

Strengthening Nutrition-Sensitive Agriculture in Ethiopia

STRONG COORDINATION AT NATIONAL LEVELS REQUIRES MORE INVESTMENT AT IMPLEMENTATION LEVEL

CASE STUDY BY EMILY WEI AND NAVYA NADIMPALLI

Introduction and Background

Ethiopia is the second most populous country in Africa with a current population of 126.5 million.¹ Between 2000 and 2016, Ethiopia made notable progress towards reducing malnutrition in children under 5: stunting rates dropped from 58 to 38 percent.² Despite these gains, mothers' and children's consumption of nutritious foods remained a challenge.³ Over this time, the Government of Ethiopia (GOE) and its ministries set forth a series of important policies, strategies and plans to address the national challenge of malnutrition.

Despite promising progress in those years, trends have begun to reverse since 2020 in the face of shocks like the COVID-19 pandemic and increased regional conflict, particularly in the Tigray region. Climate change-driven drought has also created stress. Amidst this backdrop, the national budget environment is in decline, and donor budgets for nutrition have generally flat-lined and are skewed towards emergency programs.

Purpose and Methodology

This case study was undertaken to support a project to explore the state of knowledge and practice in nutrition-sensitive agriculture and to make recommendations to improve U.S. government investments and programs. The success of investments in nutrition-sensitive agriculture relies heavily on country contexts, particularly the policy and implementation environment, as well as U.S. government and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Mission-level systems, structures and decision making. This case study was meant to explore the success factors – as well as inhibitors – for achieving impact from nutrition-sensitive agriculture interventions at the country-level.

Catholic Relief Services (CRS) policy staff and a consultant conducted this case study in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in May 2024. Eleven, one-hour key informant interviews or focus group discussions were conducted with:

- USAID Mission focal points;
- GOE focal points;

¹ "The World Bank in Ethiopia," World Bank, last updated April 9, 2024, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/ethiopia/overview>

² *Food and Nutrition Policy* (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2018), <https://www.nipn.ephi.gov.et/sites/default/files/2020-05/Food%20and%20Nutrition%20Policy.pdf>

³ Anne Bossuyt, "Moving towards Moving toward nutrition-sensitive agriculture strategies and programming in Ethiopia" in *Agriculture for improved nutrition: Seizing the momentum*, edited by Shenggen Fan, Sivan Yosef and Rajul Pandya-Yorch. IFPRI and CAB, 2019. <http://ebrary.ifpri.org/cdm/ref/collection/p15738coll2/id/133098>

- implementing partners of Feed the Future and other nutrition-sensitive agriculture projects;
- CRS project staff from across CRS' humanitarian and development portfolio, as well as partner staff; and
- civil society coalitions.

CRS in Ethiopia

Over the last 65 years, CRS Ethiopia has established a prominent position among development and humanitarian stakeholders with a consistent and high-quality reputation for strong organizational, operational, and multi-sectoral technical expertise. CRS Ethiopia maintains a broad geographic reach, improving woreda, kebele and community level accountability through its network of local partners.

CRS is a leader in emergency programming through our flagship Joint Emergency Operation (JEOP). Moving beyond emergency response, CRS' disaster mitigation and recovery projects in drought- and flood-prone areas have rebuilt individual and community assets through non-food interventions in the form of agriculture, livestock, health, nutrition, and water and sanitation assistance. Nationally, CRS has a reputation as a leader in peacebuilding, particularly as a facilitator of inter-community social cohesion strengthening. In fiscal year 2023, CRS Ethiopia served 9.7 million people directly and 2 million people indirectly. Its food security and nutrition projects include:

CRS' **Resilience Food Security Activity (RFSA)**, entitled Ifaa, or "light," is reducing poverty, vulnerability, and food insecurity. With a budget of \$102 million, Ifaa targets nine Woredas (districts) based on poverty, Productive Safety Net Program caseload/potential for scale, partner presence, and opportunity for impact in the Oromia Region. Ifaa prioritizes pregnant and lactating women, with a focus on first-time mothers; caregivers; and influential community members to ensure children under five receive adequate nutrition, vulnerable community members are reached, and behavior change takes root to create lasting change.

