

Nutrition Research Facility

Final Evaluation Report

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About the Nutrition Research Facility

The Knowledge and Research for Nutrition project of the European Commission (2020-2026) 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, pooling expertise from European academia and having the ability to mobilise internationally renowned scientific networks and research organisations from partner countries.

The Nutrition Research Facility provides expert advice to the European Commission and to the European Union (EU) Member States and Partner Countries.

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List of acronyms and Abbreviations

Acronym	Description
Agrinatura	The European Alliance on Agricultural Knowledge for Development
APHRC	African Population and Health Research Centre
CV	Curriculum Vitae
C4N	Capacity for Nutrition (C4N), part of Knowledge for Nutrition (K4N) Program
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
DG INTPA	Directorate-General for International Partnerships
EU	European Union
EUD	EU Delegation
F3	Unit F3 "Sustainable agri-food systems and fisheries" of DG INTPA
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GESI	Gender, Equity, and Social Inclusion
ISCAD	International Strategic Centre for Agri-Food Development
IRD	Institut de Recherche pour le Développement
K4N	Knowledge for Nutrition Program
KII	Key Informant Interview
LNOB	Leave No One Behind
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MEL	Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning
NAFRI	National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute
NDICI	Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument
NRF	Nutrition Research Facility
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SIG	Small Group Interview
ToC	Theory of Change
ToR	Terms of Reference
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WP	Work Package

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1. Executive Summary

1.1. Purpose and Scope of the Evaluation

This evaluation assesses the performance of the Nutrition Research Facility (NRF) over its implementation period. The NRF was established to strengthen the science–policy interface in nutrition and food systems programming by providing demand-driven research, knowledge brokering, and monitoring and evaluation (MEL) support aligned with EU external action priorities. The evaluation examines the NRF against Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC) criteria, Relevance, Coherence, Effectiveness, Efficiency, Impact, and Sustainability, as well as EU Added Value and Cross-Cutting Issues (gender, equity, climate, and rights-based approaches). It aims to assess the extent to which the NRF achieved its objectives and to derive lessons and recommendations for future EU-supported evidence mechanisms. The evaluation draws on triangulated evidence from document review, key informant interviews (KIIs), survey responses, portfolio-level analysis of NRF assignments through an evidence map, and four in-depth tracer case studies (Kenya, Lao PDR, Uzbekistan, and a global value chain study).

1.2. Overall Assessment

The NRF represents a conceptually strong and strategically relevant mechanism for strengthening the science–policy interface in nutrition. Its demand-driven architecture ensured that research topics reflected articulated needs of EU stakeholders, Member States, and partner countries. Across the portfolio, the NRF consistently mobilised high-level expertise and produced technically credible analytical outputs.

The NRF was strongest in:

- Aligning research with articulated demand
- Generating high-quality analytical products
- Strengthening MEL systems and national data infrastructure
- Contributing to conceptual reframing within nutrition and food systems debates

However, the facility’s ability to translate technical outputs into sustained policy and programmatic transformation was inherently context-dependent and therefore uneven across settings. While its institutional and methodological contributions were substantial and sustainable, translation into longer-term policy change often depended on contextual policy dynamics, institutional readiness, and timing beyond the direct control of the facility. Overall, the NRF’s impact is best characterised as catalytic and ecosystem-strengthening rather than directly transformative. Its strongest contributions lie in institutional capacity development and methodological strengthening rather than in stand-alone policy reform.

1.3. Main Findings by Evaluation Criterion

Relevance

The NRF was highly relevant to stakeholder priorities and EU strategic frameworks. Its structured demand articulation processes enhanced legitimacy and alignment with EU external action objectives. However, relevance over time depended on timeliness and sustained engagement. While topics were well aligned at inception, delivery timelines and limited iterative feedback mechanisms sometimes reduced influence. Relevance was strongest where outputs aligned with active policy windows and were embedded in ongoing institutional processes.

Coherence

The NRF demonstrated strong conceptual coherence within the EU nutrition evidence ecosystem. It was generally perceived as complementary to parallel initiatives and valuable for mobilising expertise across contexts. However, operational coherence across the WP1–WP4 chain was uneven. Structural

compartmentalisation and reliance on informal coordination mechanisms reduced the consistency of evidence flow from demand articulation through to policy embedding.

Effectiveness

The NRF consistently generated high-quality, methodologically rigorous evidence, strengthened national MEL systems, and mobilised specialised expertise across diverse contexts. Effectiveness was strongest at organisational and procedural levels, particularly where research was embedded within institutional frameworks. Evidence of direct policy-level transformation was more variable. Uptake pathways were most visible where dissemination and engagement extended beyond report delivery. The evaluation finds that evidence production alone was insufficient to ensure sustained policy influence without structured and sustained engagement across stakeholders.

Efficiency

The NRF mobilised expertise effectively and delivered high-quality outputs. However, administrative complexity and reporting requirements influenced responsiveness in several assignments. A structural tension emerged between methodological rigor and operational agility. The service-contract modality supported accountability but limited flexibility and responsiveness to evolving policy cycles. In some cases, implementing partners absorbed additional in-kind contributions to meet administrative requirements.

Impact

The NRF generated moderate impact at institutional and conceptual levels. Contributions include strengthened survey systems, improved analytical practices, enhanced MEL frameworks, and expanded science–policy dialogue. Direct attribution to policy reform is limited, reflecting both the advisory nature of the facility and the time-lag inherent in policy processes. Impact pathways were primarily catalytic and systemic, with several trajectories extending beyond the evaluation timeframe and continuing through ongoing institutional processes.

Sustainability

Sustainability is strongest where NRF support strengthened institutional systems and methodological practices. Capacity-building effects, such as survey infrastructure, MEL tools, and analytical skills, are likely to persist. Outputs not embedded within institutional processes or followed by structured dissemination are less likely to sustain influence. Long-term sustainability depends on continued institutional ownership and integration into routine practice.

EU Added Value

The NRF's EU added value lies in its ability to mobilise transnational expertise, facilitate cross-country synthesis, and act as a neutral convening platform. Added value was most visible in multi-country analytical assignments and contexts with limited national capacity. In stronger-capacity environments, EU added value was more catalytic than uniquely enabling. Some stakeholders noted perceptions of predominantly institutional positioning in branding and visibility, suggesting scope for strengthening partner-country co-ownership in future mechanisms.

Cross-Cutting Issues

Gender and equity considerations were more consistently integrated than climate and rights-based approaches. Integration was strong at analytical level and less systematically embedded in methodological design, monitoring systems, and policy operationalisation. Cross-cutting themes were partially mainstreamed but uneven in depth and translation into sustained programmatic influence.

1.4. Overarching Strategic Conclusions

Four overarching conclusions emerge:

1. The NRF model is conceptually strong and highly relevant, but its catalytic potential was moderated by procedural rigidity and insufficiently institutionalised engagement and dissemination mechanisms

across the facility.

2. The facility's comparative advantage lies in strengthening evidence ecosystems and institutional capacity rather than in directly driving policy reform.
3. Impact was strongest where research was embedded within institutional processes and supported by sustained engagement beyond report delivery.
4. Future EU evidence mechanisms will require enhanced flexibility, tighter integration across functional components, and explicit investment in structured knowledge brokering and use-tracking.

