

Influencing Policy and Practice in India

Introduction

[M S Swaminathan Research Foundation](#) is the Institute-partner in India and lead of the LANSAs Research Programme Consortium. Most of the LANSAs research in India is undertaken by MSSRF, and some by IFPRI and LCIRAH. LANSAs activities in India include evidence review, landscaping, empirical research studies, action research, stakeholder mapping and engagement, policy dialogue, capacity strengthening, research uptake, communication and dissemination. The research focus under LANSAs is the generation of evidence to leverage the role of agriculture for impact on nutritional outcomes in India, and the Consortium focus countries in South Asia. Figure 1 shows how the knowledge base from foundational and landscaping work influenced research, thus contributing to how research uptake was strategized to sensitize and reach out to agriculture policy and practice in India. Stakeholder engagement was pivotal to several successes that have led to the discourse around ‘agriculture for nutrition’. The process has been continuous, not linear, and involved repeated and targeted engagement with relevant LANSAs products to keep the momentum positive and achieve the desired LANSAs impact in India.

Shaping LANSAs work in India

As part of the landscaping activities, national and state policies, programmes and initiatives relating to agriculture, nutrition and health were reviewed, and evidence on the pathways and impact was critically assessed. Stakeholder mapping conducted during the inception phase identified organisations and individuals considered highly influential and/or highly supportive of addressing nutrition in the agriculture and enabling environment sectors.

Stakeholder engagement and critical examination of national and state policies, programmes and initiatives was a continued process. MSSRF-led knowledge-sharing consultations and roundtable discussions with end-users of research, particularly policy influencers and policy-makers at all levels of governance has influenced the agriculture for nutrition discourse across the country. Research uptake efforts under LANSAs have been instrumental in introducing the inclusion of the concept of nutrition-sensitive agriculture in academic and research discourse circles, policy formulation discussions, and among agriculture practitioners and the farmer-community. These successes were instrumental in sensitising and empowering multi-level, multi-sectoral stakeholders on issues pertinent to agriculture-nutrition disconnects and the urgent need to bridge this gap.

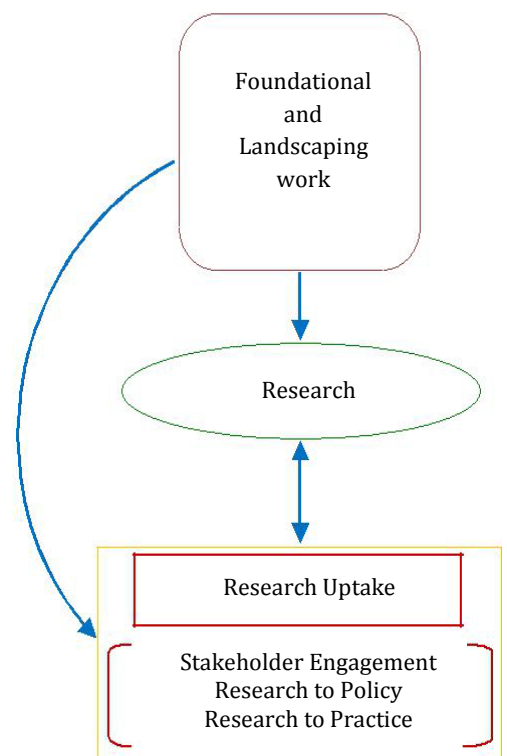


Figure 1

Generating evidence to address gaps in research

LANSAs research in India is classified under its three research pillars with inter-connected themes.

Pillar 1: Enabling environments for Nutrition

Empirical studies were undertaken to understand the barriers and facilitators to nutrition-sensitive agricultural development in the country and explored evidence of linkages between agriculture and nutrition at the state, district and household levels. Key findings that emerged from these studies

highlighted the need for social provisioning of healthcare and sanitation; importance of women's education; and effective policy implementation to improve maternal and child nutrition outcomes in rural India.

Pillar 2: Policies and strategies beyond the farmgate

Research under this pillar focused on impacts of agriculture policies and strategies that operate beyond the farm, and the role of the market and agri-food value chains to influence the food system in promoting food and nutrition security. A set of four studies were undertaken by MSSRF around the National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013, in particular to examine the rollout of the Act in different states; the feasibility of introducing millets into the Public Distribution System (PDS) as provided for in the Act; and the pulse production and demand situation in the country. A case study of the PDS in the state of Tamil Nadu which follows a universal instead of targeted approach. The need for sufficient production of millets and adoption of a decentralised procurement and distribution mechanism were some of the insights gained. A separate study led by LCIRAH has examined how public investments in agriculture and other rural sectors influence dietary diversity and nutrition outcomes. Following a country review of agri-food value chains, three case studies examined markets for nutrition and the role of different actors. The studies threw light on the need for regulations that can stimulate private business to have nutrition focus.

Pillar 3: Pro-nutrition agriculture interventions

The third pillar focused on the feasibility of agriculture and nutrition-based interventions for better nutritional outcomes in rural communities. A pilot feasibility study on adapting agriculture platforms for nutrition-sensitive messaging using ICT received a larger grant to undertake a full randomized control trial to generate robust evidence. The MSSRF-led [Farming System for Nutrition](#) (FSN) study in two different agro-ecological district locations - Wardha (Maharashtra) and Koraput (Odisha) examined the feasibility of the FSN approach to address undernutrition. Nutrition awareness and strengthening capacity of identified farm men and women to be 'Community Hunger Fighters' or champion spokespersons were an integral part of the study. The endline survey in late 2017 following three years of intervention revealed an improvement in dietary diversity and increased food intake in terms of both quantity and frequency of consumption.

Crosscut theme: Gender and Nutrition

There is limited research evidence on the links between gender, agriculture and nutrition, and on the dimension of women's time use and household wellbeing related to maternal and child health. Available findings are suggestive of a potential role for gender and nutrition-sensitive agriculture in promoting better nutritional outcomes. Qualitative research exploring gender divisions of labour and their implications for nutritional outcomes was undertaken at both FSN study sites. The research has led to insights on how different patterns of gender relations shape both agricultural and nutritional outcomes.

Overall, LANSA research in India has endeavoured to add knowledge to the understanding of enabling environment and women's agency, mainstreaming the nutrition dimension in agriculture policies and strategies, and the feasibility of a FSN approach to tackling the undernutrition problem. Evidence from these studies has implications for policy, programmes and initiatives at national and state levels.

How is LANSA making an impact?

MSSRF enjoys an excellent position and influence in the policy space on issues relevant to agriculture and food systems in the country, thanks largely to its reputation built over nearly three decades of research and development work. LANSA capitalised on this, to leverage agriculture for nutrition in India. LANSA has been successfully engaging with stakeholders to share research findings through networks, [publications](#), [social media](#), [e-newsletter](#), [blogs](#), online discussions, face-to-face meetings and [events](#). Uptake can be evidenced at three levels for LANSA in India: at the policymaker level, the practitioner level and among academic circles.

Research-to-Policy:

Evidence from India has been making a significant impression on policy influencers and decision-makers at the state and central government levels. A public policy stakeholder event in Delhi conducted in mid-2016 to share the FSN study approach encouraged several policy influencers and high-level government bureaucrats to brainstorm together on the national problem of undernutrition in India and the potential for agriculture to contribute to its amelioration. Subsequently, the Tata Trusts came forward to support MSSRF to undertake advocacy of the FSN approach with policy makers in four states, viz. Odisha, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Bihar. In March 2017, MSSRF organised a [policy level consultation](#) in Bhubaneswar, Odisha, to share insights from the FSN study under LANSA; government presence was prominent at this meeting.

The trade-offs between women's work in agriculture, especially during the peak planting and harvesting seasons, and child care and nutritional outcomes were highlighted, based on the gender research undertaken as part of the FSN study. A policy brief targeting the Odisha State Policy for Empowerment of Women and Girls 2014, which had been produced for discussion prior to the consultation, was finalised following the event, incorporating comments from participating stakeholders. [Influenced by evidence](#) emerging from the FSN study by MSSRF in Odisha, LANSA was invited by the government of Odisha to contribute to the agriculture section in the Odisha Vision 2036 policy document. A meeting with government officials in March 2018 to share the findings of the FSN study saw the emergence of a commitment to support nutrition-sensitive agriculture interventions. Three days later, the State Finance Minister included the term in his speech when presenting the state's agriculture budget in the legislative assembly. This was subsequently reiterated by a senior official from the state at a national consultation on Leveraging Agriculture for Nutrition in July in Chennai, with promise of budgetary allocations from the coming year.

LANSA has also had a significant success in Maharashtra State. The Director General of the Maharashtra Council for Agricultural Education and Research (MCAER) participated in the [MSSRF Regional Consultation on Farming Systems for Nutrition](#) in Chennai during August 2017 where the LANSA experience was shared; LANSA also had a discussion with him on the sidelines. The MCAER is the apex body that oversees the functioning of the four agriculture universities in Maharashtra. At the DG's initiative, MCAER convened a meeting of officials from the four agriculture universities and the Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVKs) under them in December 2017, where MSSRF LANSA was invited to make a presentation. KVKs are Farm Science Centres that operate across the country under the agriculture universities and the umbrella of the Indian Council of Agriculture Research (ICAR), for technology assessment and demonstration for its application and capacity development of farmers. A key action point that emerged from the meeting was to establish FSN models in KVKs across Maharashtra.

