



Feed the Future Learning Agenda

Purpose: Learning and use of evidence is a core value of the Feed the Future initiative. Through the Feed the Future Learning Agenda, we seek to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the Feed the Future initiative, in the short and long term, by generating, synthesizing, and communicating evidence related to key questions. Evidence from the Learning Agenda will inform the design and ongoing management of Feed the Future-related strategies, programs, projects, and activities. Ultimately, we want evidence from the Learning Agenda to help drive transformational change that helps the countries with which we work along their journey to self-reliance. We will share the evidence generated from the Learning Agenda with other international development actors—such as partner governments, donors, implementers, and beneficiaries—to inform their work. The Learning Agenda will also serve to address requirements laid out in the [Global Food Security Act](#) on sharing lessons learned from implementation [Section 8 (a)(14)] and incorporating finding from monitoring and evaluation into program design and budget decisions [Section 8 (a)(6)].

Background: The Office of Management and Budget defines a learning agenda as a set of broad questions directly related to the work that an agency conducts. A learning agenda prioritizes and establishes a plan to answer short- and long-term questions across relevant program and policy areas. Answering these questions enables an agency to work more effectively and efficiently through better decision-making. The Feed the Future Learning Agenda is a set of strategic questions for which we intend to produce evidence, findings, and answers that we can apply to decision-making.

In 2012, we released the first [Feed the Future Learning Agenda](#), which covered six themes:

1. Improved Agricultural Productivity
2. Improved Research and Development
3. Expanded Markets, Value Chains, and Increased Investment
4. Improved Nutrition and Dietary Quality
5. Improved Gender Integration and Women's Empowerment
6. Improved Resilience of Vulnerable Populations

The questions under these themes sought to determine which interventions had the greatest impact and were most cost effective in a given context, as well as what combination and/or sequence of interventions could best impact Feed the Future objectives. Each theme had a [literature review and annotated bibliography](#) to outline the state of knowledge at the time and was used to design a series of impact evaluations to help fill evidence gaps.

The [Synthesis of Evaluations Related to the Feed the Future Learning Agenda](#) (2016) used the Learning Agenda as a framework to summarize findings from 196 performance and impact evaluations from across the initiative. The findings from that report identified common traits of successful Feed the Future projects and informed both the [Feed the Future Global Performance Evaluation](#) and [Global Food Security Strategy](#), which guides current Feed the Future efforts.

Areas of the Second Learning Agenda: The second Learning Agenda will serve as the key Feed the Future platform for continuous learning across the initiative. Developed through an iterative consultative process, the Learning Agenda consists of priority questions in eight key areas essential for advancing the Feed the Future goal of sustainably reducing global hunger, malnutrition, and poverty:

1. Gender and women's empowerment
2. Market systems
3. Nutrition
4. Policy systems
5. Risk and resilience
6. Scaling technologies and practices
7. Water and WASH
8. Youth

In each of these areas, Feed the Future intends to disseminate existing data, generate new evidence, and produce recommendations on how to improve design and implementation of interventions.

Transformational change requires many components, and perspectives on what works best vary. Answering the questions of the Learning Agenda will help to address the broader question of "What interventions do we invest in, and to what extent, to create transformational change?" Our interventions can have greater reach through increasing funding or leveraging; increasing interest through advocacy and awareness creation such as Scale Up Nutrition's advocacy for increasing investment and attention to nutrition; increasing investment in key sectors such as national commitments for agricultural investments through Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP); or enhancing partnerships such as those between public and private sector entities. While the Learning Agenda looks at the effectiveness of interventions within particular areas, we recognize that the interplay of interventions often drives change at a large scale. For example, to impact stunting, we will need to look at how different interventions such investments in farm production diversity, animal sourced foods, WASH, etc. interact to bring about change. In this context, the questions of the Learning Agenda represent sub-components of this larger question we want to answer.

Generating the Evidence: Under this Learning Agenda, we will draw data, information, and knowledge from a wider array of sources that include research, monitoring data, and other analyses, as well as performance and impact evaluations. This Learning Agenda will use and build on the evidence coming from other learning investments and learning agendas, such as the extensive research around water, sanitation, and hygiene efforts. These cross sector collaborations will help to further strengthen and enhance the Feed the Future Learning

Agenda. The Learning Agenda questions can serve as a framework for discussions with partners inside and outside the Feed the Future initiative.

