

The Nutrition Collaborative Research Support Program (Nutrition CRSP): Planned Activities in Nepal

Introduction

Collaborative Research Support Programs (CRSPs) represent a long-standing form of US government funding for research that facilitates partnerships among US-based and developing-country scholars on agriculture, food and nutrition issues of policy relevance globally. The CRSPs receive core funding from the Bureau for Food Security of USAID, as well as buy-ins from USAID Missions and other parts of the Agency. The Nutrition CRSP is the most recently-established of 10 existing CRSPs. As the first in a series of summaries of key issues, aimed at communicating progress on activities in Asia and Africa, this Research Brief provides information on goals and planned activities of the Nutrition CRSP in Nepal.

Background on USAID's CRSPs

The CRSPs have evolved since their initiation in 1975. Initial research topics emerging in the 1977 to 1979 period included: 1) sorghum and millet; 2) fisheries and aquaculture; 3) small ruminants; 4) human nutritional deficiencies; 5) beans/cowpeas; 6) soils management; 7) basic food crops/integrated pest management; 8) post-harvest food losses; and 9) peanuts. The most recently established CRSPs (since 2000) include Livestock and Climate Change, Horticulture, and Global Nutrition—each of these focusing on global priorities. As of 2012 there were 10 CRSPs: AquaFish; BASIS/Assets and Market Access; Dry Grain Pulses (Pulse); Global Nutrition; Horticulture; Integrated Pest Management (IPM); Livestock-Climate Change (LCC); Peanut; Sorghum, Millet and Other Grains (INTSORMIL); and Sustainable Agriculture and Natural Resource Management (SANREM).

Although the 10 CRSPs vary in their goals, approaches and modes of work, there are seven core elements that characterize the CRSP model: 1) a Management Entity at a US university leads the CRSP and assembles a consortium of institutional partners; 2) a research agenda that brings rigorous science to the search for solutions to development challenges in agricultural and related sciences; 3) capacity building in host countries, especially linked to research; 4) long-term investments in research and capacity building in partner countries; 5) the leverage of additional resources to supplement the core budget provided by USAID/Washington from varied sources as the missions, private sector producer organizations, philanthropic foundations, and university partners; and 6) variety in CRSP management, governance, and resource deployment processes, reflecting the flexibility of the CRSP model.

The Nutrition CRSPs

The Nutrition CRSP has its own defining characteristics. It has: i) a geographic focus (starting with Nepal), rather than a global dispersal of activities; ii) an operational focus (implementation science rather than bench science); iii) supporting research that informs nationally-defined priorities in food and nutrition; iv) research that seeks to answer policy and program-relevant research at scale (no small grants supporting experimental or pilot activities); and v) building capacity for analysis and research both through formal education and short-term skills-based trainings of local partners.

Tufts University's Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy serves as the Management Entity for work undertaken by the Nutrition Collaborative Research Support Program (Nutrition CRSP) both in Asia and in Africa. The Friedman School works in close partnership with several US university partners—Tufts, Purdue, Johns Hopkins, and Harvard—as well as a private-sector entity, Development Alternatives, Inc. This core team manages the Nutrition CRSP's research and capacity-building resources to generate: i) empirical evidence of what works in leveraging agriculture for improved nutrition through multi-sector programming; and ii) enhanced institutional and human capacity in Asia to conduct research and implement integrated nutrition activities in future years. In Nepal, the Nutrition CRSP collaborates with the Child Health Division of the Ministry of Health and Population, the Institute of Medicine, the National Planning Commission, and other non-governmental partners (including the Nepal Technical Assistance Group, Helen Keller, and Heifer).

Key Research Questions

The mission of the Nutrition CRSP is to discover how policy and program interventions can most effectively achieve improvements in maternal and child nutrition by leveraging agriculture, at scale. There is still very limited, rigorous empirical evidence to support the widespread assumption that higher productivity and diversity of agricultural outputs automatically supports enhanced maternal and child nutrition outcomes.

The Nutrition CRSP represents an opportunity to provide evidence on the effectiveness of integrated, multi-sector policies and interventions. Various approaches to linking agriculture and nutrition will be considered in diverse socioeconomic and agro-ecological contexts—with an initial focus on Nepal. The three strategic (high level) research questions addressed by the Nutrition CRSP are defined as follows: 1) Agriculture-to-Nutrition Pathways: seeking greater clarity on cause-and-effect pathways (agriculture-to-nutrition). For examples, what 'kinds' of agriculture investment have greatest net impacts on nutrition (enhanced productivity, diversified portfolio of activities, greater focus on commercialization, focus on home consumption of specific foods, or combinations of these?); 2) Program-Impact Pathways: seeking clarity on constraints to program implementation fidelity at each layer of operational management from central (national) to local (ward) levels. For example, how does program quality from the supply side (delivery) affect uptake and use of resources/services/ideas on the demand (household consumption) side? What are the incentives and disincentives for effective line inter-sector coordination across public sector entities, and with non-governmental actors in the process of coordinating the roll-out of national policies and complex integrated programs?; and 3) Integrated-Programming Pathways: seeking clarity on what combinations work best, in what context? What efficiency gains of integration (and costs)? For example, does it matter if agriculture-based activities are 'layered' over functioning nutrition and health interventions, or do intervention packages work best if implemented simultaneously in all locations (which has implications for scaling up)?

The Nutrition CRSP's vision of success is a set of empirical findings that can be quickly translated into policy and practice leading to notable gains in agriculture, health and nutrition programming, with impacts demonstrated not just program by program, but supportive of enhanced outcomes across the globe as new findings are adopted nationally and globally.