1.5. Transferable Lessons Learned

The evaluation identifies several transferable lessons for future EU-supported evidence mechanisms:

- Demand-driven design enhances legitimacy but must be accompanied by iterative engagement.
- Evidence production alone does not ensure uptake; structured and sustained engagement across stakeholders is essential.
- Institutional embedding is the primary determinant of sustainability.
- Flexibility and timeliness are critical for policy-relevant research.
- Co-development with EU Delegations and national partners supports sustained use of outputs.

1.6. Priority Recommendations

The evaluation recommends the following priority actions for future EU-supported evidence mechanisms:

1. **Institutionalise structured engagement and dissemination mechanisms**, embedded from project design and leveraging the EU's convening power to strengthen uptake at EU and regional levels.
2. **Integrate systematic use-tracking into programme design**, enabling monitoring of how outputs inform decision-making.
3. **Increase flexibility in commissioning and delivery modalities** to better align research timelines with policy cycles.
4. **Leverage EU convening power through strategic partnerships and co-financing mechanisms.**
5. **Strengthen integration across functional components**, ensuring continuity from demand articulation through to policy engagement.
6. **Strengthen partner-country co-ownership and visibility**, including shared branding and collaborative research design.
7. **Ensure predictable allocation of expert time within contractual arrangements**
8. **Structure assignments in sequenced phases (Demand–Research–Use)**
9. **Leverage strategic dissemination platforms to enhance visibility and uptake**

Together, these recommendations aim to preserve the strengths of the NRF model while enhancing its catalytic and policy influence potential in future EU programming.

2. Introduction

2.1. Intervention Overview

From 2020–2025, nutrition and food-systems challenges have been shaped by compounding shocks, including climate events, food price volatility, conflict, and the lingering socioeconomic effects of COVID-19. These pressures have reinforced the need for coherent, multisectoral action across agriculture, health, social protection and education systems. The European Union’s (EU) strategic frameworks during this period, including the Action Plan on Nutrition, Farm to Fork Strategy, and Global Gateway, emphasise the centrality of high-quality, timely evidence to guide programming and investment decisions. Yet EU Delegations (EUDs) and partner institutions continue to face barriers to articulating evidence needs, accessing research at the right moment in programme cycles, and translating findings into operational decisions. The Nutrition Research Facility (NRF) was established to help address these system-level constraints by strengthening demand articulation, evidence generation, knowledge exchange and monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) capacities.

The work of the NRF was intended to be driven by the demand for evidence from decision makers, mainly from the EU and its partner countries prioritising nutrition (‘policy-driven research for evidence-informed decision making’). Two specific objectives were expected:

1. Improved connection, collaboration, communication and coordination between research and decision making
2. Strengthened M&E systems (including capacities) for tracking nutrition benefits of policies and programmes at field level

The NRF was conceived as a mechanism to improve the availability, accessibility, and practical use of evidence across EUDs and partner institutions. Its objectives align with EU priorities to elevate evidence-informed programming, strengthen MEL systems, and foster coherent multisectoral action. The NRF delivers its mandate through four interconnected work packages (WP):

- WP1 – Demand articulation: supporting EUDs to clarify evidence needs and decision points;
- WP2 – Evidence generation: producing research, reviews, modelling and technical analyses;
- WP3 – Knowledge brokering and exchange: translating and communicating evidence through briefs, webinars and learning exchanges; and
- WP4 – MEL support: strengthening monitoring and evaluation (M&E) frameworks, tools and practices.

Although each WP has a distinct function, they operate as a single Facility with an overarching aim: to ensure that relevant, credible, and timely evidence is generated and used to inform EU-supported nutrition and food systems interventions. The internal coherence of the modality structure, moving from demand identification to evidence production, translation, and MEL support, is central to the NRF’s design logic.

2.2. Evaluation Purpose and Scope

The final evaluation focused on the NRF operational period of April 2020 to March 2025, while also assessing likelihood of future contributions by the end of the NRF timeframe in March 2026. The evaluation had the following objectives:

1. Assess effectiveness, outputs, and outcomes of the NRF (April 2020 to March 2025) based on its logframe and theory of change.
2. Assess the extent to which the NRF was able to take up the recommendations of the Mid-Term Review which was carried out in 2022.

3. Assess potential future contribution and sustainability (April 2025 onwards) of the NRF from the legacy of its work in terms of research evidence generated, nutrition research agenda developed, nutrition M&E systems and methodologies improved, and science-policy dialogue initiated/strengthened
4. Assess the extent to which the NRF mechanism has contributed to catalysing the science-policy interface, and to informing and influencing nutrition-sensitive policies and programmes. Identify how the NRF mechanism could have been strengthened to better fulfil these roles.
5. Synthesise and document lessons learnt and best practice from the NRF experience, for Agrinatura and for the EU (and other donors) in designing new NRF like instruments for promoting improved nutrition policies and programming.

The intended main users of the results of the final evaluation are Agrinatura implementing partners, Unit F3 "Sustainable agri-food systems and fisheries" of the Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA/F3), and the Capacity for Nutrition (C4N) support service.

2.3. Evaluation Approach and Methodology

The evaluation team assessed the NRF against the criteria of relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, sustainability, EU added value, and cross-cutting issues, including gender, equity, and include, climate, and rights-based approaches. Emphasis is placed on the Facility's contribution to strengthened decision-making, cross-sector coherence, system-level improvements and institutionalisation of evidence use. Findings will support the design of future EU mechanisms for nutrition and food systems evidence, MEL strengthening and science-policy translation.

Across the portfolio, NRF outputs are primarily framed against the DAC criterion of relevance, especially for WP2 evidence-generation and, to a lesser extent, WP3 knowledge-brokering and WP4 MEL-support products. Effectiveness and coherence most often appear as secondary criteria, with sustainability and impact featuring more selectively, suggesting that questions of results and longer-term change are addressed but are not the dominant organizing lens for most assignments.

The evaluation follows a theory-based, utilisation-focused approach structured around a nested Theory of Change (ToC) developed during the inception phase (see Annex E). Sampling for this final evaluation combines three complementary levels aligned to the nested ToC:

- Facility-level sampling: how the overall NRF model supports evidence uptake across EU nutrition programming;
- Modality-level sampling: the performance and contribution of WP1–WP4;
- Case-level sampling: how specific studies, MEL support packages and knowledge-brokering activities have influenced decisions or systems.

Through a mixed methodology, we have integrated triangulation across data sources (e.g., documents; key informant interviews [KIIs] and small group interviews [SGIs]; a stakeholder survey; structured observation of NRF webinars; and tracer case studies) with the Evidence Map, contribution analysis, outcome harvesting, and comparative analysis.

Contribution Analysis provides the overarching evaluative logic, allowing the team to examine the extent to which the NRF plausibly contributed to observed outcomes. Contribution Analysis is used to test the causal pathways articulated in the nested ToC, assess the strength and credibility of evidence supporting these pathways, and explore alternative explanations. Its application unfolds across the facility, modality, and case levels, with contribution stories constructed iteratively as evidence accumulates.

