



**FEED THE FUTURE**

The U.S. Government's Global Hunger & Food Security Initiative

# **SUPPORTING OPTIMAL INFANT, YOUNG CHILD AND MATERNAL NUTRITION AND HEALTH IN JORDAN**

**FY2021 1<sup>st</sup> Quarter Report  
October 1<sup>st</sup> – December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2020**

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## Background

The Feed the Future Innovation Lab for Nutrition (Nutrition Innovation Lab) aims to generate evidence around program impacts and build academic capacity to support optimal health and nutritional status of pregnant and lactating women (PLW) and children under two in Jordan.

This will be achieved through the implementation of a rigorous research agenda, which includes assessing the impact of USAID Jordan's Community Health and Nutrition Activity, building individual and institutional capacity to conduct and interpret research, and supporting Jordanian researchers working on answering critical questions within the realm of maternal and infant young child nutrition.

The Nutrition Innovation Lab will generate evidence firstly through conducting secondary analysis of existing data sets such as the Demographic Health Survey to ascertain complementary feeding practices in infants and young children, and secondly through a rigorously planned and implemented evaluation of USAID Jordan's Community Health and Nutrition activity (CHN). The evaluation will focus on impact, process and performance, cost effectiveness and sustainability of the CHN program to provide evidence to support current and future policy and programming. The CHN program aims to improve maternal, infant and young child nutrition (MIYCN) and post-partum family planning (PPFP) behaviors through a combination of mass media, community and facility-based interventions, and policy advocacy actions to improve nutritional status and health of PLW and children under the age of two.

The evaluation of the CHN program will involve a quantitative impact evaluation, a qualitative and quantitative process and performance evaluation, and an analysis of costs and program sustainability. The evaluation will focus on CHN program implementation in three governorates of Jordan including Amman, Karak, and Zarqa.

Additionally, the project will aim to build individual and institutional research capacity in the realm of maternal, infant and young child nutrition by offering a competitive small grants fellowships, policy seminars, webinars, and scientific symposia to bring together key stakeholders from academia, line ministries, UN agencies, local and international non-governmental organizations, and other critical in-country partners. Another critical objective of these activities is to increase awareness and policy engagement through the expansion of MIYCN research and programming within Jordan.

## Summary of Activities Accomplished During Quarter I of FY 2021

A summary of activities undertaken during the reporting period are as follows.

### I. Partnerships, Engagement, and Collaboration

#### I.1. Engagement with USAID/Jordan

- During the first quarter of FY 2021, we continued regular engagement with USAID/Jordan through monthly and bi-monthly calls. A summary of key points discussed during these meetings were as follows:
  - Discussion on the consolidation of the sub-awards and the amendment request for a budget re-alignment. The Lab received the amendment approval in early January 2021.

- Discussions with USAID/Jordan and CHN (FHI 360) on the impact of the ongoing pandemic on the project activities and overall workplan. Based on the suggestions from the USAID/Jordan, the Nutrition Innovation Lab is coordinating with CHN and revisit the workplan in early February.
- Discussions with USAID/Jordan on the grants manual, annual report for FY 2020, webinar series description, impact evaluation (IE) timeline and roles and responsibilities guide, and expression of interest (EOI) and request for proposal (RFP) templates for identification of core partner of the Nutrition Innovation Lab. Based on the feedback, the Lab updated and finalized the drafts accordingly.
- Updates on the secondary data analysis using the Jordan Demographic Health Survey datasets were shared with the USAID/Jordan throughout the reporting period. With facilitation from the USAID/Jordan, the Nutrition Innovation Lab was able to access the Household Income and Expenditure Surveys (HIES) from Jordan's Department of Statistics (DoS). Data analysis is expected to start using the dataset in January. The Lab is also in the process of developing infographics using findings from the DHS surveys analysis, which will be shared with USAID/Jordan and colleagues at CHN once finalized. In the meantime, the Lab will continue to provide updates during the monthly meetings on the progress and timeline for completion of the infographics.
- Discussions on an official introduction of the Nutrition Innovation Lab project to the USAID/Jordan implementing partners and Jordan Ministry of Health.