Since the Learning Agenda will use a variety of data sources and analysis methods to discover evidence, we will have flexibility in how we address identified questions. The Learning Agenda reflects work and research being carried out under the Feed the Future initiative. The analytical outputs from existing mechanisms and activities will feed into the process of finding answers to the Learning Agenda questions. The Learning Agenda will also serve as a guide for potential questions to include in impact and performance evaluations or other analyses that are conducted under Feed the Future.

We also recognize that many others outside of Feed the Future—including other donors, host country governments, academia, and the private sector—will generate evidence and knowledge that will move us closer to answering these questions. We will seek to collaborate and coordinate with others interested in participating in the Feed the Future Learning Agenda, which can serve as a point of discussion between parties when considering joint research activities.

Dissemination and Use: With the next phase of the Learning Agenda, we will continue to look for opportunities to put the knowledge we generate into practice. We will work to curate and disseminate knowledge generated under each Learning Agenda area so that anyone working on Feed the Future projects or in similar areas has the opportunity to benefit from the evidence. We will employ different methods of knowledge delivery such as workshops, webinars, and online forums to tailor the evidence to the targeted audience and need. The findings from the Learning Agenda questions will have application at all levels of the Feed the Future initiative to enhance decision-making and programming.

Linkage to Research Strategy: The [Global Food Security Research Strategy](#) is closely linked with the Learning Agenda. The Research Strategy outlines the research investments that bring U.S. scientific ingenuity to bear on the greatest challenges presented by global food security that will help also to generate evidence for answering Learning Agenda questions. Theme III, in particular, will be tightly linked to the research strategy by generating evidence on how to sustainably and equitably improve economic opportunity, nutrition and resilience through operational and systems research. Where it makes sense and funding is available, we will use the expertise of our existing research partners and activities to address questions. Research generates scalable products and practices that advance productivity and nutrition and mitigate risk in Feed the Future partner countries. Additionally, research increases understanding about how human behavior, the development context, and the enabling environment influence progress of food-insecure households, communities, and countries toward improved food security outcomes. In sync with the intent of the Learning Agenda, such knowledge is critical to guide the prioritization, design, and implementation of Feed the Future programming.

Each Learning Agenda area is outlined in more detail in an overview document below.

Gender and Women's Empowerment

Institutional Relevance: What is the importance of the identified area/topic to the Feed the Future initiative? How does it contribute to the accomplishment of the goals/objectives of the initiative?

Inclusive agricultural growth and resilient agricultural systems (especially but not only at the household level) will require large-scale application of improved technologies and practices. Encouraging women's application of and benefit from improved and relevant agricultural technologies and practices is essential for reaching this scale, growth, and resilience, as well as to closing persistent gender gaps in access to agricultural resources. Technologies and practices must reach, be relevant to, and benefit both women and men for Feed the Future to have a substantial impact on female empowerment and agricultural growth. Female empowerment underpins and amplifies the impact of programming across all three GFSS Objectives.

Development Hypotheses/Theories of Change: What is the hypothesis or theory of change tied to this LA area/topic?

If Feed the Future addresses gender parity by improving women's access to and application of agricultural technologies and practices, then women, their households and communities, and agricultural and food systems benefit through increased productivity, incomes, resilience, and nutrition. Combined with more equitable decision-making practices, changes in these resources and benefits may affect both key domains of empowerment for women and men and overall programming effectiveness. It will be important to consider technologies and practices throughout agricultural and food systems, not only in production or nutrition.

More broadly, both contextual and programmatic factors can contribute to or impede women's empowerment and economic opportunities. Research and theory both indicate that women's empowerment should also foster improved food security and nutrition outcomes. The contextual and programmatic factors that measurably contribute to women's empowerment and its influence on food security and nutrition outcomes in Feed the Future environments can be more clearly identified to improve empowerment and nutrition outcomes.