To complement Contribution Analysis and to capture results not fully represented in existing documentation, the evaluation integrates **Outcome Harvesting**, particularly within tracer-case inquiry. Outcome Harvesting

enables the identification of emergent, unintended, or non-linear changes in decision-making, practice, or institutional processes. Outcome descriptions gathered through KIIs, SGIs, and case-related exchanges are documented, verified, and mapped onto (or used to challenge) existing ToC pathways.

Comparative analysis was used to identify patterns and divergences across tracer cases and work packages, particularly in relation to factors influencing evidence uptake, timing, and pathways to use. By systematically comparing cases with different origins of demand (e.g. EUD, Member State, consultation-driven) and levels of engagement (global vs. country-level), the evaluation was able to identify cross-cutting enablers and constraints. These comparative insights are reflected in the tracer case synthesis and inform several of the report's cross-cutting findings and conclusions.

The **Evidence Map (EM)** for this evaluation served as a structured portfolio database of all NRF outputs since 2019, coded to see patterns by work package, type of support, thematic category, geography, demand origin, intended use, depth of cross-cutting themes, and which DAC criterion and evidence gaps were addressed. Documents were gathered from resources available on the NRF website and internal documents provided on the NRF SharePoint Documentation Archive. Included documents comprised consultation reports and study documents including detailed reports for selected tracer cases. A total of 165 documents were incorporated into the EM. Most of this documentation was attributable to the evidence generated under WP2 (n=93), with the other WPs producing relatively less documentation (WP1, n=7; WP3, n=30; WP4, n=29). The documentation produced under WP2 included many files identified for the tracer cases, including Uzbekistan M&E work (n=19), school interventions in Kenya (n=24), value chains for member states (n=47), and nutrition-sensitive agroecology research in Lao (n=7). As a result of the large number of tracer case documents, most of the included evidence was country-specific (58%), with about one-third having regional or multi-country application (n=47) and the rest having application to low- and middle-income countries globally (n=23).

Documents were coded by the primary and secondary thematic category they addressed and the gap category that the research was designed to address. Several trends surfaced when analysing themes and gaps across the NRF portfolio. The thematic categories span the full nutrition and food-systems agenda, from food security, diet quality and agri-food value chains through social protection, health services for undernutrition, and the double burden of obesity and non-communicable diseases. They also capture cross-cutting enablers and governance issues, including climate–nutrition resilience, MEL systems and data use, institutional coordination and Gender Equity and Social Inclusion (GESI)-focused analysis, alongside categories for knowledge brokering, policy and strategy support, and a residual “other” class for specialised topics.

The gap categories represent priority nutrition evidence gaps that the research was designed to address. Gap categories include missing or weak demand for evidence, thematic gaps in key areas such as climate–nutrition, GESI/Leave No One Behind (LNOB), food-systems coherence and social protection–nutrition linkages, and systemic gaps in MEL capacity, policy translation and institutionalisation of evidence use. They also capture research that focuses on underserved geographies or population groups, addresses shortcomings in knowledge-brokering, and an open “other” slot includes gaps not covered elsewhere. In the analysis presented in this report, any gap or theme categories with few observations have been removed or subsumed into the “other” category.

2.4. Data Collection

Data was collected between January and February 2026. Primary data collection consisted of a stakeholder survey and key informant and small group interviews. Semi-structured KIIs and SGIs constituted the core of primary data collection. The consultation sequence began with facility-level KIIs with DG INTPA, Agrinatura and NRF management to refine the ToC, clarify institutional perspectives and narrow down options for tracer cases. Modality- and case-level interviews with EUDs, implementing partners, research providers and universities, and government counterparts took place after tracer cases were identified using early interview and stakeholder survey data. The evaluation conducted 27 interview events comprising 22 key informant interviews (KIIs) and 5 small group interviews (SGIs). In total, these interviews engaged 32 unique stakeholders.

The number of KIIs and SDGs by stakeholder group are summarised in Table F1 in Annex F. The stakeholder survey was administered using Google Forms. The survey was emailed by the NRF team to their database of webinar participants. Responses were received between 15 January and 13 February 2026 with a total of 44 responses received.

Four tracer cases were selected to examine specific NRF assignments or clusters of activities where evidence generation, MEL support or knowledge exchange to determine if and how activities have contributed to decision-making or system improvements. A longlist of potential tracer cases was generated from discussions with the Evaluation Reference Group, and the stakeholder survey, with final selection and validation agreed with DG INTPA before the main January interview period. Table 1 summarises the characteristics of the selected four tracer cases.

Table 1. Overview of Selected Tracer Cases and Key Characteristics

Geographic Scope	Topic	WPs included	Origin of Request
Global	Nutrition-Sensitive Agri-Food Value Chains	WP2, WP3	Member State request
Kenya	School nutrition interventions in Kenya	WP1, WP2, WP3	Consultation workshop: East and West Africa and the Sahel
Lao PDR	Nutrition-Sensitive Agroecology in Lao PDR	WP1, WP2	Consultation workshop: Asia
Uzbekistan	Understanding the Nutrition Landscape in Uzbekistan	WP4	European Union Delegation in Tashkent

2.5. Limitations & Mitigations

The evaluation did not follow its original timeline. Due to delays in the start of the evaluation the main data collection period happened over the end-of-year and new year holiday period, which may have limited the response rate of both survey respondents and potential key informants. Multiple reminders were sent for both the survey and interview invitations and communications were delayed as much as feasible to ensure stakeholders and informants were back in the office post-holiday season and able to respond to requests. The team did not have visibility on who received the survey as this process was managed by the NRF team and email list data is protected under the General Data Protection Regulation. Also, if stakeholders were not part of NRF's dissemination list, they would have been excluded from receiving the survey. For the tracer cases, all data collection was done remotely which likely limited the team's ability to gain insight from potential local users of the outputs, such as country governments and communities. While tracer cases provide in-depth insights into how NRF activities function in practice, they are not intended to be statistically representative of the full portfolio. Findings from tracer cases should therefore be interpreted as illustrative of broader patterns rather than generalisable across all NRF-supported activities.

Given the nature of the NRF as a knowledge and research facility, attribution of outcomes to specific activities is inherently challenging. Many observed changes, particularly at policy and system levels, result from multiple interacting actors and processes over time. While the evaluation uses Contribution Analysis to assess plausible links between NRF activities and observed outcomes, definitive attribution cannot be established. A further limitation relates to time lags between evidence generation and uptake. Several NRF-supported activities, particularly recent or ongoing ones such as the Uzbekistan case, had not yet completed analysis or dissemination at the time of the evaluation. As a result, the evaluation is more able to assess potential and anticipated use rather than demonstrated outcomes in some cases.

The evaluation draws heavily on documented outputs and accessible stakeholders, which may bias findings toward more visible or well-documented activities. Less documented or lower-profile assignments may be underrepresented in both the Evidence Map and qualitative findings. While efforts were made to include a range of stakeholders, engagement with end users, particularly national government decision-makers and community-level beneficiaries, was limited. This constrains the ability to fully assess the extent of uptake, use,

and longer-term impact from a user perspective. Much of the qualitative evidence is based on self-reported data from stakeholders involved in or closely associated with NRF activities. While triangulation was applied where possible, responses may be subject to recall bias or positive reporting bias, particularly among implementing partners. The quality, completeness, and consistency of available documentation varied across activities. In some cases, limited reporting or incomplete documentation constrained the depth of analysis and the ability to triangulate findings across sources.