The Agriculture Technology Application Research Institute of the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR-ATARI), Pune which has 77 KVKs across Maharashtra and Gujarat under it, has come forward to promote the FSN approach. Ten KVKs participated in a [workshop on the FSN approach](#) in April and have commenced setting up demonstration models as confirmed by ICAR-ATARI, Pune Director at the national consultation on Leveraging Agriculture for Nutrition in Chennai in July 2018. MSSRF-LANSA has been invited for the second consecutive year in 2018 by the ICAR-Indian Agriculture Research Institute in Delhi to conduct a session on FSN at a workshop on 'Extension Strategies for Nutrition Sensitive Agriculture to address Sustainable Development Goals', for faculty in agriculture universities and KVK officials. This way, LANSA and MSSRF are getting to be known for focusing the spotlight on 'agriculture for nutrition' in India.

LANSA's gender cross-cut lead was invited to share insights from LANSA research on women in agriculture and nutrition at a national consultation on Realising Rights of Women Farmers in August, organised by the National Commission for Women, India, UN Women and MAKAAAM, an alliance for women farmers' rights. LANSA's research and policy briefs on gender were shared with participants at this forum that included

senior level policy makers, civil society and representatives of women farmers' groups. The LANSAs insights provided an additional justification for strengthening and protecting women's rights in agriculture from the nutrition perspective and generated considerable interest. LANSAs insights on women in agriculture and nutrition were also [shared](#) at a national conference on 'Technological Empowerment of Women' organised by the National Academy of Sciences, India, to observe International Women's Day in March 2018.

Research-to-Practice:

At the grassroots level, both men and women farmers have begun accepting the FSN approach and engaged with LANSAs researchers to adopt these changes in their agricultural and other farming practices. LANSAs has been able to couple nutrition-sensitive agriculture interventions, with awareness on nutrition and health issues and leveraging agriculture for nutrition, at different levels in the community, including schools, thus ensuring a sustainable impact. The development and introduction of a '[Nutrition Calendar](#)' and '[School Nutrition Garden \(SNG\)](#)' initiatives to sensitise village school children on nutrition are also demonstrating encouraging results. Produce from the SNG is used by the cook in the midday meal cooked for the school children. Teachers in respective schools and block level government education officers are supportive of the initiative. The Midday Meal Scheme (MDMS) is a national programme for providing a hot cooked meal to children in all government schools. Evidence from the SNG initiative was used to further the dialogue with district-level policymakers at a meeting in Wardha in May 2017, regarding the potential of integrating nutrition gardens in schools with the MDMS. Given the existing load on staff in these schools, our research also suggests that youth groups could be mobilized for sustainability of this initiative.

Farm [men](#) and [women](#) from the FSN study sites are now coming forward as spokespersons championing the approach, sharing their experience at national and sub-national forums. Such sharing has triggered uptake of FSN interventions in villages beyond the five and seven core study villages in Wardha and Koraput respectively to 16 other villages in Wardha and 18 in Koraput. This cadre of '[Community Hunger Fighters](#)' it is expected will sustain the momentum created by the demonstration on the ground. The [voices of change](#) testimonies of farm men and women are evidence of the better understanding of agriculture nutrition linkage by men and women in the FSN study villages.

Apart from in-country research impact activity over the last five years, there have been several regional attempts led by the research uptake team to reach out to agri-nutrition stakeholders with the aim of achieving the overarching LANSAs objectives. The online medium has emerged as an effective strategy for focused stakeholder engagement and consultation with wider reach. LANSAs first animation film – [Women in Agriculture in South Asia: the Nutrition Connection](#) was launched on YouTube on March 8 (International Women's Day) 2017 and a social media campaign and [seminar](#) was organised in Chennai around the theme #BeBoldForChange to bring attention to action for desired policy change for women involved in agriculture. A three week [online discussion](#) on Sustainable Farming System for Food and Nutrition Security was facilitated by LANSAs on FAOs Global Forum on Food Security and Nutrition in Oct-Nov 2017. LANSAs hosted a [policy plenary](#) at the ANH Conference in Kathmandu in July 2017, drawing attention to our research insights on women's work in agriculture, care and nutrition. Facilitated by Rachel Lambert, Senior Livelihoods Adviser, DFID, this high-level panel raised considerable interest and enthusiasm amongst participants around mainstreaming gender within agriculture and nutrition interventions.

Research products and use

LANSAs has always used a two-pronged uptake approach using evidence to influence policy and practice. Foundational and landscaping work led to an understanding of agri-nutrition stakeholder needs and preferences, and how they would like to receive evidence. Further, knowledge sharing roundtables provided MSSRF with deeper insights to the agriculture policy priorities and decision-making processes, also what could be the 'policy windows of opportunity' for LANSAs to influence the policy formulation process. These stakeholder insights came from policy influencers and government functionaries at various levels and from multi-sectors.