Learning Questions:

1. What factors substantially contribute to the gender gap in the application of agricultural technologies and practices? What are the most effective approaches and interventions that result in improved women's application of agricultural technologies and practices?
2. What are the gendered impacts of applying different agricultural technologies and practices, including on women's and men's yields, incomes, time allocation and workload, and participation in and benefit from market systems? Other potential impacts of interest include employment, decision-making roles, control over income and produce, mobility, and gender-based violence.
3. How are the differences and similarities between women and men in the application of technologies and practices influencing nutrition outcomes? How do these similarities and differences in application of technologies and practices influencing resilience capacities?
4. What underlying factors and policy/programmatic drivers contribute to changes in women's empowerment over time and what are the most effective approaches to addressing those factors/drivers?
5. How have changes in women's empowerment translated into food security and nutrition outcomes?

Market Systems

Institutional Relevance: What is the importance of the identified area/topic to the Feed the Future initiative? How does it contribute to the accomplishment of the goals/objectives of the initiative?

Central to achieving agriculture-led growth is the existence of a competitive, inclusive, and resilient market. Without a dynamic agriculture and food market space that engages a variety of actors, sustainable poverty reduction cannot be realized. The agriculture and food market system is also foundational in achieving nutrition and resilience objectives, by providing consistent availability and access to goods and services to all. Achieving our goals through a market systems approach will maximize our impacts, creating sustainable solutions to challenges that are embedded in the local context. This approach evolved from the value chain approach, used extensively in Feed the Future phase one, and based on learning that hyperfocus can miss opportunities for durable systemic changes by ignoring cross-market functions. Continued learning on this approach through Feed the Future phase two will promote efficiency and greater effectiveness of our investments.

Development Hypotheses/Theories of Change: What is the hypothesis or theory of change tied to this LA area/topic?

Through a facilitative approach, agriculture and food market systems projects and activities aim to address the underlying causes of poor market performance that matter to people living in poverty in order to create lasting impact through systemic change, leading to inclusive, resilient economic growth and ultimately sustainable poverty reduction and food security. Inclusive market system development focuses on developing product to market systems by increasing incentives in the agriculture and food market system to achieve desired outcomes. The approach focuses on stimulating a change in behavior of market players – public and private, formal and informal – so that they are better able and motivated to perform important market functions effectively. It requires that donors and implementing partners play a facilitating role. As external agents, they seek to catalyze others within the market system while not becoming part of it themselves, thereby creating sustainable change embedded in the capacity of the local system. Impacts, then, reach further through indirect touch points and are multiplied in the local economy.

Learning Questions:

1. What monitoring methods, tools and indicators best capture market systems change; are cost-effective; and work well in developing country operating environments?
 - a. How do we measure the resilience of a market system to shocks and stresses?
 - b. How do we calculate multiplier effects of market system strengthening investments?
2. How can donors, governments, and other public sector actors most effectively incentivize private sector investment in ways that reduce poverty, hunger, and malnutrition?
3. How does market system development maximize indirect impacts?
 - a. Which market systems development interventions have the largest positive impact on the poor? How are women, youth, and traditionally marginalized groups affected? Are there unintended negative (absolute or relative) impacts on these groups?
 - b. How can responding to urban and international demand increase availability and purchase of diverse nutritious foods in rural markets? How does this vary across wealth quintiles among rural consumers? Which cross market functions are key for strengthening market systems? In what context?
 - c. Which cross market functions are key for strengthening market systems? In what context?
 - d. How does stability/strength in a market system affect household resilience? Do more resilient markets buffer shocks for households so that they are less impacted?

Nutrition

Institutional Relevance: What is the importance of the identified area/topic to the Feed the Future initiative? How does it contribute to the accomplishment of the goals/objectives of the initiative?

Nutrition is central to sustainable development and is required to make progress on issues such as health, education, employment, poverty, inequality, and the empowerment of girls and women. At the same time, a variety of multi-sectoral development issues contribute to poor nutrition. Available, affordable, safe, and nutritious food is essential to meeting food security and nutrition challenges.

Development Hypotheses/Theories of Change: What is the hypothesis or theory of change tied to this LA area/topic?

Development programs that introduce/improve the following factors within a community will lower disease burden and increase the number of well-nourished individuals (with a focus on women and children in the 1,000 days period) within that community and at the population level.