Together, these limitations highlight the complexity of assessing a multi-component, demand-driven facility operating across diverse contexts, and reinforce the importance of interpreting findings as indicative of patterns and contribution rather than definitive measures of impact.

3. Findings

3.1. Portfolio-Level Overview

Portfolio Composition and Structure. Over its implementation period, the NRF delivered a diverse portfolio of assignments spanning evidence generation, knowledge exchange, monitoring and evaluation (MEL) support, and structured demand articulation. The largest share of assignments was implemented under WP2 (evidence generation), reflecting the facility's core mandate to produce analytical and technical outputs. A substantial proportion of country-level and programme-level activities were undertaken under WP4 (MEL support), particularly in contexts requiring strengthened monitoring systems, survey design, or evaluation frameworks. WP3 activities were integrated within selected assignments to support dissemination and engagement processes, while WP1 activities were primarily associated with regional consultation workshops and structured demand-generation mechanisms. Assignments originated through multiple channels, including regional consultation processes, direct requests from EU Delegations, Member State requests, and engagement with implementers of EU-supported programmes. This diversity of entry points reflects the demand-driven design of the facility and the range of stakeholders engaged.

The Evidence Map analysis further highlights the diversity and scope of the NRF portfolio. The heat map in Figure 1, with red signifying fewer documents and green a higher number of documents, illustrates the primary themes coded per document in the Evidence Map. This data shows that the NRF portfolio is heavily concentrated in WP2 country-level work on agriculture and food systems, largely in African countries, with a substantial but smaller body of evidence focusing explicitly on diet quality and dietary patterns though these themes did come across as secondary themes for several documents. Medium-level areas of activity include knowledge-brokering outputs on agriculture and diet themes, as well as a modest set of studies on health services/undernutrition treatment and MEL systems, particularly at multi-country or global level. By contrast, there are relatively fewer products focused on policy and strategy development, and MEL-focused work is concentrated in country-level assignments rather than being evenly spread across regions.

Figure 1. Thematic Coverage of NRF Outputs Across Work Packages and Geographic Levels (Evidence Map Analysis)



Note: Cells show the number of documents coded per theme. Colour intensity reflects the volume of evidence, with red indicating fewer documents and green indicating a higher number of documents.

Geographic and Thematic Distribution. Geographically, the NRF portfolio includes country-level assignments across Africa, Asia, and Central Asia, as well as regional and global analytical products. Most assignments were concentrated in African contexts, aligned with EU-supported nutrition and food systems programmes. Additional country-level work was undertaken in Asia and Central Asia, alongside selected global thematic studies. Thematically, assignments addressed nutrition-sensitive agriculture and food systems, school feeding and diet quality, gender and equity dimensions of nutrition programming, and strengthening of MEL systems and national data infrastructure. Cross-cutting issues, including gender, equity, climate, and rights-based considerations, were reflected across the portfolio with varying levels of integration, as documented in the evidence map analysis.

The heat map in Figure 2 illustrates that NRF commissioning most strongly targeted gaps in food-systems and multi-sector coherence evidence, including agriculture–nutrition linkages and combined social protection–nutrition pathways, particularly in African, country-level assignments. Medium-level attention was also given to gaps in GESI/LNOB evidence, MEL systems and capacity, and translation of evidence into policy and strategy, whereas comparatively fewer assignments were directed at climate–nutrition/shock-resilience gaps, weak demand articulation, knowledge-brokering gaps, or gaps for specific underserved population groups and regions, indicating areas where important needs were recognised but less frequently addressed through NRF-supported research.

Figure 2. Evidence Gap Coverage Across the NRF Portfolio (Evidence Map Analysis)



Note: Cells show the number of assignments addressing each evidence gap. Colour intensity reflects the level of coverage, with red indicating limited coverage and green indicating stronger coverage.

Outputs and Deliverables. Across assignments, a range of technical and advisory outputs were produced under the NRF. These included analytical reports, policy briefs, evaluation and MEL frameworks, survey protocols, data tools, advisory notes, webinars, and synthesis products. Assignments were frequently accompanied by stakeholder consultations, restitution workshops, and dissemination events. Beyond the tracer cases presented in this report, examples of portfolio-wide outputs include the SANOI programme evaluations and longitudinal MEL support, evaluative research conducted through the AFAFI Centre, support to nutrition data systems in Uzbekistan, and regional and thematic synthesis products linked to EU-supported programmes. Together, these outputs illustrate both the analytical and institutional support functions embedded within the facility's mandate.

Implementation Characteristics. Review of portfolio documentation indicates variation in assignment scope, duration, and budget allocation. In several instances, actual implementation timelines extended beyond initial projections. Assignments combined technical analysis with consultation and engagement processes, though the balance between analytical production and dissemination varied across contexts. The service-contract modality under which the NRF operated shaped commissioning procedures, reporting requirements, and implementation timelines. These structural features are considered further in the analysis under the relevant DAC criteria.

This overview presents the scale, thematic breadth, geographic distribution, and structural features of the NRF portfolio. The following sections analyse performance against the OECD-DAC criteria, drawing on both portfolio-wide patterns and assignment-level evidence.

3.2. Modality-Level Characteristics

The NRF operated under a service-contract modality structured across the four WPs (WP1–WP4). This structure shaped the commissioning, implementation, and reporting of assignments. Budget lines, deliverables, and timelines were organised by work package, which provided clarity of roles but also influenced how activities were sequenced and coordinated. The service-contract framework required formal approval procedures, detailed reporting, and predefined deliverables. These features supported accountability and quality assurance but also influenced implementation timelines and amendment processes. Variations in

implementation duration across assignments should therefore be understood in the context of this contractual modality.

The division of activities across WPs influenced how evidence generation (WP2), knowledge exchange (WP3), and MEL support (WP4) were combined within individual assignments. In some cases, WPs operated sequentially; in others, they were integrated within a single activity design. Analytical implications of this modality are examined further under the relevant DAC criteria. Taken together, the portfolio-level and modality-level perspectives provide the structural context within which individual assignments operated. The following sections assess performance against the OECD-DAC criteria, drawing on both portfolio-wide patterns and assignment-level evidence.

3.3. DAC Findings

Relevance

Evaluation Question 1: Does the NRF reflect the priorities and expectations of key stakeholders, including government, researchers, and affected communities?

The NRF was largely aligned with the priorities and expectations of key stakeholders (including governments, researchers, and affected communities) at the point of demand articulation, reflecting a clear commitment to a demand-driven model. However, operational constraints, including administrative rigidity, uneven feedback loops, and misalignment with policy and programming cycles, sometimes reduced the usability of outputs for decision-making and limited responsiveness to evolving evidence needs.

1. Strong alignment with EU frameworks. The NRF was designed to support EU external action priorities relevant to nutrition and food security, including evidence needs linked to the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) programming and the EU Action Plan on Nutrition. Several stakeholders described strong early linkages with the European Commission and perceived the facility as relevant to EU policy and programming processes. However, respondents also noted that NRF outputs did not always adapt quickly to shifts in priorities and emerging initiatives, which sometimes reduced perceived relevance when rapid evidence inputs were needed. For example, in the Uzbekistan tracer case, the large-scale survey design and data collection were successfully implemented, but delays in analysis and dissemination limited the immediate policy utility of the results within active decision-making windows. Similarly, several interviewees noted that the NRF's contracting and approval processes could slow responsiveness when rapid analytical inputs were required. At EU level, the value chain study provides a strong example of this alignment. Commissioned in response to articulated demand from Member State stakeholders, the study addressed a recognised gap in integrating nutrition considerations into agricultural value chain approaches. Informants consistently described the topic as timely and conceptually aligned with the EU's increasing emphasis on food systems transformation. While subsequent uptake was more limited operationally, the initial selection of the topic reflected clear strategic relevance within evolving EU policy debates.

2. Alignment with national strategies. In specific contexts like Uzbekistan, the NRF successfully integrated within national development and nutrition strategies, demonstrating its capacity to respond to clearly articulated local needs effectively. The NRF's work supported broader efforts to expand how nutrition was framed within the country, previously dominated by a focus on food safety and production. By introducing new frameworks for nutrition assessment, including the utilisation of socio-economic determinants of health, the NRF established a basis for future data collection, contributing to steps toward strengthened national dietary data collection efforts. Similarly, in Kenya, the school nutrition study emerged directly from a regional consultation process and aligned closely with existing national coordination structures, including the Adolescent Nutrition Task Force and the Nutrition Research Technical Working Group. Engagement with national ministries and development partners during the design phase reinforced alignment with ongoing policy discussions. This case demonstrates how the NRF's demand-driven approach could effectively connect research topics to clearly articulated national priorities when embedded within established coordination platforms

However, stakeholders described variable alignment across contexts. In some settings, relevance at the point of demand articulation did not always translate into sustained alignment during implementation, particularly where engagement beyond the initial commissioning phase was limited or where outputs were not clearly embedded within existing policy and planning processes. A distinct but related dimension concerns alignment across governance levels. The Laos tracer case further illustrates how relevance can vary by level. The nutrition-sensitive agroecology study was highly relevant to local communities and institutional partners, generating context-specific insights and strengthening local engagement. However, its small geographic scale and village-level focus limited its perceived applicability for national-level policy actors seeking generalisable evidence. This highlights a trade-off between depth of contextual relevance and scalability for policy influence.

3. Responsiveness to articulated demand. The NRF's demand-driven design enabled stakeholders to shape research and support topics around articulated needs. However, many respondents reported that delivery timelines sometimes did not align with decision-making windows, reducing opportunities for instrumental use. Several stakeholders described outputs arriving after key policy discussions or programme planning moments. A further constraint was the limited systematisation of post-delivery feedback loops, which reduced the NRF's ability to iteratively refine outputs and respond to emerging needs over time. Many respondents described the NRF as distinctive in its co-creation model and its responsiveness to policy-maker demand, noting that topics were not imposed but emerged from consultation processes. Several contrasted NRF with more supply-driven research platforms.

4. Proactive gap identification. The NRF's consultations and demand creation workshops supported the identification of priority evidence gaps. However, stakeholders described that the facility's ability to pursue gaps proactively beyond the initial prioritisation phase was limited. Respondents noted limited mechanisms for ongoing review, iteration, and follow-up once assignments were underway, which contributed to perceptions of a reactive rather than anticipatory operating mode in some workstreams. Survey respondents highlighted the value of consultation workshops in shaping research topics and confirming priority evidence gaps. Several noted that NRF teams actively screened proposed topics against existing research to avoid duplication and focus on genuine gaps, reinforcing perceptions of strategic relevance.

5. Continued relevance over time. Stakeholders consistently emphasised that relevance depended not only on topic selection but also on timeliness and fit with policy cycles. Administrative processes and lengthy research timelines sometimes reduced the usefulness of outputs, particularly when decisions moved quickly. Where NRF work was delivered within active decision windows, relevance and perceived utility were stronger.

Survey perception data (triangulation). Survey responses broadly echoed interview findings: respondents generally valued the NRF's demand-driven approach and the relevance of topics selected, while also highlighting constraints related to timeliness, adaptability, and limited feedback mechanisms that affected usefulness for decision-making in some cases. Thirty-seven (37) out of 44 respondents (84.1%) reported that the NRF helped address priority evidence gaps related to nutrition and food systems, and a large majority indicated that NRF outputs influenced their work. These responses suggest that topic selection and problem identification were widely perceived as relevant, even where operational constraints limited immediate uptake.

Overall, the NRF's design strongly reflected stakeholder priorities through its demand-driven model and alignment with EU external action frameworks. Relevance was particularly evident at the point of demand articulation, where assignments responded to clearly identified needs. However, operational constraints, notably administrative rigidity, inconsistent opportunities for stakeholder feedback and engagement during assignments, and misalignment with policy decision cycles, reduced the practical usefulness of some outputs. As a result, while problem alignment was generally strong, operational responsiveness was variable. Relevance was therefore highest in contexts where outputs were delivered within active decision windows and where engagement extended beyond initial scoping to iterative dialogue. This pattern is reflected in the evidence map analysis, where most documented outputs are framed primarily against relevance criteria, with fewer explicitly articulating impact or efficiency dimensions. This suggests that assignments were consistently

positioned in relation to identified evidence gaps and stakeholder priorities.

Coherence

Evaluation Question 2: To what extent did the NRF project add value to and was complementary, harmonised, and coordinated with other EU interventions on nutrition?

The NRF demonstrated generally strong conceptual complementarity with other EU-funded initiatives and global evidence platforms, particularly in its positioning as a demand-driven research and MEL support mechanism. However, operational coherence was uneven across work packages and partnerships. While coordination frameworks existed and were effective in some contexts, internal silos and variable institutionalisation of collaboration limited the facility's ability to consistently operate as an integrated, system-level actor.

1. Coordination and complementarity (external coherence). The NRF sought to coordinate with initiatives such as C4N and Knowledge for Nutrition (K4N), and in several cases complementarity was achieved, particularly in areas like M&E frameworks. Survey data reinforce this perception: 40 of 44 respondents (90.9%) reported that the NRF was complementary or highly complementary to other initiatives, and 33 of 44 (75%) felt it strengthened coordination across actors.

For instance, collaborations facilitated by the NRF moved towards standardised M&E practices across various nutrition initiatives. In Kenya, engagement through established national nutrition forums enabled coordination with UNICEF, WFP, and government stakeholders which led to NRF-supported findings being used to inform follow-on activities commissioned by other actors. Similarly, the value chain study aligned conceptually with EU-level food systems debates and complemented existing analytical initiatives. However, significant challenges persisted due to the fragmentation in communication and coordination, particularly with C4N, which led to bottlenecks and occasions where collaborative efforts did not fully capitalise on available expertise. Coordination was often dependent on personal relationships rather than institutionalised mechanisms. Several stakeholders noted that collaboration with parallel EU-funded mechanisms was reactive rather than strategically structured, limiting consistency across contexts. While 31 of 44 survey respondents (70.5%) indicated that the NRF helped avoid duplication, interviews highlighted occasional overlap in mandates or outputs, particularly where roles between platforms were not clearly delineated. This suggests that complementarity was generally achieved in principle but not always fully operationalised in practice.

2. Internal coherence and functioning of the WP1–WP4 chain. The NRF's design envisaged a coherent flow from demand articulation (WP1) to research generation (WP2), knowledge brokering (WP3), and MEL strengthening (WP4). Conceptually, this structure provides a clear pathway from evidence identification to use. However, evidence indicates that in practice, work packages sometimes operated in parallel rather than as an integrated sequence. In Uzbekistan, strong technical support under WP4 enabled survey implementation and capacity building but limited structured linkage to dissemination and policy engagement pathways constrained downstream use. In the value chain study, robust analytical outputs under WP2 were accompanied by a range of dissemination and engagement activities, including mid-course briefings with Member States, a workshop in Ghent, post-study webinars, presentations at the ANH Academy conference, and policy briefs tailored to decision-makers. Engagement was primarily concentrated among a limited group of EU stakeholders, notably Belgium and technical actors involved in commissioning. However, while these activities supported policy dialogue and conceptual uptake, they did not extend widely across Member States nor consistently translate into operational tools or practitioner-facing guidance, reflecting a weaker connection between research and brokering functions. This suggests that dissemination was active, but the connection between research outputs and practical application remained less developed. These patterns suggest that while the overall model was coherent by design, implementation sometimes emphasised sequential delivery of work packages rather than full integration across the chain, reducing the catalytic potential of the full WP chain.

3. Uptake of Mid-Term Review (MTR) recommendations. The 2022 MTR identified areas for improvement,

including stronger integration across work packages and enhanced communication mechanisms. While some internal adjustments were made, stakeholders reported that implementation of these recommendations was partial. Persistent concerns about internal silos and coordination challenges suggest that structural constraints limited the extent to which MTR insights were fully operationalised. This MTR recommendation (improve cross-WP integration and reduce silo effects) appears only partially addressed. Informal coordination improved, but structural integration remained limited. Overall, the NRF demonstrated strong conceptual coherence and was widely perceived as complementary within the EU nutrition evidence ecosystem. In particular, the MTR recommendations to strengthen cross-work-package integration, enhance systematic communication mechanisms, and improve timeliness were only partially operationalised. While internal adjustments were made, structural coordination challenges and delays persisted into later implementation phases.

External coherence was most visible at the level of individual assignments and policy dialogues, where collaboration and alignment were often effective. However, system-level coherence was more variable. Internal WP silos, reliance on informal coordination mechanisms, and partial uptake of MTR recommendations constrained the facility's ability to consistently function as a fully integrated mechanism. Coherence was therefore strongest at the level of relationships and individual activities, and weaker at the structural and institutional level. The relatively limited number of documents explicitly coded under coherence criteria in the evidence map suggests that coordination and complementarity were often operational rather than formally articulated dimensions of assignments.

Effectiveness

Evaluation Question 3: To what extent has the NRF achieved its objectives?

Overall, the NRF was effective in generating technically credible evidence, strengthening MEL systems, and supporting episodic improvements in science–policy dialogue. Effectiveness was strongest at the level of organisational practice and technical capacity, and more variable in achieving sustained policy-level influence. Survey data reinforce this assessment: 83% of respondents reported that NRF outputs influenced their work, and a similarly high proportion indicated that the facility addressed priority evidence gaps. However, the depth and durability of influence varied across contexts and work packages. The evidence map further indicates that formal documentation of uptake is limited, with most assignments coded as having no explicit uptake evidence within official deliverables.

Result 1: Strengthening the Science–Policy Interface

1. Improved Collaboration. Across interviews and tracer cases, the NRF facilitated engagement between researchers and policy actors through consultations, workshops, and structured dialogue. In Kenya, engagement through existing national coordination forums supported interaction between research institutions, ministries, and development partners. Stakeholders emphasised that in-person engagement and iterative dialogue were important in fostering trust and enabling evidence exchange. However, sustained collaboration beyond the lifespan of specific assignments was less consistent, suggesting that relationship-building was often activity-bound rather than institutionalised.

2. Uptake of Evidence. Evidence of uptake varied across cases. Direct evidence uptake by policymakers was noted, particularly where outputs aligned with urgent decision-making needs. In Kenya, NRF-supported research contributed to follow-on activities, including a UNICEF-commissioned national survey on school meals and ongoing work to develop menu guidelines. The African Population and Health Research Centre (APHRC) and Institut de Recherche pour le Développement (IRD) applied NRF-developed methodologies in subsequent research proposals and projects. These examples demonstrate instrumental and catalytic use of outputs. In contrast, in Uzbekistan, while the survey design and data collection were successfully implemented at scale, analysis and dissemination delays have limited immediate policy use. Use is anticipated but not yet fully realised. In the value chains study, uptake was primarily conceptual. Informants described the framework as influencing internal policy thinking and serving as a reference tool for assessing nutrition sensitivity in value chains. However, translation into operational programming or country-level interventions was limited within

the NRF timeframe. These cases suggest that uptake was strongest where outputs aligned with active policy or programming windows and where implementing partners maintained engagement beyond report delivery.

3. Brokerage Effectiveness. Brokerage activities were undertaken (consultations, webinars, debriefings). However, structured post-delivery follow-up and systematic use-tracking were not consistently embedded within the design. Brokerage and sustained uptake were not the sole responsibility of the NRF. Influence pathways depended on shared engagement among INTPA services, implementing partners, EU Delegations, and national policy stakeholders. The extent to which evidence informed policy processes was therefore shaped by the interaction between NRF outputs and these broader institutional actors. The NRF's brokering role was uneven. Where dissemination and engagement were embedded into the assignment design, such as workshops in Kenya or EU-level policy discussions in the value chain case, brokerage was more visible. However, several informants noted that dissemination often relied heavily on implementing partners rather than a structured NRF-led brokering strategy. In cases such as Uzbekistan, limited resourcing for post-data collection dissemination reduced opportunities to translate evidence into policy dialogue. Stakeholders frequently emphasised that effective brokering requires sustained interaction, simplified communication products, and alignment with decision cycles, conditions that were not uniformly met. Tracer cases suggest that brokerage was strongest where outputs were explicitly designed for policy engagement (e.g. value chains at EU level), and weaker where dissemination and translation were not systematically supported. As articulated by a key informant, the NRF was "not the fastest structure to respond to demands," indicating a systemic inhibition to its brokerage role.

4. Timing Alignment. Timing emerged consistently across interviews as a determinant of effectiveness. In several assignments, research and validation processes extended beyond initial timelines, reducing the likelihood of influencing live decision processes. In Uzbekistan, delays were not only the result of technical challenges in digital data collection, but also reflected broader operational and coordination constraints, including the expansion of scope, complexity of managing a large-scale nationally representative survey, and the need for partial data re-collection following early implementation issues. These factors compounded to delay analysis and dissemination, highlighting that timing challenges were linked to how activities were designed and managed, rather than purely technical issues. In other cases, stakeholders described outputs arriving after key planning windows, limiting instrumental uptake. However, delays were not universal. In Kenya, stakeholders indicated that no-cost extensions mitigated potential disruption and did not significantly undermine perceived usefulness. These variations suggest that timing constraints were systemic but not determinative in all contexts.