#### I.2. Engagement with FHI 360/Community Health and Nutrition Activity Implementers

- During the reporting period, the Nutrition Innovation Lab engaged extensively with the CHN/FHI 360 team through bi-weekly meetings to facilitate the program design of CHN as well as the impact evaluation design. Some key discussions and decisions from these meetings are summarized below:
  - One representative of the Nutrition Innovation Lab was invited to participate in the CHN franchise model steering committee.
  - Discussions on using infographics as a medium to share descriptive outputs from the Nutrition Innovation Lab's secondary analysis using Jordan DHS datasets were held. In addition, a folder with relevant literature reviews on Jordan's IYCF research was shared with the M&E team of CHN.
  - One of the key activities that Nutrition Innovation Lab was engaged in with CHN through the reporting period was collecting information on the two (community based and facility-based activities) program activities and its roll out plan, both of which are crucial in finalizing the impact evaluation. This included discussions and clarifications on CHN's program outcomes and end line projected targets for the outcomes, identification of all 21 health facilities, components of the community-based activities, IE roles and responsibilities guide, as well as familiarization with the monitoring, evaluation and learning plan of both the institutions. In addition, technical discussions on identifying CHN's targeted health facilities (social franchise models) and developing the IE protocol (including sample size calculation and research implementation plan for the baseline survey) continued on a bi-weekly basis. Decisions and outcomes from these discussions are being incorporated into the evaluation protocol. Also, the discussions and close coordination have immensely supported CHN in strengthening its program design.

- In early December, both teams revisited the impact of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic on access to health care facilities and communities, as well as its impact on the program rollout and baseline survey. Both parties agreed that the baseline impact evaluation (IE) survey cannot be rolled out until a clear decision on CHN program implementation timetable could be made.
- However, in order to continue the ongoing planning discussions of CHN program design and subsequently the impact evaluation design, both parties agreed to have a regular technical interaction through bi-weekly calls. In addition, the two parties have nominated points of contact who have continued to communicate and interact to expedite some of the key technical discussions, queries, and clarifications.
- In addition to the CHN program and IE-related discussions, the Nutrition Innovation Lab has been in discussion with CHN to plan for a Jordan-focused virtual webinar series. Colleagues from CHN have been helpful in connecting the Nutrition Innovation Lab with in-country key stakeholders and researchers in Jordan. The first webinar is expected to be held in March 2021.
- The in-country CHN team has also been supportive of the Nutrition Innovation Lab in its effort to identify a Jordanian national ethical review committee (under Ministry of Health) for IE protocol review and approval.

### 1.3. Identification of Potential Collaborators and Partners

- Due to the ongoing pandemic, the process of identifying potential collaborators and partners in-country has been a challenging task for the Nutrition Innovation Lab. However, through the work of the Lab's Jordan-based research assistant (RA), stakeholder mapping has been successfully ongoing. With the RA's help, the team has been able to compile a list of potential institutions in Jordan.
- The process of identifying an in-country core partner of the Nutrition Innovation Lab started with the release of expression of interest (EOI) on October 9, 2020. Three applications were received by the deadline of November 12, 2020. After extensive review, two out of the three applicants were selected for an informational interview in early December. Based on the initial evaluation of the two institutions, they have both been invited to submit the request for proposals (RFP).
- The Nutrition Innovation Lab hopes to complete the process of identifying the core partner by end of March 2021.
- In early December 2020, the Nutrition Innovation Lab interacted with Dr. Reema Tayyem, a researcher at the University of Jordan, to discuss her publications on validated food frequency questionnaire (FFQ) tools for Jordanian population (adult and pregnant women). Dr. Tayyem has agreed to join the research team as an investigator/consultant to support the development of the FFQ tools for the impact evaluation, and to provide her expertise and support in training data collectors for the baseline data collection.

## 2. USAID Jordan Post-Award Reporting Requirements

### 2.1. Activity Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) Plan and Grants Manual

- The revised Activity MEL Plan was re-submitted to the USAID/Jordan on November 17, 2020.

### 2.2. Annual Implementation Plan (Workplan)

- The first draft of the annual implementation plan was submitted to the USAID Jordan on May 1, 2020.
- As suggested by the USAID/Jordan, the annual implementation plan will be updated to reflect expectations of travel and activities that can be achieved remotely given the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Suggestions were also received to hold a joint discussion with FHI 360 to ensure that key research evaluation activities of the Nutrition Innovation Lab were synchronous with the CHN (FHI 360) implementation plan timeline. An updated implementation plan will be re-submitted as soon as CHN program and IE design decisions are made.

