



Bridging Agriculture and Nutrition: Challenges in Communication

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Context: By the 1970s, large-scale agriculture improvement efforts included strategic communication components. Outputs ranged from carefully designed media products to training for extension officers on group and interpersonal communication. Human nutrition tended to be better linked to agriculture in countries where the extension approach had roots in the British system that included “home economics” as a specialty in agricultural extension.¹ Communication support for many agricultural innovations routinely included instructions and promotion on the use of an innovative product or processes to improve family nutrition. Communication strategies typically included audience research and segmentation, message formation, channel mix, and feedback as outlined in “communication of innovation” models (1). In the 1990s and 2000s, agriculture sector extension staff became smaller, and communication strategies shifted toward informational materials on specific innovations and crops, as well as wider use of “two-step early adopter” communication models, such as Farm Field Schools and “lead farmer” systems.

Independent of the agriculture sector, nutrition communication activities matured in the 1980s, carried by the “Child Survival Revolution.” In the 1990s, emphasis shifted toward a balance of social and psychological models, with channels and messages focused on improving feeding practices and how food was used. “Social marketing” models promoted nutrition-related products, such as iron folate supplements and fortified staples, across large populations, and “positive deviance” became widely used at the community level to promote and demonstrate improved nutrition-related practices.

Until recently, most nutrition communication strategies stayed on their own side of the agriculture-nutrition bridge. Sophisticated nutrition communication work focused on establishing and reinforcing food as a fundamental human right, promoting food fortification (including iodization of salt), battling industries that sold and promoted breast milk substitutes, and improving infant and young child feeding—particularly breastfeeding. Agriculture communication strategies and products also stayed primarily on their own side of the bridge and targeted improving crops for cash and/or consumption, improving group communication channels through Farmer Field Schools, promoting subsidized inputs programs, and protecting land through improved cropping techniques.

Current Status: In 2014, communication challenges are no longer isolated in either “nutrition” or “agriculture.” Agriculture in developing countries has moved beyond cash crops and subsistence farming, and nutrition is no longer focused almost exclusively on acute malnutrition, hidden hunger, and Infant and Young Child Feeding (IYCF).

While eliminating extreme poverty by 2030 is a central post-2015 development agenda issue, the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) calls for equal importance to be given to eliminating hunger and undernutrition, targeting the 12% of humanity who suffer from hunger on any given day and the more than 2 billion who are affected by micronutrient deficiencies. IFPRI says this can be achieved by 2025. The related communication challenge, then, is not only to fully link agriculture with nutrition but to also build strategies that effectively balance support for promoting both social and individual behavioral change.

In the context of enhanced national food and nutrition priorities, the concept most often used to bridge the two is food security. While food security is necessary for nutrition and health, the concept is complicated and often misused. Too often agricultural policymakers will accept the linkage of agriculture with nutrition while limiting their sector’s contribution to the development, production, and increased access of households to nutritious foods. Those working on the nutrition side, most often from the health sector, tend to be more oriented toward feeding practices and prevention of infection than on continuous availability, accessibility, preparation, and use of nutritious foods.

In recent years, communication strategies have followed areas where food and nutrition have gained substantial national and international support. These include policy development, the work of food processors in fortification, the development of more nutritious crop varieties, and the promotion of multi-sector programs. Strategic communication support in these areas has been well planned, multi-channeled, evidence based, and reasonably effective.

¹ “Home Economics” was a component of the British colonial system of agricultural extension. This component or specialist was not present in the French colonial system, nor is there an equivalent in many former Francophone countries.

At the policy level, Kenya's Food and Nutrition Policy, Rwanda's updated Food and Nutrition Policy, and Zambia's National Food and Nutrition Strategic Plan each have clear, high-priority linkages between food and nutrition. These linkages include fortification and food processing at the national level, decentralized district plans to reduce malnutrition, and food- and nutrition-oriented social assistance targeting the most vulnerable populations.

Complementing many such food and nutrition policy linkages is the recent strategic emphasis on the first 1,000 Days of a child's life, from the start of a woman's pregnancy until her child's 2nd birthday. New evidence and communication strategies show impacts of stunting on fetal and child development, adult health, and national economic productivity. The overarching goal of the 1,000 Days initiative, to prevent chronic malnutrition and support the long-term health and development of children under two, serves as a powerful tool for communication strategies to link agriculture and nutrition and support change at all levels.

Countries are also developing multi-sector strategies and communication support that link household food production with the nutrition requirements and healthy eating practices for pregnant women and young children. Communication support for 1,000 Days programs requires multiple partners and effective messages that link diverse intervention packages. These may include backyard nutrition gardens, biofortified crops, small livestock, fortified staples, micronutrient powders for home fortification, focused antenatal care, vitamin and mineral supplementation, maternal, infant, and young child feeding, sanitation and hygiene, infection prevention, and several others.

Multi-sector interventions and communication support are essential because no single intervention or set of interventions from any one sector can substantially lower the prevalence of stunting. The required linkages include, at minimum, agriculture, health, and social assistance, as well as communities and other partners. Success will require both strengthened services and interrelated, mutually reinforcing communication strategies, activities, and products that facilitate adoption of improved practices at both the community and household levels.

Challenges:

- Coordination across sectors may be unfamiliar. For example, one national Food and Nutrition Strategy is explicitly owned by the ministries responsible for health, agriculture, and social assistance. Two of these ministries have dedicated, well-equipped, and professionally staffed communication support units. Despite an ongoing national 1,000 Days communication campaign, a major 1,000 Days multi-sector component in current National Food and Nutrition Strategic Plan, and a new Nutrition Action Plan from the agriculture sector, the leaders and staff of these units have not met for joint planning and discussions.

Strategies for Strengthening Communication Support across the Agriculture-Nutrition Bridge:

- Recognize and address communication gaps by explicitly raising nutrition considerations for each link in the chain from national food economies to households and individuals.
- Recognize that the human right to food and nutrition requires elimination of the measurable risks and potential lifelong damage to a child's growth, health, cognitive development, and productivity that result from inadequate and unbalanced nutrition during the first 1,000 Days.
- Recognize that ensuring adequate nutrition often involves at least three supporting sectors of services and related information including: 1) agriculture, 2) health, and 3) social assistance.
- Select and link essential services and information from across sectors in a manner that encourages and facilitates learning, trial, and adoption of a sequence of practices and behaviors that positively affect health and nutrition. This step will need to be continued or carried out concurrently until a fully adequate set of practices and essential behaviors is identified (there will be additional alternatives).
- Evaluate, and if necessary improve, the knowledge and services needed to support adoption of each effective practice and essential behaviors.
- Develop and implement effective, science-based communication strategies to promote these steps including, as needed, components aimed at:
 - Policy advocacy and resource generation,
 - Organizational motivation and alliance building, and
 - Social and individual behavioral change.

1. Ascroft, J; Gleason, G. 1979. *Establishing the information support unit, Ministry of Agriculture*. Report of Project Information Support Unit of the Ministry of Agriculture for Development Support Communication Department. Rome: United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO).