

Spotlight Analysis: Nutrition and Agriculture

Nutrition is an important component of economic development as a whole and food security in particular. Evidence shows that malnutrition in the first two years of life permanently reduces cognitive function and physical capacity, making individuals more vulnerable to disease. This, in turn, reduces productivity, slows economic growth and perpetuates poverty.

The United States Agency for International Development's Nepal Flood Recovery Program (USAID-NFRP) recognizes the critical importance of the first 1,000 days of childhood nutrition and is working with women and children in rural communities to raise awareness and education around nutrition and hygiene. As part of USAID-NFRP's most recent extension, the nutrition component now focuses on improving access to a more diversified daily diet through increased nutritional awareness and productive gains made by home gardening or commercial farming.

USAID-NFRP is working in 15 village development committees (VDCs) of the Terai, including 10 in Kailali and five in Kanchanpur. The primary qualification for beneficiary selection was that all households had pregnant women or children less than two years of age. In total, 2,259 households were selected to participate in the one-year nutrition and hygiene training program, which also includes the provision of a 333 square-meter home garden for each beneficiary family.

The nutrition and hygiene component of the program focuses on three main areas: training of trainers, nutrition action groups and home gardens. USAID-NFRP is also piloting a program that addresses nutrition topics with commercial farming groups. Nutrition and hygiene training typically given to home garden beneficiaries are now provided to more than 3,100 commercial farmers, with an additional component to address internal household financial and resource management issues. This initiative will bridge a gap between increased incomes and greater awareness of the nutritional values of crops.

TRAINING OF TRAINERS



Photo by Fintrac Inc.
In coordination with HKI, USAID-NFRP has developed and field tested separate training manuals suited to the needs and conditions of both home gardeners and commercial farmers.



Photo by Fintrac Inc.
As part of USAID-NFRP's nutrition and hygiene component, babies' weight and height are regularly monitored to ensure optimal childhood nutrition.

In coordination with Helen Keller International (HKI), USAID-NFRP developed a training program and syllabus for nutrition and hygiene courses. HKI staff have trained 16 community-based trainers in essential nutrition actions and behavior change communications. This group now serves as community-level nutrition extensionists in the target VDCs. USAID-NFRP and HKI have formalized the training materials and expanded their reach to include commercial agriculture groups in addition to home gardeners. The trainers are fully operational in all 15 worksites and each is providing training and education to an average of 400 households.

NUTRITION ACTION GROUPS

The community trainers help beneficiary households form nutrition action groups. To date, 112 nutrition action groups have formed from the 2,259 participant households, all of which have pregnant women or lactating mothers. The groups are comprised of an average of 20 members and they receive a three-day training course from their local trainer.

Through these trainings, young mothers and children are learning life-altering behavioral changes. Pabitra Mahata has three young daughters. She and her husband scrape by on a small income from their tiny store. Mahata used to feed her children rice and junk food and said they were frequently sick. After participating in the USAID-NFRP training she learned the importance of providing a balanced diet for her children.

“I was touched and highly motivated by the training given...I immediately started the feeding of nutritional foods...Our children are growing healthy now,” Mahata said.

The program is also teaching families like Mahata’s to sell the surplus vegetables at local markets, creating additional income for these rural farmers. Bolstered by the success of her experience, Mahata is committed to sharing her newfound knowledge with her neighbors.

“I have started conveying my knowledge and skills to my neighbors and visitors in our grocery shop,” she said. “We are very grateful to [USAID-NFRP] for implementing such a good program, without which we would have to survive under malnutrition.”

HOME GARDENS

Each household is establishing a 333 square-meter garden as part of the nutrition and hygiene component. Families are growing a variety of crops, including bean, amaranth, pumpkin, gourds, papaya, guava, citrus and Indian cherry. During the last quarter, 22 percent of the total production was not consumed by the household and was sold in local markets, earning modest incomes for the farmers. While the main focus of this component is nutrition, program staff is also working with households to link them to local markets or other service providers to sell this surplus food. Under Phase III, the program is covering 75 hectares of home gardens that provide families with the fruits and vegetables needed to address caloric, vitamin and mineral deficiencies common to people in rural communities of the Terai.



Photo by Fintrac Inc.
Women are learning to grow nutritional and marketable crops in their own gardens, allowing them to provide their families with the healthy foods they need and boost their incomes by selling extra crops.

EARLIER ACTIVITIES

All Phase I and II activities are complete, including 120 awareness trainings and 120 refresher trainings for 3,697 adults and children. Major achievements included the independent construction of private toilets by most participants, 1,715 improved cooking stoves installed and trainings on the repair, maintenance and correct operation of the stoves. To ensure sustainability, one person per worksite was trained as a resource person to troubleshoot issues within their communities. 2,258 demonstration home gardens were established on a total of 74 hectares. By strengthening communities and stimulating growth across sectors, USAID-NFRP will have a lasting impact by lifting nearly one million Nepali people out of poverty.