



EVIDENCE NEEDS TO INFORM NUTRITION POLICIES & PROGRAMMES IN EAST AND WEST AFRICA AND THE SAHEL

Nutrition Research Facility – January 2022

Key Messages

The Nutrition Research Facility (NRF) organised a consultation process (March to June 2021) to identify the needs for evidence from decision-makers to inform nutrition policies & programmes in the Sahel, East & West Africa.

196 stakeholders were invited to take part in the process, comprising an online questionnaire, a virtual workshop and an online prioritisation exercise, all conducted in English and French.

78 stakeholders from 15 countries participated in the consultation, representing mainly national governments, but also academia, cooperation partners, United Nations agencies, civil society organisations and regional intergovernmental organisations.

The process yielded 16 prioritised research topics, of which 5 have been selected by the NRF and the European Commission for further investigation under the Knowledge and Research for Nutrition project, which NRF is a component.

The NRF will replicate this process in other regions, which proved to be an efficient way to identify research needs based on decision-makers' concerns.

About the Nutrition Research Facility

The Knowledge and Research for Nutrition project of the European Commission aims to provide improved knowledge and evidence for policy and programme design, management and monitoring & evaluation in order to reach better nutrition outcomes.

The project is implemented by Agrinatura – the European Alliance on Agricultural Knowledge for Development – which has established a Nutrition Research Facility (NRF), pooling expertise from European academia with the ability to mobilise internationally renowned scientific networks and research organisations from partner countries.

Through a demand-driven process, the NRF provides expert advice to the European Commission, to the European Union (EU) member states and to partner countries that have prioritised nutrition in their cooperation with the EU. In order to stimulate the demand for scientific input from decision-makers, the NRF organised a consultation process between March and June 2021 to identify the needs for evidence to inform nutrition policies & programmes in East and West Africa and the Sahel. The present brief describes this consultation process and its outcomes.

A three-step consultation process: collection of ideas – interaction among stakeholders – prioritisation

Identification of stakeholders

The first round of consultation led by the NRF focused on East and West Africa and the Sahel. The stakeholders to be invited

to take part in the consultation (involved either in policy and programme design and implementation or in research) were identified through national focal points of the Scaling-Up Nutrition (SUN) movement, EU delegations, other initiatives active in these countries that aim to enhance evidence-informed decision-making and the NRF's own networks. A total of 196 individuals were directly contacted.

Consultation process

The consultation process consisted of an online questionnaire (in English/French), followed by two virtual workshops (in English/French), each of two half-day sessions held at a few days' interval. The framework presented in table 1 guided the online questionnaire to collect the emerging spontaneous needs for evidence. Building on the results of the online questionnaire, participants in the first session of the workshops were invited to expand and build consensus on evidence needs. They were split into three groups to discuss (1) the characterisation of nutrition issues as well as methods, tools and indicators; (2) the efficiency of interventions; and (3) the enabling environment. Each group could propose up to ten topics they believed were of particular importance. During the second session of each workshop, participants voted electronically for the three most important topics in each category (taking into account the 'importance' criteria encompassing: the political or societal relevance of the issue, the magnitude of the problem and the potential for improvement with research inputs – see table 2). Participants then specified the items shown in table 3 for the selected issues.

Table 1. Framework for the formulation of evidence needs

Group 1	Characterisation of nutrition issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Specify their prevalence and the population groups most affected Understand their drivers Measure the consequences on health and socio-economic development
	Methods, tools and indicators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Choose the right tools, indicators and measurement methods for screening, monitoring and evaluation Check validity Identify benefits and limitations
Group 2	Efficiency of interventions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assess efficiency and impact Improve the process of implementation (targeting, coverage, cost, side effects...) Identify the conditions for feasibility and acceptability Identify the factors for success and scaling-up
Group 3	Enabling environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Guide the implementation of frameworks Support governance mechanisms Analyse funding

Prioritisation process and formulation of research questions

The initial prioritisation step was undertaken during the second session of the workshops as described above, leading to 20 research topics. They were further grouped and reformulated into 16 research

questions by the NRF. All stakeholders who had participated in the initial online questionnaire or in one of the workshops' sessions were invited to score those research questions through an online poll, according to the criteria of 'importance' and 'feasibility' (table 2).

Table 2. Criteria for the prioritisation of evidence needs

Prioritisation Criteria		Meaning
Importance	Political or societal relevance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The evidence need deals with a topic which is addressed in nutrition programming or decision-making processes that are planned in the short to medium term The evidence need is presented as important by various decision makers
	Magnitude of the problem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The problem for which evidence is needed is highly incident and/or prevalent The problem concerns many institutions and/or nutrition professionals The problem generates a heavy economic burden
	Potential for improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It is plausible that the research could result in improving nutrition outcomes (dietary diversity, micronutrient intake, etc.)
Feasibility	Feasibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The project can be carried out within 1 year The human and financial cost of the project is proportionate
	Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The impact of the recommendations on practice and outcomes is measurable (i.e. adequate M&E)

Table 3. Items to specify for the formulation of research questions

Specification item	Example
AIM	i.e. what you are trying to change, accomplish, measure, improve, impact (e.g. reduced overweight)
WHO	i.e. the population group you are targeting (e.g. age, gender, socioeconomic conditions, migrants, agricultural extension workers, health professionals, etc.)
WHAT	i.e. the topic of the research (e.g. assessment of nutrition education efficiency, validation of nutrition indicators across countries, etc.)
ISSUE	i.e. the nutritional issue you want to address with new evidence (e.g. overweight, food safety, etc.)
WHERE	i.e. the location or setting of the research (e.g. community level, one given region, national or regional level, urban/rural areas, etc.)
WHEN	i.e. the relevance of the nutritional problem over a specific period of time (e.g. during which season, lean season, etc.)

