrition, should the focus continue on diversifying homestead food production or diversifying the food supply such as investing in nutrient dense value chains? Might the project consider both approaches and if so, what are the tradeoffs?

EK: Can look at this in several different ways. One assumption is that by farm production of nutrient rich/dense foods, consumption will improve, which may or may not be true. Another strategy is increasing household income (to increase diet diversity), since we have seen the two are linked, and not just for the rural population, but the urban as well as the world becomes more urbanized. Increase in food availability and accessibility as well, and finally addressing taste preferences and demand for these foods.

Q6. What effect has COVID-19 had on food systems and how prepared is the world to address the growing inequalities in our system?

NC: COVID 19 has disrupted food value chains and markets in many COVID 19 affected countries, although it is a bit more resilient than we expected especially at global level despite trade restrictions. However, an important consideration is that food systems were affected differently in different parts of the world depending on when the pandemic took place in relation to the growing seasons. In Ethiopia, the pandemic was starting up as the harvest season was coming to a close, so households already had their harvest, but going forward, as the input market has been disrupted, it is unclear what will happen going forward. In regard to Africa more broadly, meetings at the African Union and Regional Economic Committee held meetings to develop response plans and help facilitate movement of food across borders. One major lesson is that the importance of having instruments in place preempting the next pandemic and ensuring these instruments and interventions are informed by lesson learned from COVID 19 pandemic in preparation to the next pandemic.

Q7. With so many competing nutrition needs and variables what nutrition priority must be tackled first to see progress in STDs?

NC: We necessarily can say we are going to prioritize one thing over the other, we have currently prioritized mothers and children in both at the global level and national level, but we do need to be mindful of the rest of the population. While it is important to prioritize women and children, the first 1000 days, because of the ripple effect of undernutrition during this crucial stage, African countries should also be careful to not ignore overweight and obesity, which also have negative long-term effects. The cost of hunger studies showed a very high negative impact and cost to undernutrition in Ethiopia (16.5% of GDP), demonstrating that undernutrition is costly. The country cannot afford to add on additional costs from the negative impact of overweight, obesity and non-communicable diseases on

health systems that are already weak. Thus, an increasing focus on all forms of malnutrition is very important and on interventions that can also have double duty and address multiple malnutrition issues.

Q8. How can agroecology and food sovereignty and health be prioritized in food systems?

EK: There are a number of activities recently implemented around agroecology. There's a report from the High Level Panel on agroecology and institutions like the FAO has emphasized agroecology as one of the ways for sustainable agricultural strategies that could be very effective. Agroecology and food sovereignty are very closely linked as they both emphasize the individual, community level and agroecology emphasizes traditional knowledge which has been proven effective especially in respecting natural resources. Representation and power to local level is very important, the challenge is how to use the positive and essence of agroecology and scale it up to larger areas of countries. The second part is how to get sincere private sector involvement in agroecological approaches, so that the scaling up is possible, but there is enormous potential untapped with the private sector in this area.