CRS' Feed the Future program, **Ethiopia Seed Activity (ESA)**, is a five-year, \$9.5 million project aimed at addressing systemic challenges in the country's seed systems. From October 2023 to September 2028, ESA aims to strengthen policy and regulatory frameworks, enhance data collection and dissemination, and facilitate interconnected seed marketing and distribution systems that meet emerging demand. The activity is being implemented in eight regions of the country.

The **Joint Emergency Operation (JEOP)** is a multi-year food security program focusing on transitory food insecure households. In fiscal year 2023, CRS operated in 136 woredas across five regions and one city administration and served approximately 8 million people - 40-45% of the total number of people targeted for emergency food assistance in the 2023 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP).

The **Community Recovery and Resilience Project (CRRP)** is a \$6.4 million project funded by the Leona M. and Harry B. Helmsley Charitable Trust. CRRP is a comprehensive response and recovery project aimed at enhancing the lives of vulnerable communities, focusing on increasing income, improving health outcomes, ensuring access to safe and clean water, and enhancing livelihoods.

Policy Environment

The GOE has created a comparatively strong policy and institutional environment for nutrition-sensitive programming. A 2005 Demographic and Health Survey showed that agricultural surpluses did not necessarily result in reductions in hunger.⁴ Another study commissioned by the African Union Commission and GOE, *The Cost of Hunger*, concluded that the annual costs associated with child undernutrition in Ethiopia was equivalent to 16.5% of its GDP annually.⁵ In this context, the GOE proliferated a series of nutrition-oriented policies, strategies, plans and guidelines that reflected new evidence.

The mandate for addressing malnutrition historically sat with the Ministry of Health. The creation of the first National Nutrition Program in 2008 primarily reflected nutrition-specific interventions in response to high acute malnutrition needs. However, after the 2013 *Lancet* series laid out the need for a multi-sectoral response to address stunting specifically, the subsequent National Nutrition Program incorporated more nutrition-sensitive approaches across sectors, including mainstreaming nutrition into agriculture.⁶ The Program also calls for enhanced inter-sectoral coordination with signatories from 13 ministries.

In 2015, the GOE launched the Seqota Declaration, which lays out Ethiopia's high-level commitment to end stunting by 2030. Endorsed and embedded into the National Growth and Transformation Plan, it sits among the country's highest-level commitments. The Seqota Declaration is managed under the National Nutrition Program and led by the Ministry of Health but implemented by seven ministry signatories, including the Ministry of Agriculture. The Declaration promotes local coordination platforms, which take stock of available interventions, and encourages their complementarity so that households receive a comprehensive set of nutrition-sensitive and nutrition-specific services.⁷

The Seqota Declaration is accompanied by a fifteen-year roadmap to achieve its goals through three phases. The first is an Innovation Phase (2016-2020), where innovative approaches were tested in 40 woredas of the Amhara and Tigray regional states. The second is the Expansion Phase (2021-2025), where preparation is in progress to expand promising practices and lessons learned during the first phase. The final phase – the National Scale-up Phase (2026-2030) – involves full-scale implementation of evidence-based, multi-sectoral interventions throughout the country. GOE has committed 6 billion ETB (roughly \$100 million USD) annually – half from national treasury and half from regional governments – and has requested for partners to match this amount annually for a total of 12 billion ETB annually for implementation. The estimated cost of expansion and scale up is 146 billion ETB (about \$2.5 billion USD) over ten years.⁸

As the GOE grew to understand that nutrition-sensitive approaches increasingly required agricultural approaches, the Ministry of Agriculture undertook a growing role in addressing nutrition as a component of its efforts for economic development. With 85% of its population dependent on rain-fed agriculture, Ethiopia recognizes that the impacts of nutrition-sensitive agriculture on malnutrition could be enormous.⁹ Despite including nutrition indicators into agricultural plans as early as 2010, the implementation aspects of achieving such indicators remained elusive. By 2015, the capacity to undertake nutrition-sensitive agriculture activities remained limited (Bossuyt, 2019). In 2016, the Ministry of Agriculture launched a Nutrition-Sensitive Agriculture strategy, which laid out three main pathways to address malnutrition: 1) food production and productivity, 2) agricultural income, and 3) women's empowerment. The strategy

⁴ Mokoro, *Independent Comprehensive Evaluation of the Scaling Up Nutrition Movement: Inception Report* (Oxford: Mokoro Ltd, 2014), <https://mokoro.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/SUNinception.pdf>

⁵ *The Cost of Hunger in Africa: Implications for the Growth and Transformation of Ethiopia* (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2013), https://documents.wfp.org/stellent/groups/public/documents/newsroom/wfp263405.pdf?_ga=2.202986065.1191294278.1724687459-669546205.1724687459

⁶ *National Nutrition Program 2016-2020*, (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia), <https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/eth190946.pdf>

⁷ Bossuyt, *Moving towards Moving toward nutrition-sensitive agriculture strategies and programming in Ethiopia*, 169.