### 2.3 Annual Report

- A draft of the annual report was first submitted on October 30, 2020.
- An updated draft of the report along with the revised MEL plan, performance indicators, and responses to USAID/Jordan feedback was resubmitted on November 17, 2020.
- A final clean draft of the report was submitted to USAID/Jordan on December 17, 2020.

## **3. Activities related to Research and Evaluation Agenda for Community Health and Nutrition Activity (CHNA)**

### 3.1. Secondary Data Analysis and Literature Review

- The secondary data analysis uses multi-year Jordan DHS datasets to assess trends/patterns and changes (if any) in complementary feeding practices and food choices (e.g., ultra-processed foods and sugar-sweetened beverages), and will help determine the critical factors that facilitate or impede the recommended practices in infants and young children under 24 months of age in Jordan. This analysis has been progressing well, and the team is in the process of developing infographics to highlight descriptive findings from the analysis to share with USAID/Jordan and CHN partners by February 2021.
- In addition to the DHS datasets, the team received access to three rounds of Household Income Expenditure Surveys (HIES) in early December to assess trends in expenditure and consumption of ultra-processed foods (UPF) and sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs), and to examine the association between the share of expenditure on the processed and packaged foods (UPFs and SSBs) versus nutrient-dense foods like fruits, vegetables, animal source foods, etc. During the reporting period, the team reviewed the datasets and have begun analyzing the data. A detailed update on the findings from the analysis will be shared in the second quarterly report.

### 3.2. Development of Impact Evaluation Protocol

- During the reporting period, the Nutrition Innovation Lab team continued to engage with USAID/Jordan colleagues and CHN/FHI 360 in its effort to understand the program impact pathways, key program outcomes and targets, and implementation plan of the CHN program in order to develop a rigorous impact evaluation design.
- The research team at the Nutrition Innovation Lab continued to develop the protocol and study tools (questionnaire, informed consent forms, etc.). A first draft of the questionnaire has been reviewed as has the first draft of the protocol.
- The ongoing pandemic and restricted movement internationally and within Jordan has posed several challenges for CHN program design and implementation, which has also adversely affected finalization of the protocol and study tools for the overall impact evaluation design and timeline for the baseline survey. Key challenges that have delayed the process are as follows:
- Firstly, due to the surge in the active cases of coronavirus in Jordan, the rollout of CHN's formative research to identify social movement components and practices has been delayed by

several months delayed by several months. This also means delay in finalizing the IE questionnaire modules on program exposure and social behavioral change communication (SBSS) practices, since the formative research would have allowed CHN to identify the key SBCC practices for the program and in turn, the Nutrition Innovation Lab would integrate them into their baseline assessment.

- Secondly, the CHN program is still in the early phase of identifying the 21 health facilities (social franchise models). The Nutrition Innovation Lab's proposed step-wedge design for impact evaluation requires identification of all 21 health facilities to calculate the sample size and sampling strategy for the evaluation. In addition, randomization of the health facilities prior to implementation of program activities in the two cohorts is crucial for data analysis and evaluation of CHN. Discussions on these issues are ongoing with the CHN and have been positive, but unfortunately the protocol development process has been stalled until a decision can be made.
- Finally, the uncertain rollout timetable for CHN has impeded the process of deciding on a timeline for the evaluation baseline survey. Ideally, the program rollout would follow immediately after the baseline, minimizing the gap between the baseline survey and rollout of program activities, especially in the first cohort facilities of CHN program.
- Nonetheless, both CHN and the Nutrition Innovation Lab have had extensive discussions to collectively and collaboratively resolve these challenges and have been closely monitoring the pandemic situation to formalize a realistic timeline for the program and evaluation activities.

### 3.3. Development of an online survey to assess the effect of COVID 19 on use of services by pregnant and lactating women

- The research team has also been developing an electronic online survey to understand the effect of COVID-19 on demand, access, health facility preparedness, and delivery of health care services to pregnant and lactating women in Jordan. Specific aims of the survey include examining the factors related to COVID-19 as well as potential consequences that have affected Jordanian women's decision making and ability to access time-sensitive, good quality, and essential maternity, reproductive and child health and nutrition services at the health facilities in Jordan. The survey also aims to understand the burden of COVID-19 pandemic on Jordanian healthcare providers' capacity and preparedness to provide facility-based, quality care services for pregnant and lactating women, infants, and young children. The survey tools and protocol development are expected to be completed in January 2021 and submission to the ethical review committee will occur in February. The team hopes to have the survey rolled out electronically by April.