1. Access, availability, and utilization of nutritious and safe diets year-round (for example, through nutrition-sensitive agriculture programming)
2. Direct, nutrition-specific interventions and services
3. More hygienic household and community environments
4. Women's empowerment

Learning Questions:

How can the U.S. government most effectively support the reduction of undernutrition and support a well-nourished population by addressing immediate and underlying determinants of stunting, wasting, and serious micronutrient deficiencies?

1. What are the most efficient ways to identify the determinants of stunting within the contexts where we work?
2. Which nutrition-sensitive interventions, especially in market systems and value chains, most effectively increase access, availability, and utilization of nutritious and safe diets year-round?
 - a. What are the most effective means to drive household and community consumption of high-quality nutritious and safe diets from Feed the Future value chain investments?
 - b. How does food market penetration and presence affect household access to nutritious and safe foods?
3. What are the best ways to identify, deliver, and scale up proven nutrition-sensitive and nutrition-specific interventions? How do they interrelate? Consider both public and private sector channels, as well as policy and diplomacy efforts.
4. In places in which we anticipated better nutrition outcomes in Feed the Future Phase I (those achieving substantial progress in reducing poverty), what were the reasons for the sub-optimal nutrition outcomes?
5. How can we achieve greater programming efficiency and effectiveness to accelerate the reduction of wasting and stunting in all contexts by jointly addressing both manifestations of undernutrition?

Policy Systems

Institutional Relevance: What is the importance of the identified area/topic to the Feed the Future initiative? How does it contribute to the accomplishment of the goals/objectives of the initiative?
Effective governance, policies, and institutions catalyze and accelerate the food and agricultural systems transformation required to reach our goal of sustainably reducing global hunger, malnutrition, and poverty. They are crucial in ensuring countries invest strategically in their own development, improving the private sector enabling environment, and building evidence-based participatory processes that will advance inclusive and sustainable agriculture-led growth, resilience, and nutrition.
Development Hypotheses/Theories of Change: What is the hypothesis or theory of change tied to this LA area/topic?
<p>If we effectively support partner countries in the development of:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. a prioritized policy agenda of key actions needed to drive inclusive agriculture-led growth that are informed by evidence and committed to by partner country governments2. institutional architecture for predictable, transparent, inclusive, and evidence-based policy formulation and implementation3. mutual accountability through a transparent, inclusive, and continual process of managing for development results, with local stakeholders supporting this process, <p>then we expect countries to achieve strengthened governance, policy, and institutions that further advance food security gains.</p>
Learning Questions:
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Theory of change: What is the emerging evidence on the relationship between policy systems (defined as policy agendas, institutions, relationships, and processes) and food security?2. Promising policies: What is the emerging evidence on policies that promote agricultural transformation? What are the implications of this emerging evidence for our programming?3. Effective programming: What are effective programming approaches to generate improved policy and thereby strengthen policy systems to accelerate improvements in food security? What is the evidence that analysis drives policy decision-making?4. Measuring progress: What are effective approaches to measuring gains that lead to good policy outcomes? What country level policy indicators may signal that a country has in place food-policy systems that enable the country to transition from relying on U.S. foreign assistance for food security?

Risk and Resilience

Institutional Relevance: What is the importance of the identified area/topic to the Feed the Future initiative? How does it contribute to the accomplishment of the goals/objectives of the initiative?
Resilience is an essential condition for achieving our goal to sustainably reduce global hunger, malnutrition, and poverty as well as to reduce reliance upon emergency food assistance including in fragile contexts. It protects our investments in the face of shocks and helps partners and beneficiaries adapt to changeable conditions.
Development Hypotheses/Theories of Change: What is the hypothesis or theory of change tied to this LA area/topic?
In order to build resilience, several context- and shock-dependent resilience capacities need to be strengthened at the individual, household, community, national, and systems levels. This includes fragile contexts where Resilience and Food Security play important roles in addressing some of the underlying drivers of conflict (including conflict associated with Violent Extremist (VE) Threats) as a complement to programming that directly addresses conflict through conflict mitigation and management. When these capacities are successfully strengthened and maintained, people will be able to better protect critical assets, food security will be improved and sustained, populations will sustainably escape poverty and vulnerability, and people will be well-nourished—even in the face of recurrent shocks and stresses.
Learning Questions:
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. What sources of resilience (at various levels) explain why some households and communities subject to recurrent shocks and stresses are able to manage these events without compromising current and future well-being, while less-resilient households and communities are not? How can these sources of resilience be strengthened, particularly where recurrent shocks result in repeat, large-scale humanitarian emergencies?2. What roles do inclusive, agriculture-led growth and agricultural value chain development play in strengthening the resilience of households, communities, and market systems?3. What individual, household, community, and systems-level resilience capacities are important for enabling poverty escapes and what risks pose the greatest threats to sustaining these escapes over time? How can these sources of resilience be strengthened to improve and maintain development outcomes of interest in the face of recurrent shocks and stresses?4. How is resilience strengthened, and food security gains best achieved, in areas of protracted conflict and/or VE threats?5. What contributions do improved resilience and food security make to addressing some of the underlying causes of conflict, including conflict related to violent extremism?