⁸ *Seqota Declaration: Resource Mobilization Plan* (Seqota Declaration Federal Program Delivery Unit, 2024), <https://r4d.org/resources/seqota-declaration-resource-mobilization-plan/>

⁹ *Ethiopia: a Case Study Conducted by the Climate Resilient Food Systems Alliance* (2022), https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/Ethiopia_CRFS_Case_Study.pdf

made explicit links to the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Program, the National Nutrition Program, and the Seqota Declaration, as well as initiatives of the agricultural ministries. It also set out provisions to strengthen multi-sector coordination across the agricultural ministries, which resulted in nutrition focal points or case teams (Bossuyt, 2019). A Food and Nutrition Coordination office was established at the Ministry of Agriculture in 2018. A subsequent National Nutrition-Sensitive Agri-Food Systems Strategy (2024-2030) released in April 2024 builds on learning from the past strategy. It includes a broader focus on social and environmental components of nutrition through the four pillars of food systems, with additional objectives around post-harvest loss and food safety, among others. It also lays out sector leadership and collaborative roles, strategic actions, and key performance indicators (NNAFSS, 2024).

Over this time, the Ministry of Agriculture also began to integrate nutrition into existing national agricultural efforts, including through its national Productive Safety Net Program, currently in its fourth iteration, and the Agriculture Growth Program. For both exercises, building the understanding and capacity of extension workers and other implementing stakeholders has been an important foundational step in its success. The Productive Safety Net Program faced initial challenges in rolling out its nutrition-sensitive approaches because of constrained budgets and the onset of El Niño, which forced a shift to emergency response. But it is now working to implement nutrition-sensitive approaches more heavily. Similarly, the Agriculture Growth Program spent initial years building tools and capacity for a better understanding of how to integrate nutrition-sensitive activities into its strategies and plans.

Between 2013 and 2016, the GOE's nutrition budget more than doubled, largely driven by investments in nutrition-sensitive programs. From 2015-16, nearly \$455 million was allocated to nutrition, 73% of which was for nutrition-sensitive programs, including the One WaSH National Program and nutrition-sensitive provisions of the Productive Safety Net Program (FDRE, 2017). GOE leadership has been key, but it has also been supported by ongoing engagement and advocacy from development partners to ensure that food security and nutrition efforts were increasingly coordinated, integrated and funded.

The Seqota Declaration has been an essential piece to pull these various strategies, programs and coordination bodies together – a North Star for achieving nutrition outcomes for Ethiopia. It champions multi-sector coordination and community-level decision making and provides a vision for the subsequent nutrition-relevant policies and strategies.

The GOE has recently shifted to a food systems approach, spurred by their engagement in the 2021 United Nations (UN) Food Systems Summit. Since the Summit, GOE has embedded 22 “game changers,” or actions “critical to accelerating food systems transformation and have been designed to both support and evolve existing national policies and programs” into their Food and Nutrition Strategy, in recognition that a food systems approach fills gaps to further nutrition outcomes. Continued U.S. government and donor investment into these policy frameworks have also been essential to their fruition, particularly providing technical assistance into their formation and eventual implementation.

Government of Ethiopia Coordination

A growing recognition that nutrition is not solely the responsibility of the Ministry of Health has been reflected by changing efforts of other ministries to address nutrition through the multi-sectoral policies and initiatives such as the National Food and Nutrition Policy (2018-2030), the Seqota Declaration, the National Nutrition Agri-Food Systems Strategy (2024-2030) as well as the governance structures such as Food and Nutrition Inter-Ministerial Steering Committee and the creation of Food and Nutrition Offices in both the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Agriculture. The second National Nutrition Program revitalized the implementation of the National Nutrition Coordination Body and established Regional Nutrition Coordination Bodies in most regions as well as woreda-level coordination bodies.