Sixteen prioritised research questions arose from the consultation process

Participation

78 individuals from 15 different countries as well as regional organisations participated in the consultative process (table 4),

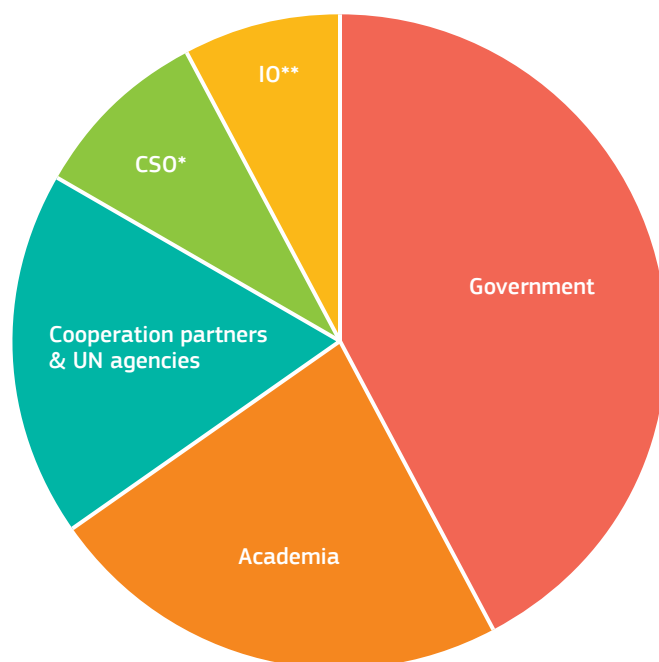
Table 4. Participants by country

Country	Number of participants
Benin	3
Burkina Faso	19
Central African Republic	1
Ethiopia	6
Ivory Coast	4
Kenya	12
Mali	2
Mauritania	1
Niger	4
Rwanda	2
Senegal	11
Sudan	2
Tanzania	1
Tchad	2
Uganda	2
Regional organisation*	6
Total	78

*ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States), CILSS (Permanent Interstate Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel) and IGAD (Intergovernmental Authority on Development).

of which 31 filled in the initial online questionnaire, 58 attended the virtual workshops and 27 contributed to the prioritisation of research questions. The participants were from governments and ministries (n=33), academia (n=18), cooperation partners and agencies of the United Nations (n=14), civil society organisations (n=7) and intergovernmental organisations (n=6) (figure 1).

Figure 1. Participants by type of organisation



*CSO: Civil Society Organisations

**IO: Intergovernmental Organisations



Research questions identified

The consultation process yielded 16 prioritised research questions covering various topics (see table 5). The NRF and the European

Commission selected the five research questions with the highest priority rates for further specification and investigation in the framework of the Knowledge and Research for Nutrition project (table 5).

Table 5. List of research questions that arose from the consultation process and priority rank

Topic	Research questions	Priority
Analysing the persistence of malnutrition	*What are the drivers of persistently high rates of undernutrition in the Sahel?	High
	*Which package of nutrition-sensitive and nutrition-specific interventions has the best impact on stunting?	High
	What are the main determinants of success of interventions that have led to substantial and sustained improvement in [stunting/ anaemia]?	High
Influencing food consumption and food acquisition to promote nutritious diets and prevent diet-related NCDs	*How efficient are interventions at schools (nutrition education, school meals, physical activities...) for promoting nutritious diets among adolescent girls?	High
	How effective are laws and regulations to control advertising and food labelling (front-of-pack labelling-FOPL) on food consumption and food acquisition of adolescents? What is the effect of the media and information environment (advertising, TV series, etc.) on food consumption and food acquisition of adolescents?	Medium
	What are the factors that lead to success of large nutrition education campaigns on healthy food consumption and food acquisition of adolescents?	Medium
	What are the drivers of food acquisition and consumption for [a given group of population] [in a given setting] within [a country]?	Medium
Documenting food safety of nutritious foods	What is the level of contamination (microbiological and chemical) along the different components of the food systems (production, storage, processing, transportation, distribution) for [a category of food] value-chains in peri-urban settings?	High
	Which nutrition-sensitive and environmentally sound interventions can promote safe and healthy diets?	High
	*How effective are laws and regulations to improving food safety and quality?	High
Improving political commitment and enabling environment	What is the current level of alignment of development partners' priorities with national priorities?	High
	What are the main current modalities for financing nutrition across countries and agencies?	Medium
	What are the current mechanisms to make organisations accountable for their investments or the use of funds in nutrition?	Medium
	What does political commitment mean both for government and donors and how can its different dimensions be best measured (resource planning and allocation for nutrition, institutional reforms, alignment, etc.)?	Medium
Guiding the choice of dietary quality indicators	*What nutrition indicators should be prioritised in the evaluation of nutrition policies or programmes?	High
	What is the validity of various dietary quality indicators according to different settings or to seasonality and for specific population groups?	Low

* Questions with the highest scores, which have been selected by the NRF for further investigation.

Lessons learnt and next steps

The consultation process, in particular the workshops, involved active engagement from participants and provided the opportunity to: i) discuss nutrition-related issues in their respective countries; ii) share experiences and learn from each other; iii) engage in a research-policy dialogue to identify evidence needs for effective nutrition policy and programming; iv) build consensus on priority research questions to be considered. The evaluation of

the workshops by the participants showed globally a good level of satisfaction. The process led efficiently to the identification of topics for research studies grounded in decision-makers' needs, including across countries, thus justifying a regional approach. The NRF will replicate the approach in other regions. Five high priority research questions arising from this initial consultation will now be addressed through the Knowledge and Research for Nutrition project, and the results of these studies will be reported back to decision-makers.