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Legacy Series:

LIFT's programmes have generated a wealth of information across themes and regions in Myanmar. LIFT launched a Legacy Series in 2017 to share this learning with its partners and stakeholders. This series will reflect on LIFT programmes and will look to the future of development programming in Myanmar.

Legacy Paper No. 2

The role of men in nutrition
– lessons from the Delta RISE project



Livelihoods and Food Security Trust Fund



Learnings from Delta Rise Project

Worldwide, men's engagement in nutrition projects is reportedly limited, even though research suggests that men are pivotal in the nutritional well-being of their families¹. The Delta RISE project implemented by Welthungerhilfe (WHH) and GRET in Myanmar's Ayeyarwady Delta has a significant number of male participants, reaching approximately 30 per cent of men in WHH villages. This Legacy Paper examines men's involvement in the Delta RISE project and why their participation is relatively high. It also investigates the barriers and importance of male participation in nutrition projects.

Methodology

This paper is based on desk research and fieldwork carried out in two WHH project villages: Boe Hlaing Chaung and Koe Eain Tan in Bogale Township of the Ayeyarwady Region in Myanmar. Seven semi-structured, one-to-one interviews were conducted; two men and one woman from Boe Hlaing Chaung, and two men and two women in Koe Eain Tan Village. The LANN+ coordinator of WHH was also interviewed. Interviews in the villages were conducted in Myanmar language with the help of a translator and the LANN+ coordinator was interviewed in English.

This research is exploratory and does not aim to assess the Delta RISE project or be representative of all nutrition projects in the Delta

Key Findings

- In order to understand men's contribution to nutrition one needs to look beyond an understanding of nutrition that focuses solely on food preparation and cooking.
- To involve men in nutrition trainings, the location and timing should be taken into consideration.
- The research suggests that men's interest in nutrition training and activities substantially increases when nutrition is linked to topics they are already interested in and areas they consider to be their responsibility, such as natural resource management and agricultural practices.
- During the research, both men and women expressed a desire for separate and dedicated nutrition activities for men. Such opportunities are likely to contribute to increasing men's participation.
- Raising awareness about the importance of proper nutrition for the long-term health of the household is crucial to encourage more men to participate in nutrition activities. Video production and the use of radio can be particularly powerful tools to communicate messages.

¹ Catholic Relief Services, Father Engagement in Nutrition: A qualitative analysis in Muhanga and Karongi districts in Rwanda, 2016

“ Sometimes women who are going to the [nutrition] trainings can’t apply their knowledge since they are not the household head. They would like to but their husbands don’t allow it. - Female respondent

Many nutrition projects have traditionally targeted mothers of young children as the sole beneficiaries, however the role and contribution of men in the well-being and health of their families has come into increasing focus in recent years.²

On the Delta Rise Project

The LIFT-funded Rural Intensification for Sustainable Economic Development (RISE) project implemented by Welthungerhilfe and GRET in Bogale and Mawlamyinegyam townships in the Ayeyarwady Delta in Myanmar is addressing the needs of rural households by supporting them to increase their incomes from farming activities, increase their access to non-farm employment and economic opportunities, and to improve their nutrition.

WHH uses a ‘Linking Agriculture and Natural Resource Management towards Nutrition Security’ (LANN+) approach. LANN+ targets rural populations who rely on local natural resources for their food and nutrition security. It also places a particular emphasis on the nutritional needs of mothers and children. Trainings integrate participatory learning through theatre, role plays, joint cooking classes and recipe development.

In the Delta RISE project, the LANN+ approach was implemented in 30 WHH villages and 15 GRET villages and provided training on nutrition and food diversification. This involved identifying and promoting the use of neglected sources of nutritious food; providing knowledge about food and ecosystem balancing, and educating villagers on the importance of responsive breastfeeding, complimentary feeding and nutrition during the first 1,000 days of a child’s life for their long-term development.

² Catholic Relief Services, Father Engagement in Nutrition: A qualitative analysis in Muhanga and Karongi districts in Rwanda, 2016

The International Research Centre for Research on Women conducted a review of 58 programmes that had interventions targeted at men. It noted that well-designed engagement programmes for men can have positive impacts on maternal, newborn and child health, particularly when these programmes emphasise equitable relationships between men and women in communication and decision-making.³

Furthermore, not involving men can make it harder for women to employ and sustain the practices learned in nutrition trainings. While nutrition is often considered to be the responsibility of women in Myanmar, men are often the head of household and they can affect how nutrition decisions are ultimately made.

Research by Catholic Relief Services has found that when women have support from the men in the households for adopting different and better nutritional methods, these behaviour changes are more likely to be sustained and to be passed on to their children⁴. It is important that both men and women display good nutritional behaviour for raising healthy children and promoting good nutritional practices to be passed on to younger generations⁵. These highlights further the importance of involving men in nutrition projects and increasing their understanding of good nutrition.

³ Barker G, Ricardo C, Nascimento M, Olukoya A, Santos C, Questioning gender norms with men to improve health outcomes: evidence of impact, *Glob Pub Health*, 2010, 5 (5): 539-553.

⁴ Catholic Relief Services, Father Engagement in Nutrition: A qualitative analysis in Muhanga and Karongi districts in Rwanda, 2016

⁵ Comrie-Thomson, L., et al., Men Matter. Engaging Men for Better MNCH Outcomes, 2015

The current state of men's role in nutrition in Delta RISE

In 2016, approximately 30 per cent of the participants in LANN+ training modules in WHH's project villages were men, which project staff considers to be a high participation rate. The training informs the men of different agricultural techniques and improved ways to manage natural resources alongside teaching about good nutritional practices.

