

Agriculture to Nutrition (ATONU) - Making agriculture work for nutrition: from research evidence to policy

Malnutrition is one of the greatest contemporary challenges affecting health, productivity and economic growth of many developing countries. Africa is most at risk of many types of malnutrition because a large proportion of its population relies on agricultural production for food and nutrition. In addition, agricultural policies and programming in Sub-Saharan Africa has tended to focus on increased production and productivity of staple foods such as cereals and tubers. Agriculture programming and activities that do not consider nutrition outcomes contribute to the prevalence of micronutrient deficiency and obesity among rural African communities that rely on agricultural production for nutrition. It is against this backdrop that the Food, Agriculture and Natural Resources Policy Analysis Network and partners implemented the Agriculture to Nutrition (ATONU): Improving Nutrition Outcomes through Optimized Agricultural Investments Project, to answer the question of what agriculture projects and programs can do to deliver positive nutrition outcomes. ATONU tested three pathways to deliver improved nutrition to smallholder farming households in Tanzania and Ethiopia: (i) agricultural production for own consumption, (ii) use of agriculture income to purchase other nutritious foods, and (iii) women empowerment to improve agency and nutrition. The aim was to use the results from the household level studies to feed into engagements with decision-makers. Following ATONU interventions, vegetable production and dietary diversity improved among farmers; farmers who received nutrition education demonstrated better understanding of what and how to consume foods for better nutrition; farmers demonstrated a keener consideration of messages coming from government workers such as hospitals and extension workers. The success of ATONU was partly due to the fact that the project worked with government structures in implementation. According to the results of the project's formative research, men had the final say on household decisions. Therefore, in order to empower women to make nutrition-sensitive decisions, ATONU engaged men to sensitize them on the importance of maternal and child nutrition and the need for women to participate in household decision-making. This created an enabling environment for the women to participate in household decision-making, especially in matters concerning nutrition. Some of the men that were actively involved in ATONU social behavior change sessions have become champions for good nutrition within their communities. While research brings out the existing gaps and what works in addressing nutrition, it takes an enabling policy environment to facilitate both agriculture programming that is nutrition-sensitive and the uptake of nutrition-sensitive actions by the target group. Five policy and programming recommendations are made in order to improve the nutrition of smallholder farm families in Tanzania: (i) increasing support for diverse agricultural production; (ii) formulation of agricultural policies that ensure that nutrition education reaches smallholder farming families from multiple channels to enable them make informed food choices; (iii) capacitating agricultural extension officers in nutrition-sensitive agriculture; (iv) engaging men in women empowerment programmes that aim to improve the nutrition of women and children; and (v) building local level communities of practice for sustainability of nutrition-sensitive initiatives.

Country

Zimbabwe

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