RAISE-FS two pager

Healthy Diets for Nutrition in Ethiopia - a food systems approach

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Poor dietary quality is a key challenge in Ethiopia, driving malnutrition. The RAISE-FS project made significant efforts to tackle this by promoting a diet-focused food systems approach, supporting efficient, sustainable, and inclusive agriculture. This briefs highlights RAISE-FS's efforts and experiences.

Introduction

Poor dietary quality remains one of the critical food system challenges in Ethiopia and a major determinant of malnutrition. The percentage of women consume five or more food groups range from 2.1% (West Armacho of Amhara region) to 18.9% (Sidama of south region) display very limited diversity. These dietary deficiencies contribute directly to micronutrient deficiencies and undernutrition among women and children. Food insecurity interacts with these trends by limiting access to nutrient-dense foods and further reducing dietary diversity. Low awareness, socio-cultural norms, limited decision-making power regarding food choices, and the cost of healthy diets all contribute to poor dietary outcomes. These constraints demonstrate that healthy diets are not only a nutrition issue, but a systemic agri-food challenge requiring interventions that enhance availability, affordability, utilization, and food safety.

The RAISE-FS project addresses these challenges by operationalizing a diet-centred food systems approach. Within this framework, Ethiopian Food-Based Dietary Guidelines (FBDGs) are translated into practical behavioural change communication strategies and combined with nutrition-sensitive agricultural interventions. Entry points such as home gardening, poultry farming, intercropping, biofortified crop promotion, and food preservation techniques are used to enhance both dietary diversity and livelihood opportunities. Nutrient-dense crops including mung bean and orange-fleshed sweet potato are promoted to improve micronutrient intake. Home gardening initiatives aim to expand access to fruits and vegetables, improve seasonal availability, and household resilience. Poultry is introduced as a combined nutrition–livelihood strategy to increase animal-source foods consumption and income sources. Food safety and preservation activities, such as pot-in-pot cooling technologies have been mplemented to extend the shelf-life of perishable foods and facilitate year-round access to nutritious foods.

The RAISE-FS experience demonstrates several advantages of a diet-centred approach. First, agriculture becomes a pathway to improve diets when production diversity is directly linked to consumption rather than solely to market sales. Second, translating dietary guidelines into culturally relevant communication tools strengthens behaviour change and equips households and local implementers with practical knowledge. Third, nutrition-sensitive agriculture requires strong social inclusion and gender dimensions, since intra-household decision-making, control over income, and time allocation all influence food acquisition and consumption. Fourth, multisectoral platforms at woreda and region level strengthen coordination between agriculture and health, and foster ownership, which is critical for scaling interventions.

RAISE-FS' experience has revealed persistent barriers. Low household incomes, food insecurity, and the high relative cost of nutrient-dense foods make it difficult for families to follow healthy dietary recommendations. Security-related disruptions, particularly in Amhara, have hindered supportive supervision and slowed field activities. Agricultural constraints such as insufficient access to year-round seeds for vegetables, limited irrigation water, and low availability of poultry inputs have reduced the adoption potential of dietary recommendations.

Together with project partners, RAISE-FS operationalized dietary guidelines developing behavioural change communication materials, such as posters and recipe booklets, which provide clear and accessible messages for rural households. A comprehensive home gardening manual that integrates gender, nutrition, and agricultural practice has been developed to support extension workers. The project has encouraged consumption of nutrient-rich vegetables such as beetroot, green leafy vegetables, and orange-fleshed sweet potato.

Preservation techniques for fruits and vegetables have been introduced to improve shelf life. Poultry

farming has contributed to improved household income and increased access to animal-source foods. At the systems level, stakeholder engagement strengthened coordination and ownership, extending interventions beyond pilot woredas in collaboration with agriculture and health extension workers.

Evidence from implementation

Improvements in dietary diversity

Evidence from implementation shows improvements in dietary diversity, particularly through increased fruit and vegetable consumption, alongside greater agricultural diversity at household level.

Enhanced food system resilience

The dietary and agricultural changes have contributed to enhanced food system resilience and improved livelihoods.

Ownership of the model

Government stakeholders have expressed ownership of the model, facilitating replication and opening pathways for sustained integration into regional agriculture and nutrition planning.

Lessons learned

Several lessons emerge from this experience

Nutrition at the center

Placing diet at the core of agricultural investments leads to stronger dietary outcomes.

BSCC materials

Behavioural change and communication tools are essential for turning dietary guidelines into household practices.

Multi-sectoral platforms

It enhance harmonization, minimize fragmentation, and ensure sustainability by integrating responsibility within government sectors.

Simplae and attractive communication materials

Simple, well-designed communication materials effectively raise awareness, foster dialogue, and encourage household experimentation and adoption.

Looking ahead, strengthening of dietary guideline implementation requires a robust theory of change that links knowledge, production, livelihoods, and behaviour. Communication materials should be tailored to both rural households and urban consumers, while advocacy tools are needed for agri-food system stakeholders and community influencers. Improving dietary diversity will require simultaneous efforts to raise agricultural productivity, stabilize water and seed systems for home gardens, expand small livestock access, and increase household purchasing power. Introducing a healthy diet for nutrition for agriculture and health extension workers, assigning nutrition experts at community level, and expanding training on cooking demonstrations and food safety would support long-term sustainability.

A healthy diet-centred vision is unique in Ethiopia as it integrates agriculture, gender, and nutrition. By focusing on the consumption of nutrient-dense foods, diversifying livelihoods, improving food safety, and strengthening agri-food governance, it contributes to Ethiopia's national priorities.

Key publications

- Enhancing food systems through home gardens
- Harmonizing nutrition behavioural change communication materials using the Ethiopian Food-Based Dietary Guidelines: A scoping review.
- Are the Ethiopian Dietary Guidelines in line with what people believe to be a healthy diet and what they consume
- Research for agricultural development in support of nutrition sensitive agriculture–experiences from Ethiopia.
- RAISE-FS behavioural change manual and poster from FBDG. https://raise-fs.org/publications/

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