Scaling Technologies and Practices

Institutional Relevance: What is the importance of the identified area/topic to the Feed the Future initiative? How does it contribute to the accomplishment of the goals/objectives of the initiative?

Achieving the Feed the Future objectives of inclusive and sustainable agriculture-led growth, strengthened resilience, and improved nutrition at a population level requires a suite of efforts, including effectively leveraging, partnering, supporting the multiplier effect, and planning for widespread adoption of improved technologies and practices by value chain stakeholders. Widespread adoption can be accomplished through programming that optimizes the roles of USG agencies and their partners. Implementing effective programming requires an understanding of scaling processes, factors that influence the diffusion of improved technologies and/or practices, and the most useful metrics to monitor the progress of efforts to promote widespread adoption.

Development Hypotheses/Theories of Change: What is the hypothesis or theory of change tied to this LA area/topic?

If we:

1. assess the scalability, or the potential of an improved technology and/or practice to be taken up by delivery pathway actors and widely adopted by end users
2. understand and address stakeholder incentives, constraints, capacity, and preferences, especially those related to gender, to promote adoption
3. create an enabling environment by supporting facilitative factors and addressing constraining factors related to diffusion of adoption
4. demonstrate value, develop capacity, and strengthen feedback among actors to promote diffusion by working through sustainable delivery pathways (public, private, and public-private partnerships),

then we will achieve widespread adoption of the relevant technologies and practices.

Learning Questions:

1. What interventions do we invest in, and to what extent, to create transformational change?
2. What implementation models and interventions best support achieving widespread adoption, over time and space, of improved technologies and/or practices through commercial, public-sector, public-private, community-based, and civil society pathways?
 - a. What are the optimal roles of USG agencies and their partners in promoting widespread adoption of improved technologies and/or practices? Conversely, what potential actions should we avoid?
 - b. What are the best methods for monitoring scaling of an improved technology and/or practice? What indicators and metrics are most important for monitoring performance of scaling activities in consideration of the types of goods (technologies and services), types of pathways, the enabling environmental factors, and target population characteristics?
3. How do we develop an estimate of the temporal and spatial pattern of diffusion of an improved technology and/or practice? What methods are required to develop an accurate estimate of diffusion and create evidence-based targets?
4. What are the most effective approaches for increasing the rate of uptake of research efforts by public and private sector delivery pathways? How should such findings be integrated into research plans by Feed the Future research partners?

Water and WASH

Institutional Relevance: What is the importance of the identified area/topic to the Feed the Future initiative? How does it contribute to the accomplishment of the goals/objectives of the initiative?

The sustainability of food security investments depends on environmentally-sound and sustainable management of production systems which includes water management. Water is an input for agriculture, along with seeds, fertilizers, etc. In many contexts, irrigation accounts for large demands on available water resources. Water resources have the potential to become a conflict issue and may impact food security and resilience. Although water is a single resource, it must perform multiple functions (agriculture, livestock, human consumption, industry, ecological, etc.). Given climate variations and projected decreases in overall and per capita water availability, agriculture water management, prioritization and coordination between different uses will become more important. Improved access to adequate amounts of clean and safe drinking water, food, and sanitation services along with overall hygiene is critical to improving nutritional status and preventing environmental enteropathy, which has been associated with cognitive and physical growth failure.