## 4. Supporting Jordan's IYCF research agenda and building Jordan's related human and institutional capacity

- Due to continued travel restrictions, the management entity of the Nutrition Innovation Lab has not been able to meet in person with potential collaborators and partners in Jordan to initiate project set-up activities.
- Despite the challenges, remote stakeholder mapping has continued, and the team has continued to interact with potential stakeholders and experts in the field of maternal and infant young child nutrition. Some of the key institutions that the Lab has interacted with so far include the Center for Strategic Studies, the University of Jordan, Jordanian Hashemite Fund for Human Development (JOHUD), and researchers from MINDSET. The Jordan-based research assistant

was also able to interact with mothers' and women's groups like the Breastfeeding Group through Facebook and WhatsApp.

## **5. Governance of the Nutrition Innovation Lab**

- During the reporting period, the Nutrition Innovation Lab continued its work on the organizational structure that is both internally and externally collaborative and efficient. Although remotely active, the Lab has made good progress in compiling a list of potential stakeholders and partners in-country and will continue the process of adding internal and external partners and stakeholders into the structure.
- The team is being led by Shibani Ghosh, Associate Director of the Nutrition Innovation Lab, who serves as the Principal Investigator in collaboration with Patrick Webb, Director of the Nutrition Innovation Lab, who will serve as co-Principal Investigator. Both are faculty at the Friedman School and have significant experience working across different countries and cultural contexts.
- The PI and co-PI will be supported by Amman- and Boston-based teams. In Amman, the Nutrition Innovation Lab will hire a Jordan Country Coordinator and a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow. Both positions will be held by Jordanian nationals. In Boston, the team now includes Elizabeth Marino Costello, Robin Shrestha, Katherine Heneveld, Justin Heneveld (RA), Kamal Kasturi (RA).
- The Jordan Country Coordinator and Post-Doctoral Research Fellow will be hired through a sub-award to a selected partner institution. The core partner institution will be part of the overall Nutrition Innovation Lab's network, and it will function as a key research and capacity building collaborator.
- The team continued to work with the Mission in Jordan on an amendment request which included the merger of two sub-awards into one. Clarifications on the changes to the budget and the budget narrative were submitted.

## **6. Successes and Challenges of working in the context of COVID 19**

- Due to the ongoing global pandemic, the Nutrition Innovation Lab, like many other institution and development programs including CHN, have continued to face with significant planning, logistic and implementation challenges. Despite the challenges, the Nutrition Innovation Lab has so far been successful in engaging remotely with the USAID/Jordan colleagues as well as the CHNA implementers (FHI 360), potential partners, experts, and stakeholders throughout the reporting period. These interactions have facilitated key discussions, and although the progress has been gradual, the team has made good progress on project set-up, identification of the core partner, development of impact evaluation design and evaluation tools, and secondary data analysis to support CHN program design.

## **7. Lessons Learned: Designing and implementing a large-scale impact evaluation in times of COVID-19 pandemic: Lessons Learned from the Nutrition Innovation Lab's activities in Jordan**

The COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences have affected institutions around the world, requiring quick adaptations to programs and research activities in order to respond to changing needs, priorities, constraints, and opportunities. Typically, prior to the pandemic, a large-scale program evaluation project would have had the luxury to operate within its theory of change and assumptions, with defined set of performance indicators to track progress and program impacts. However, the ongoing pandemic and these uncertain times pose unique conceptual, methodological,



ethical, and implementation challenges for projects aiming to conduct rigorous program evaluations. Since March 2020, the Feed the Future Innovation Lab for Nutrition has been faced with these challenges in its effort to design and implement an impact evaluation of the USAID-supported Community Health and Nutrition project in Jordan. As a result, the team was required to rethink and restructure its adaptive management process to circumvent these challenges. Although whether this will translate into a successful implementation of the evaluation remains to be seen, the lessons learned during the project so far will ultimately add value to ongoing and future projects as they develop their collaborative learning and adaptive processes.

The USAID/Jordan supported Nutrition Innovation Lab project was launched in early February 2020, with the goal of conducting an impact evaluation of the USAID-supported Community Health and Nutrition (CHN) project and building local human and institutional research capacity related to maternal, infant and young child nutrition in Jordan. The timeline of the project kick-off occurred around the same time as the world witnessed a global surge in COVID-19 cases, and international travel restrictions were put in place as a response to control the global spread. As a result, any in-person engagement to facilitate the in-country project setup and stakeholder mapping activities were severely impacted, and the project team has been limited to remote interactions to complete its project setup activities, including identification of a core partner for the project.