The National Food and Nutrition Policy (2018-2030) proposed the creation of a Food and Nutrition Council that “shall be established at national level to facilitate and coordinate the implementation of the Food and Nutrition Policy” (FN Policy, 2018). The Food and Nutrition Council has 14 signatories to the Policy and is viewed by many stakeholders to be the structural key to resolve outstanding questions on who takes the final ownership on achieving nutrition outcomes,

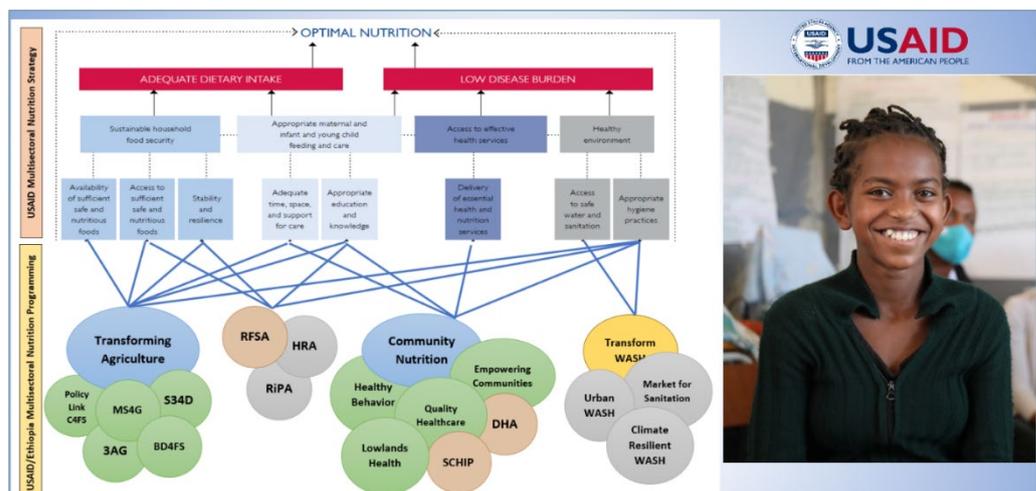
The Government of Ethiopia's nutrition budget more than doubled between 2013 and 2016.

primarily between the Ministries of Agriculture and Health. With leadership of the Prime Minister or Deputy Prime Minister, priority setting towards budget and human resource allocation can be better integrated and joined up for more effectiveness in meeting the objectives of the National Food and Nutrition Policy, among others. The legalization of this council is currently still in process, but there is support to push it forward at the national government-level. The USAID Mission also supports this initiative and has included funding for it in the nutrition governance pillar of the Feed the Future Community Nutrition Activity. Subnationally, four regions have independently established regional Food and Nutrition Councils.

U.S. Government Coordination

USAID is one of largest bilateral donors for food security and nutrition in Ethiopia; in fiscal year 2023, USAID provided \$1.6 billion in foreign assistance with around \$900 million specifically for humanitarian assistance, \$360 million for developmental food aid/food security assistance, and \$80 million for agriculture.¹⁰ Over time, USAID has evolved its approach to integrate nutrition and relevant indicators into much of its programming. With the understanding that “nutrition is not a sector,” integration and coordination is strong: at the Mission level, a nutrition working group tackles many of the programmatic and policy challenges together, ensuring that all relevant stakeholders are party to the discussion and outcomes. As Ethiopia was named a USAID Nutrition Priority Country, the Mission’s multi-sector working group on nutrition co-developed the country plan. USAID has also seen success through strong coordination, as well as joined up design and programming. **Figure 1** shows how the two current flagship USAID Feed the Future activities in Ethiopia, Transforming Agriculture and Community Nutrition (blue circles), are expected to coordinate and collaborate with other existing USAID-funded projects including other Feed the Future and non-Feed the Future activities. Requiring this level of interconnectedness is meant to ensure that coordination is standardized throughout the lifecycle of the activities and is maintained regardless of leadership or staff turnover.