Development Hypotheses/Theories of Change: What is the hypothesis or theory of change tied to this LA area/topic?

1. If we implement sound agriculture water management technologies and practices, we will achieve sustainable agriculture productivity, improve resilience, enhance nutrition outcomes, and reduce negative impacts.
2. If we promote collaboration and coordination between water stakeholders, build capacity to manage conflicts, and promote multiple use systems where appropriate, communities will be able to manage water resources efficiently, effectively, and equitably.
3. If we target water (quality and quantity), sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) and animal husbandry and horticulture interventions to improve access and behaviors, we will improve health and nutritional outcomes.

Learning Questions:

How can agriculture water management, water supply, sanitation, and hygiene technologies and practices be best leveraged to achieve sustainable growth, resilience, and nutritional outcomes?

1. What are the best ways to increase agricultural productivity and improve resilience while simultaneously supporting sustainable and equitable water management?
2. What are the key lessons (related to resilience and transitory poverty escapes) from off farm activities (e.g. market access, equipment maintenance etc.) that help to ensure the successful adoption and sustainability of agricultural water management technologies?
3. What conditions support multiple use water systems and/or collaboration between water users?
4. What are the effects of different WASH interventions (type of intervention and scale) on stunting and other nutrition indicators?

Youth

Institutional Relevance: What is the importance of the identified area/topic to the Feed the Future initiative? How does it contribute to the accomplishment of the goals/objectives of the initiative?

Youth in developing countries play a critical role in achieving the overarching GFSS goal of sustainably reducing global hunger, malnutrition, and poverty. The working-age, rural population in Feed the Future target countries is young and we need to harness their creative energy. Most youth in Feed the Future target countries live in rural areas and will be making a transition from economic dependence on their parents to an independent livelihood, many within the agri-food system. Like adults, youth in rural areas face challenges related to access to resources and technology, underdeveloped market systems, and coping and mitigation mechanisms for negative shocks. They may also struggle with participation in rural economies, owing to a lack of productive assets, savings, access to credit or land, and/or empowerment, and young women may be disproportionately affected by these factors. Further, youth may lack important technical or life skills that hinder their full participation in agri-food systems. Feed the Future program implementation aims to: (i) help youth *transition* into economic independence, and (ii) *empower* youth to participate in local activities designed to achieve Feed the Future goals. Research on how well previous programming achieved youth specific goals is limited because youth participation was not tracked.

Development Hypotheses/Theories of Change: What is the hypothesis or theory of change tied to this LA area/topic?

Feed the Future programming can support youth with their transition to economic empowerment and independence, improving their economic future through increased incomes, resilience, and improved nutrition. If we:

1. Engage youth in Feed the Future activities, helping them build skills and networks, access resources, and overcome certain youth-specific barriers, youth will be better prepared to productively engage in and earn livelihoods from diverse areas of agri-food systems as they transition to economic independence, which will positively contribute to GFSS outcomes of improved agriculture-led economic growth, resilience, and better nutrition.
2. Identify new opportunities that attract or facilitate increased capital investment, on or off farm, job opportunities in which youth are especially suited (agricultural service provision, input and output markets, transport, and marketing) will be more plentiful, leading to progress in achieving GFSS outcomes.

Learning Agenda Questions:

1. Are there youth-specific opportunities or constraints to engaging in agri-food systems, and do those differ by gender, socio-cultural and enabling environment factors¹?
 - a. What economic opportunities in agri-food systems are most effective at attracting youth?
2. What programmatic approaches work to overcome youth-specific constraints so that youth can productively participate in agri-food systems?
 - a. When Feed the Future programs succeed, do youth share proportionately in this success? Why?
3. Which areas of agri-food systems are best suited to engage youth, and how can Feed the Future support youth to get involved?
4. How can Feed the Future collaborate with other key actors (e.g. health, education, democracy and governance, private sector, etc.) to best support and empower youth?

¹Including, but not limited to: youth age cohort, food security and/or nutritional status, ethnicity, religion, poverty, social support network, sexual orientation and gender identity, access to health and other services, education level, technical and non-cognitive skills, climate events or other shocks, areas of high violence or conflict, political enabling environment, supply chain challenges, legal structures and land tenures, economic geography, cropping system, knowledge of and access to technology, etc.