The male participants in the Delta RISE project who were interviewed for this research were aware of the importance of proper nutrition and how they can improve their families' nutritional intake through improved agriculture practices and the management of natural resources. Respondents spoke of how they were cautious not to overuse fertilizers and pesticides on the agricultural produce they harvested for subsistence. The men interviewed said they were helping improve the nutrition of their families by sharing the knowledge acquired from LANN+ with family members.

The men said they saw their role in the family's nutrition around the areas of agriculture, horticulture, income generation and knowledge sharing. This highlights that it is important to look beyond food preparation in the home when understanding nutrition to recognise potential roles of men. It is also important to link men's involvement with areas that they feel are their responsibility, such as income generation and agricultural production.

Findings from this research suggest that by linking nutrition with agriculture and natural resource management LANN+ has created incentives for men to engage in the training, leading to higher participation.

Barriers for men to take a more active role in nutrition and ways to improve men's participation

While the Delta RISE project has a relatively high number of men participating in their nutrition activities, the research highlighted some barriers that inhibit more men from engaging and explain why the nutritional know-how of men in the project villages still remained low compared to the women in the village.

A common explanation for men's limited involvement is their high workload and lack of time. All of the men interviewed said their work in the fields, casual labour activities and membership in the Village Development Committee and MAFF⁶ limited the time they had to participate in LANN+ activities.



Man labouring in harvest in the Delta. - Photo by John Rae, 2016

⁶ Management Advice for Family Farms (MAFF), implemented by GRET in Myanmar, is an advisory approach based on learning and decision-making processes. MAFF is derived from management sciences and the main objective is to strengthen farmers' capacities to manage all the resources of their farms (land, labour, inputs, money, crops, and livestock) and other activities (off-farm and non-farm).

Shocks and strains on the household also influenced how men engaged with nutrition activities. Two men interviewed said that illnesses in the family inhibited them from taking on a more active role in nutrition because when their wives were ill they had to take on household work in addition to their usual work. While this heavy burden limits their ability to participate in nutrition trainings and workshops, how men choose to allocate and prioritise their time is linked to how they understand the roles and responsibilities of men and women. The men who were interviewed said they saw preparing meals as the responsibility of the women.

The Delta RISE project with its LANN+ approach has been able to overcome these gendered and time related barriers to an extent. They mobilised a relatively large number of men to participate in the nutritional activities by linking agriculture and natural resource management with nutrition security. Many men said they were interested in LANN+ because the trainings did not only focus on food identification and preparation but also on food production and the management of natural resources. WHH tailored some of the activities within their trainings specifically for this aim. For example they used the paddy-to-plate concept to show how agricultural practices impact on the food that arrives on the plate and affects the nutritional well-being of families. WHH also highlighted the importance of good nutrition for men by linking it to their own health and stamina. By overcoming the belief that nutrition is only about food preparation and by appealing to men's interests, WHH has managed to increase the interest of men in nutrition and their engagement in Delta RISE activities.

While WHH has successfully engaged men in nutrition activities the research also suggested some further initiatives that could increase their involvement further. All men interviewed were in

favour of having informal forums where they can meet with other men and talk about the nutritional well-being of their families and their own role in it. This suggests that men need designated spaces where they can learn about nutrition, such as informal meetings in the evenings or cooking competitions or classes directed at men. WHH has already introduced the idea of cooking competitions in the project villages that could teach men important skills and help overcome the misconception that cooking is solely the responsibility of women.

“Men-specific meetings are a good idea since if the meetings are exclusively for men, they have to go. They can't send us - the meetings are only for them.

- Female respondent

Raising awareness on the importance of nutrition through video and radio is also a good way to reach men. As one man recalls his experience of seeing a video in a workshop in Bogale,

“In a workshop they showed us a video of fish eating small pieces of plastic in the river and these fishes with plastic in their stomachs got eaten by people in the end. I can't forget this video. The project should use more videos since men can't always attend all the meetings and it is a very important tool to share information

- Male respondent

Radio messages can also be used to reach out to men about the importance of nutrition. One staff member of WHH suggested using famous actors to spread nutrition messages over the radio. Such mediums enable nutrition messages to reach men outside of workshops and trainings.

Concluding remarks

The WHH has utilised several ways to encourage more men to participate in nutrition activities. Linking nutrition to agriculture and natural resource management has proven to a successful way as it appeals to men's areas of interest and reflects the wider understanding of nutrition that goes beyond food preparation, while also recognizing the importance of food production and management of natural resources as key elements of the nutritional well-being of families in the project villages. This research has shown that one way to overcome cultural and time-related barriers to increasing men's participation in nutrition activities is by setting up frequent informal meetings for men only where they can share their knowledge, challenges and suggestions and using other channels of communication than workshops and meetings.

Bibliography:

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Front cover photo by John Rae, 2016

This learning paper is based on a review of project reports, interviews with beneficiaries and interviews and correspondence with key people at Welthungerhilfe and LIFT. It does not reflect the views of Welthungerhilfe, LIFT's donors or any other institutional stakeholder. It has been researched and produced by the LIFT fund management office. Research followed the RCUK policy and guidelines on the



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