5. Dissemination Effectiveness. Dissemination approaches were not consistently effective in translating evidence for decision-makers, leading to challenges in ensuring that high-quality evidence reached its intended audience. While multiple output formats were often produced, including policy briefs, webinars, and presentations, informants noted that core analytical outputs were sometimes dense and not fully tailored to decision-makers' needs. In the value chains case, simplified materials did not fully bridge the gap between conceptual analysis and operational guidance. In Uzbekistan, dissemination had not yet occurred at scale due to ongoing analysis. Where communication was embedded within existing platforms, such as Kenya's national nutrition forums, uptake pathways were stronger. This suggests that effectiveness was enhanced when dissemination was integrated into established coordination structures. Reports emphasised the need for simpler, more actionable summaries to enhance uptake and stakeholders stressed the need for the NRF to produce "catchy, short videos" to highlight main messages, revealing a gap in how evidence was framed for policy uptake.

Result 2: Strengthened MEL Systems

1. Capacity Strengthening. Evidence of effectiveness is strongest in relation to MEL strengthening. In Uzbekistan, the NRF supported the design and implementation of a large-scale nationally representative survey, significantly enhancing national technical capacity in survey methodology and data systems. Informants described this as a substantial institutional capability gain. Similarly, in Madagascar, stakeholders

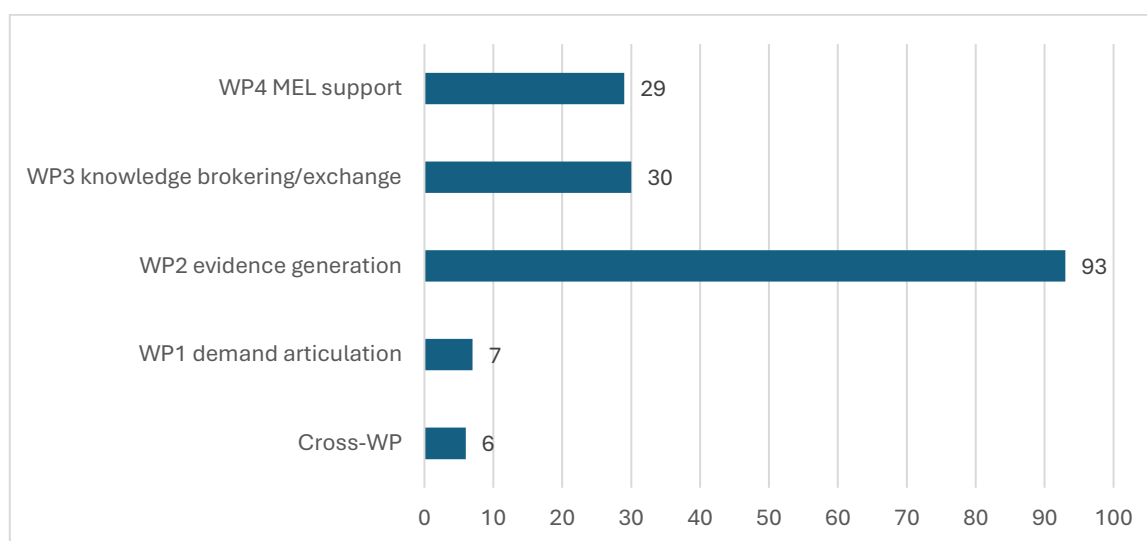
reported improved technical competencies in evaluation design and data analysis. Survey responses also indicate that respondents perceived tangible improvements in analytical and monitoring practices following NRF engagement.

2. Procedural and Organisational Influence. While the NRF made notable advancements in procedural changes within MEL systems, the overall influence on high-level policy remained less pronounced. Several tracer cases demonstrate procedural uptake of NRF-supported tools and frameworks. In Kenya, NRF-developed approaches informed follow-on surveys and guideline development. In the value chain study, the framework was used internally as a reference tool for integrating nutrition considerations into analytical processes. Additional examples from MEL assignments, such as the SANOI and AFAFI centre work, indicate procedural and organisational influence through the development of monitoring tools, gender-sensitive indicators, and evaluative research approaches that informed programme monitoring practices. These examples indicate moderate to strong effectiveness at organisational and procedural levels.

3. Limits to Policy-Level Influence. Evidence of formal policy change directly attributable to NRF outputs is more limited. In most cases, NRF contributions formed part of broader policy ecosystems involving multiple actors. Where outputs were timely and embedded in dialogue processes, influence was stronger; where engagement ended at report delivery, translation into policy was less evident. Overall, effectiveness was strongest at the level of technical practice, capacity building, and conceptual reframing, and more variable in driving sustained system-level policy change. Across the portfolio, the NRF was most effective in strengthening technical practices, enhancing MEL capacities, and supporting improvements in the quality of evidence used in programming. Survey responses indicate that a substantial majority of stakeholders perceived NRF outputs as influential in their work, and tracer cases demonstrate concrete examples of procedural and organisational uptake, including strengthened survey systems, evaluation tools, and analytical frameworks. Effectiveness was particularly strong where engagement extended beyond report production to include training, dialogue, or integration into existing coordination platforms.

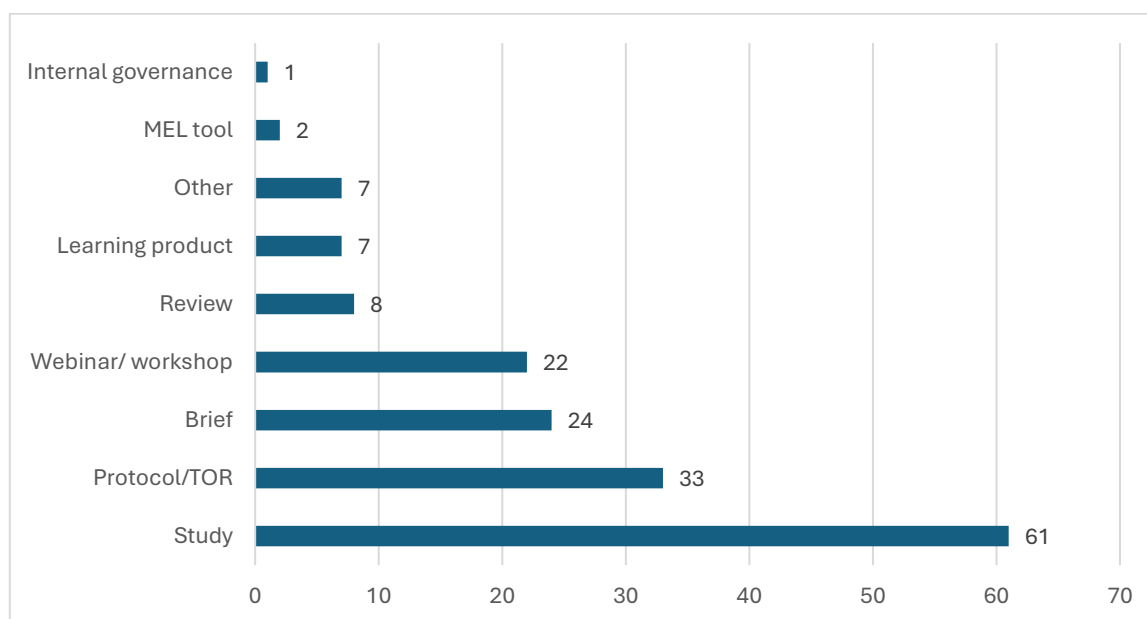
However, effectiveness was more variable in achieving sustained policy-level influence. In several cases, outputs contributed to conceptual reframing and informed internal debates, but translation into formal policy change was limited and context dependent. Timing misalignment, limited resourcing for dissemination and follow-up, and uneven integration across work packages constrained the facility's ability to consistently convert technical outputs into durable system-level change. Overall, the NRF's effectiveness was strongest at organisational and technical levels, and more mixed in producing sustained policy transformation.

