

## Agriculture for Nutrition in Afghanistan

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### Country Context

For centuries agriculture has been the mainstay of the predominantly rural Afghan society. Wheat is the principal food crop, while fruits and nuts and livestock products such as wool have played a large part in subsistence, in local marketed production, and in exports. A major food crisis in the early 2000s led to massive humanitarian intervention. The national rate of child malnutrition has reduced from a catastrophic level of more than 60% stunting recorded in 2003/04 to about

40% in 2011/12, but high levels of hunger and micronutrient deficiencies persist. Much attention is given in humanitarian work to therapeutic approaches to improving the nutrition of vulnerable groups, but the contribution of agricultural development and the food system to improving rural and urban diets also needs to be increased. The recent history and current context of Afghanistan point to other factors affecting the wellbeing of the population. Political fragmentation is enmeshed with military conflict, the drugs economy, cultural diversity, regional extremes of temperature and altitude, and migration. Research is needed in these complex conditions to improve the linkages between agriculture and nutrition, taking into account the conditions of political and environmental fragility and gender issues.

### What is LANSAs?

Leveraging Agriculture for Nutrition in South Asia (LANSA) is a programme of research which aims to generate evidence that can improve nutrition outcomes in India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan. The research under LANSAs explores the fundamental, underlying and immediate determinants of nutrition particularly for women, girls and children under five years of age, and the ways in which the potential of agriculture to address malnutrition can be realised.

### LANSA research in Afghanistan

LANSA work in Afghanistan is led by the team from the LCIRAH, University of London. We are using national data to analyse the agricultural determinants of health and nutrition. Secondly, fieldwork is being undertaken through non-governmental organisations which have a permanent presence in Afghanistan. Thirdly, local research initiatives into agriculture and nutrition are being integrated into the programme. Finally, capacity building among local partner organizations is supported by the team from MSSRF, India and IDS, UK.

### Understanding policies and stakeholders

The field research in Afghanistan was launched in mid-2015 with a mapping exercise of both agriculture and nutrition stakeholders and policies. Fieldwork was conducted by the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), with support in Kandahar from the Afghanistan National Agricultural Sciences and Technology University (ANASTU). The objectives were to understand the interrelationships among key organisations in agriculture and nutrition, the local evidence base linking agriculture to nutrition, and the perceptions of decision makers about the capacity, priorities and financial resources for improving nutrition through the agri-food system.

Interviewees were drawn from the Afghan public sector, and international and national NGOs, in Kabul, Bamyan, Badakshan, Kandahar and Nangarhar. Initial analysis of the data points to the significance of fragmentation in policy making, coordination and communication. A stakeholder consultation was held in Kabul in April 2016 to consider results, seek feedback and inform future work. A consolidated report will become available on the website shortly.

## Micronutrient deficiencies and dietary diversity



South Asia is the region of the world with the highest levels of iron-deficiency anaemia. There has been little work on understanding anaemia in Afghanistan, except that anaemia prevalence amongst non-pregnant women has been estimated at 25%. Analysis of secondary data on health and agriculture is being conducted in order to identify the drivers of anaemia in women, and the food sources of iron. The diversity of foods in diets is an important factor in enhancing nutrition. For Afghanistan, where bread is the principal

food, lack of dietary diversity probably is very important. Secondary data are also being used to analyse the relationship between agricultural production and dietary diversity. Emerging from the data is the question of how easy – or difficult - it is for people to access food from local markets. Work is also being developed to understand at household level, what are the drivers of agricultural diversity, with a view to identifying interventions which address malnutrition by diversifying farming.

### How does the environment affect agricultural and dietary diversity?

Afghanistan has long been known for its rich crop genetic biodiversity. Traditional varieties of cereals, pulses and oilseed crops form the diet of many poorer communities – and may be less environmentally fragile under changing climate conditions than improved seeds. We hope to be able to work the United Nations Environment Programme to understand the impacts of climate change on local agro-biodiversity, farming systems and food and nutritional status.



### Capacity building

The research conducted so far has built on close interaction with stakeholders and policy makers. Fieldwork has been designed and implemented with local research partners. LANSA is supporting the NGO BRAC to undertake a randomised control trial of the promotion of vegetable gardening among young women through adult literacy centres in Kabul, Parwan and Kapisa. In addition, 4 stakeholders participated in an online discussion in February 2015 which brought together expert participants from across Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan and India, to discuss the regional experiences of orienting agricultural value chains towards better nutrition of vulnerable groups. Others have enrolled on the FAO-hosted ENACT online course on nutrition education that is being piloted January-April 2016.

### How will this research make a difference?

The evidence from this research programme has potential to impact areas from agriculture through food markets, consumption patterns and household nutrition to the policy-making environment. LANSA will actively engage with stakeholders through a variety of channels and media in order to integrate agriculture and nutrition policies and programmes and to promote coherence among national and international stakeholders in addressing the complex challenges of malnutrition in the diverse regions of Afghanistan.

### For more information

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