FIGURE 1. USAID’S multi-sectoral programming in Ethiopia



¹⁰ “U.S. Foreign Assistance by Country: Ethiopia”, last updated July 25, 2024, <https://www.foreignassistance.gov/cd/ethiopia/2023/obligations/1>

Exposure visits help
with understanding
what successful
nutrition-sensitive
agriculture
interventions look
like

Findings and recommendations:

1. The GOE has shown strong leadership to advance the cause of nutrition-sensitive agriculture.

Taking lessons from the evidence, expert insight, and experiential learning were crucial factors in moving the GOE's approach to nutrition from largely nutrition-specific interventions to include a broader array of nutrition-sensitive activities. It is notable that exposure visits to other countries to learn from other governments and strategies played a significant role, according to informants. This exposure helped create the baseline understanding of what a successful nutrition-sensitive agriculture intervention could look like, but also showed the roadmap for how it could be successfully done, including through multi-sectoral budgeting. As a result, the GOE created a series of evidence-based multi-year policies and frameworks that reflect the changing literature around how to best address chronic malnutrition in agrarian societies such as Ethiopia.

While a baseline understanding of nutrition-sensitive approaches has been essential for setting policy frameworks, ongoing capacity training at all levels to deepen understanding on nutrition-sensitive agriculture has also been a key success factor to operationalize the nutrition-sensitive agriculture strategy. Save the Children is currently implementing the Bill and Melinda Gates-funded CASE project, which has facilitated building some of the systems and structures to properly implement the nutrition-sensitive agriculture strategy within the Ministry of Agriculture. Through the grant, the Ministry of Agriculture formed the Food and Nutrition Office, increasing its food and nutrition staff numbers from 6 to 14 at national level, and trained 39 staff at the national and 3 regional levels. With a clear sustainability plan in place, all trained staff should eventually be funded by the GOE. A follow-on Japan International Cooperation Agency-funded project continues to strengthen the capacity at the woreda levels.

GOE's strong understanding and prioritization of nutrition at elevated levels has made it possible for donors and civil society to increasingly take a "360 approach to nutrition" in which nutrition outcomes are integrated into its many activities. Strong policies at the national level create frameworks for donors to easily slot into, and for civil society and internal advocates to seek accountability. Also, the creation of guidelines in support of the strategies help align ministries, as well as the implementation of project activities.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Nutrition-sensitive agriculture must be supported by protected, multi-year funding. Respondents noted that currently, the balance for nutrition activities at the national level is still weighted towards emergency assistance, with projects limited to only one to two years' length.
- Donors/USAID should lead the coordination across humanitarian and development activities.
- Donors/USAID should fund exposure visits, which are lower-cost, high-impact activities that can help governments see first-hand how nutrition-sensitive agriculture approaches can be implemented effectively.

2. The multi-sectoral nature of nutrition is well-reflected by the multiple ministries that have signed on to the GOE's nutrition strategies and policies.

A proliferation of coordination bodies is well-attended and engaged – including the National Nutrition Coordination body, Seqota forum and the inter-ministerial committee, which help promote ownership, commitment and accountability across stakeholders. The proposed Food and Nutrition Council, which many stakeholders are actively pushing forward, will be an important platform for high-level coordination and leadership and will bring in regional representation and leadership.

Government tracking of nutrition budgets and activities across ministries also highlights its prioritization of nutrition among its many policy issues. The GOE creates "costed woreda-based plans" that allow for needs-based planning and budgeting at the woreda-level, but it is not clear that donor-funded projects feed into or actively coordinate with these plans. This could be due to a lack of geographic overlap, but where there is overlap, this will be a lost opportunity for the

Government and its citizens. A rough calculation shows that USAID Feed the Future projects are anywhere from 5-10 times the budget allocation of the GOE for such activities.

USAID is well-coordinated with GOE activities at national levels and supports many technical needs. Its current portfolio of activities is well-aligned with all GOE's current food security and nutrition strategies including the Seqota Declaration, National Food and Nutrition Policy, and Productive Safety Net Program. Feed the Future's Community Nutrition Activity is currently supporting an assessment in support of standing up the Food and Nutrition Council. Multi-sectoral and cross-project coordination at the Mission level is quite strong and will be required as it increases nutrition-sensitive approaches in emergency nutrition projects, namely CRS' JEOP.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DONORS, GOVERNMENTS, and IMPLEMENTERS:

- Donors and Governments should incentivize ongoing multi-sectoral collaboration such as through governance components of Feed the Future projects and country multi-sectoral nutrition plans. Donors should also ensure that projects are well-aligned and coordinated with existing plans and strategies, all the way through implementation level.
- All stakeholders should support the nutrition-sensitive humanitarian-development-peace nexus effort that UNOCHA is currently leading, to understand the integration across the divides. This will also take into the account the needs of conflict-affected communities, which need recovery and social cohesion activities in the aftermath of conflict.
- Donors/USAID should lead cross-project coordination of nutrition-sensitive components that are being newly integrated into projects, such as JEOP.