Armed with this base, MSSRF produced a series of thematic [Policy Briefs](#) to cater to policymakers as well as several [Research Briefs](#) to encourage academic discussions around agriculture for nutrition in India. These Uptake products led to targeted and effective [stakeholder engagement](#) and [public policy discourse](#) paving the way to take MSSRF research to policy forums. Consumers of LANSAs research are varied, and [Research Uptake](#) is a continuous process involving different sets of stakeholders. In an attempt to deliver demand-driven and practice-oriented research, MSSRF has pursued an engagement and research dissemination strategy that was tailor-made for different categories of agriculture and nutrition stakeholders. Periodic, strategic and feedback-oriented activities were pursued, which also served to refine the communication of research evidence from LANSAs. Multi-sectoral stakeholder events hosted by LANSAs across all levels on governance in India have led to active engagement and knowledge sharing on the importance of nutrition-sensitive agriculture.

Key areas where LANSAs research is making impact

Given the federal nature of the Indian Constitution, LANSAs in India engaged in policy dialogue at both the national and state levels, and further down at the district and Panchayat level¹.

LANSAs research initiatives under pro-nutrition agriculture-food value chains examined business and government driven value chains through case studies of the existing models in operation in two states of the country under the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) and that of two commercial value chains. The insights from this and other studies in the region will be shared at a workshop on Regional Cooperation and the SDGs being organised by RIS, UNESCAP and NITI Aayog in October 2018, to generate awareness and discourse on agri-food value chains for nutrition.

Access to basic grains is the first element of nutrition, contributing to energy for daily activities. The NFSAs (2013) has a provision for expanding the food basket to include millets in government food distribution programmes. Millets are more nutrient dense than rice and were promoted under the FSN study in Odisha and Maharashtra. Karnataka was the first state in India to introduce millets in the Public Distribution System (PDS), and MSSRF undertook a [study](#) to understand the feasibility and challenges of the initiative. Findings from the study were [shared](#) with government officials in Karnataka at a meeting convened by the Additional Chief Secretary and Development Commissioner, Government of Karnataka in his office, in June 2017. The insights were also submitted to NITI Aayog which had constituted a Task Force to examine the introduction of millets in the PDS. The other studies on the experience of rollout of the NFSAs in different states, Tamil Nadus experience with the universal PDS and analysis of production, consumption and distribution of pulses are also topical in the current policy context. Insights from these studies were shared at a workshop Leveraging Agriculture for Nutrition organised by MSSRF with NITI Aayog in Jan 2018 and at another [workshop on 'Reimagining PDS'](#) organised by the Indian School of Business and National Institute for Nutrition, Hyderabad, in February 2018, preparatory to their writing a position paper for NITI Aayog.

LANSAs research on enabling environment highlights the importance of [WASH for improving the ag-nutrition connection](#). Qualitative research points to problems on the ground, fetching water for and cleaning the toilets being a key one; without proper and alternative arrangements, it may end up being one more job further increasing women's heavy workload and burden. One of the key pointers is the recognition that gender analysis is central to mainstreaming a nutrition focus within agriculture and other development interventions. It is not just agricultural work that is increasingly feminised, but nutritional responsibilities are also largely allocated to women, as part of their unpaid care and domestic work. Among government policies and programmes, the NFSAs emphasises concurrent attention to non-food enabling environmental factors: safe drinking water, sanitation, environmental hygiene and primary healthcare; Evidence from LANSAs research cautions that we need to continually emphasize the importance of paying attention to women's work and time burdens and finding ways of reducing and redistributing them, as highlighted in the [Policy Brief](#) with recommendations on the Odisha State Policy for Girls and Women (2014). Without this, progress will be slow.

¹ Local self-government at village level

A key focus of LANSAs research in India was to demonstrate the feasibility of a farming systems approach to address nutritional problems in rural India that can be replicated and scaled up. As described, LANSAs colleagues continuously endeavoured to keep policymakers informed and engaged with the evidence generated and this has resulted in impact in both Maharashtra and Odisha states, where the study was undertaken.

NITI Aayog launched a National Nutrition Strategy to address malnutrition in September 2017 and this was followed up by the central government setting up a National Nutrition Mission in December 2017. MSSRF organised a high level roundtable discussion on Leveraging Agriculture for Nutrition with NITI Aayog in January 2018. The event jointly chaired by the Members for Agriculture and Nutrition at NITI Aayog highlighted the need for the two sectors to work together. The [meeting minutes](#) circulated by NITI Aayog contain action points and list the agencies responsible for their execution. Insights from LANSAs research were shared at the [national consultation on Leveraging Agriculture for Nutrition](#) inaugurated by the Vice President of India in Chennai in July 2019. Both policy makers and policy influencers who spoke at the event echoed the need for agriculture to have a nutrition focus. LANSAs in this manner has been able to build a legacy and make its impact felt on policy and practice in the country at different levels.