The duration of the pandemic for over one year has resulted in ethical and conceptual challenges for the research team, both in terms of finalizing the impact evaluation design and in designing the evaluation to accommodate the direct and indirect effects of pandemic on the overall program. Ethical challenges within the program itself and the inability to interact with its target beneficiaries (communities and health facilities) have delayed the finalization of the overall program interventions, which in turn has delayed the finalization of the evaluation design. In addition, the evaluation team is in the process of developing an online survey to assess the impact of COVID-19 on target population groups of pregnant and lactating women and children under the age of two years to understand how the pandemic has impacted their access to healthcare services. The surveys are also being used to assess the pandemic's impact on healthcare providers at the local health facilities, and their burden, preparedness, and readiness to provide healthcare services.

From the methodological and implementation perspective, a key challenge has been on the operationalization of theory of change of both the CHN program and its impact evaluation, which includes finalizing program and evaluation design, implementation timeline, implementation of program components as well as the evaluation surveys, fostering partnerships and collaborations with communities, implementing partners, collaborators and key government stakeholders at the national and sub-national level.

In spite of these challenges, the Nutrition Innovation Lab has been successful in accomplishing a number of key milestones, such as unlocking the potential of secondary data analysis using existing large datasets (Demographic Health Surveys and Household Income Expenditure Surveys) to understand the context surrounding maternal, infant and young child nutrition in Jordan, continuing remote stakeholder interactions using various online platforms for presentations, and planning webinars and interactions to introduce the program and evaluation project to the key stakeholders



in Jordan. Additionally, the Nutrition Innovation Lab has successfully engaged remotely with the donor and the program implementers to foster a strong partnership supporting the program and rigorous evaluation design.

The facilitators and key adaptive management strategies shared below were adopted by the Nutrition Innovation Lab in its effort to overcome the challenges during the project inception phase. These strategies may not be reflected or sufficiently captured by the project's proposed performance indicators but are nonetheless useful lessons learned for ongoing and future USAID-funded impact evaluation projects.

- 1) **Engagement with the program implementers should happen at the earliest phase of the project.** The evaluation team's ability to engage early with the program from the initial phase of the program design, provides opportunities to make timely adaptive changes to the program and evaluation design and theory of change, especially in light of conceptual and methodological challenge such as those brought by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 2) **Continued interactions and communication to establish collaborative decision-making processes is key.** In situations such as the pandemic where circumstances change quickly, it is critical that the program and evaluation teams interact and communicate regularly. Continued interactions allow exchanges of information on a timely fashion and facilitate collective and collaborative program- and evaluation-related decisions.
- 3) **Documentation is crucial, especially when working remotely.** With rapidly changing circumstances and reliance on remote interactions, documentation of discussions, decisions, context monitoring, and management processes is key to determine, reflect upon, and revisit the project's adaptive management strategies. In addition, preparing a list of activities and highlighting areas of collaboration, with defined roles and responsibilities and, decision trees which account for unforeseen circumstances have been proven to be really helpful while working remotely.
- 4) **Strengthen coordination capacity between donor, program, and evaluation stakeholders.** With changing environments and limited access to technical resources, the ability to share information and capacity between program stakeholders, the donor agency (USAID/Jordan in this case), and the evaluation team through a coordinated mechanism has proven to be useful for program and the evaluation. For example, USAID/Jordan facilitated the Nutrition Innovation Lab's access to multi-year datasets from Jordan's Department of Statistics, which facilitated the secondary data analysis process. Similarly, support from the Nutrition Innovation Lab researchers to CHN team facilitated them in making key program design related decisions, and CHN's support in facilitating Nutrition Innovation Lab's stakeholder mapping activities are just few examples of maximum utilization of each entity's capacity, coordination, and collaboration to overcome and prevent potential delays. This has also been much hugely emphasized in the USAID Collaborating, Learning and Adapting (CLA) toolkit as well.
- 5) And finally, **stock taking, communicating and celebrating successful adaptations** as valuable lessons learned at all levels of the evaluation processes is crucial, even when faced with a number of existing and new unforeseen challenges.