3. *Grassroots-level capacities, coordination and implementation of multi-sectoral nutrition interventions need further investment, particularly at the woreda-level and below.* Many of the capacity strengthening activities have not yet made it down to the zonal, kebele and village levels, despite stronger multi-sectoral collaboration at these levels. Budget constraints for government extension workers at the grassroots level mean extension workers are often over-extended and can result in high turnover. Implementing partners may end up "competing" for extension worker's time and participation, which can create internal competition between project interventions.

Some promising models at the implementation level include utilizing care groups, women's organizations or savings and lending groups to push out coordinated nutrition-sensitive activities. Another promising, historic approach is the "home economics" model, which was part of the Ministry of Agriculture decades ago, and which it recently assessed for reinstatement. The approach, which included components of homegrown gardens, cooking demonstrations and home processing of foods, is a promising approach because it centers the household rather than the sectoral implementers and its technical approaches. This may help reduce duplication and provide useful and applicable information for households.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Donors, GOE and implementers must cascade capacity strengthening efforts down to implementation level for nutrition-sensitive agriculture interventions and outcomes to be fully realized. Right now, much of the training and fora for nutrition-sensitive agriculture learning remain at national and regional levels.
- Donors should utilize the "grant-under-grant" model, which sub-grants to existing stakeholders, increasing the likelihood of ownership and sustainability. Additional learnings for the grant-under-grant model can be found [here](#).

4. *Implementation is more likely to be successful when well-consulted, co-created and utilizes collaborating, learning and adapting approaches.* Ensuring learning is utilized and carried forward at the institutional level is also essential, and can be captured in formal collaborating, learning and adapting documentation, as well as through longstanding national staff. For example, USAID's investment in nutrition-sensitive agriculture has shifted objectives based on learnings from past projects. Through the learning from Empowering New Generations to Improve Nutrition and Economic Opportunities, USAID's flagship nutrition project from 2011-2016, a better water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) component was added to a subsequent 6-year USAID project called Growth through Nutrition. Based on learnings from Growth through Nutrition, the current Feed

the Future projects, Transforming Agriculture and Community Nutrition, specialize in components of the previous Growth through Nutrition activity, but are co-located in 50 target woredas and ensure that the two projects coordinate with the flagship WASH activity, Transforming WASH. Community Nutrition also includes the mandate for essential coordination and governance between the two projects. Another learning from Growth through Nutrition was to use the grant-under-grant initiative to support and empower woredas and local civil society organizations with capacity building.

Based on consultation with the Ministry of Agriculture, Feed the Future's Transforming Agriculture project has included enset, or "false banana," as one of its target commodities. Almost 30 million people in the south of the country depend on enset, which is drought resistant, and now the Feed the Future activity aims to fortify it to increase its nutritional value.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Donors and implementers should utilize collaborating, learning and adapting approaches and ensure learning is institutionalized.
- Donors and Governments should invest specifically in strengthening governance and coordination, which are essential components for multi-sectoral nutrition activities.

5. ***The GOE's shift towards a food systems framework has expanded the scope of food security and nutrition at the national level and will drive greater change for nutrition outcomes.*** The Ministry of Agriculture's National Nutrition Sensitive Agri-Food Systems Strategy elevates "new" components along the value chain, particularly through the National Food Safety and Quality Strategy and Post-Harvest Management Strategy. Complex frameworks reflect complex realities of the entire system and point to further investments by the Government and ministries to further nutrition outcomes.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- USAID should work with Feed the Future stakeholders to explore funding opportunities from the Development Finance Corporation, the U.S. government's development finance institution, including on food security.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank all those who graciously participated in the key informant interviews and candidly shared their experiences and learning. We would also like to thank the support of the CRS Ethiopia office, particularly Mekonnen Tesfamariam, nutrition advisor.