Figure 3. Portfolio-Level Outputs by Work Packages



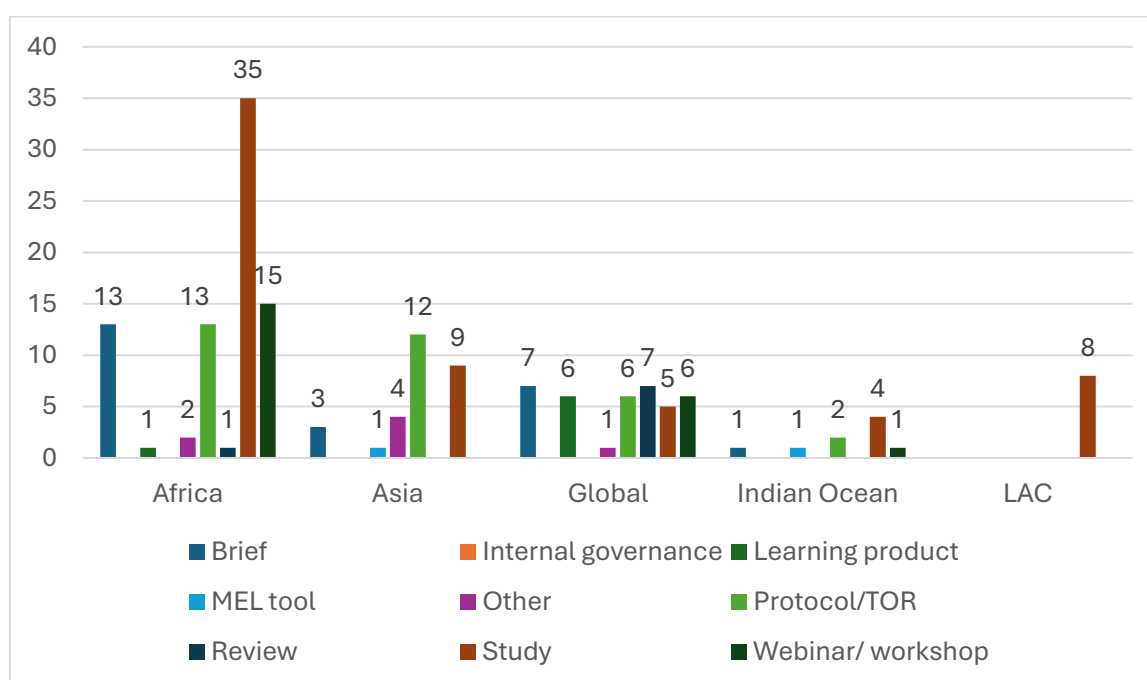
Note: Numbers indicate the number of interviewees who referenced each theme.

Figure 4. Portfolio-Level Outputs by Type



Note: Numbers indicate the total number of NRF outputs produced in each category across the portfolio.

Figure 5. Portfolio-Level Outputs by Region



Note: Numbers indicate the number of NRF outputs by country/region. LAC = Latin America and the Caribbean.

Across the portfolio, the NRF produced 61 study documents, 33 Protocols/TORs, 24 Policy/evidence briefs, 22 Webinars and workshops, 8 systematic/scoping reviews, 7 learning products, 2 MEL tools, and an assortment of miscellaneous products classified as other. Generally, the Evidence Map shows a portfolio dominated by WP2 evidence-generation outputs, with smaller but still significant clusters of WP3 knowledge-brokering/learning products and WP4 MEL-support tools, and only a limited number of WP1 demand-articulation or explicitly cross-WP outputs. In terms of product type, studies and protocols/TORs account for the largest share of outputs, complemented by briefs, webinars/workshops and a small set of learning products, MEL tools and internal governance documents, indicating that most NRF work has centred on generating and packaging primary evidence. Geographically, outputs are concentrated in Africa and, to a lesser extent, Asia, with relatively few products originating from the Indian Ocean and LAC regions and a

moderate number of global assignments, suggesting that the facility's documented support has been strongest in African country contexts while providing more selective coverage elsewhere.

Efficiency

Evaluation Question 4: Was NRF efficient in using its resources (e.g. time, money, expertise)?

The NRF's efficiency was shaped by a structural trade-off between technical rigor and operational flexibility. While the facility successfully mobilised high-level expertise and produced technically credible outputs, administrative complexity and procedural rigidity reduced timeliness in several assignments. Efficiency constraints were primarily temporal and procedural rather than financial in nature. The NRF operated under a service-contract modality structured across four work packages (WP1–WP4), with predefined deliverables, reporting requirements, and budget allocations. This modality provided clarity of scope and accountability but also shaped commissioning timelines, amendment procedures, and the sequencing of activities. Efficiency performance should therefore be interpreted within the structural parameters of this contractual framework.

1. Timeliness and Delivery Efficiency. Timeliness emerged consistently across interviews and tracer cases as the most significant efficiency constraint. Several assignments exceeded planned durations. In part, this reflects the complexity of technical delivery; in part, it reflects the procedural requirements associated with the service-contract modality, including formal approval processes for amendments and deliverable validation. In Uzbekistan, expansion of the survey scope and technical challenges in digital data collection required partial re-collection of data, contributing to delays in analysis and dissemination. In other contexts, stakeholders described outputs arriving after key planning windows had passed, reducing opportunities for timely use. However, delays were not universal. In Kenya, while no-cost extensions were required, stakeholders reported that adjustments mitigated disruption and did not fundamentally compromise the quality of outputs. These variations suggest that efficiency challenges were systemic but not uniform across workstreams.

2. Administrative Burden and Transaction Costs. Multiple informants described the administrative and reporting requirements associated with NRF contracts as heavy relative to budget size and timeline. In the Kenya case, implementing partners described a substantial administrative and reporting burden relative to the size and duration of the contract. The lead institution reported producing seven reports within approximately 15 months and navigating extensive justification requirements for staffing and budget adjustments. VAT treatment issues and unanticipated administrative demands further reduced available resources. Informants estimated that senior experts provided additional unpaid days of work, alongside PhD-level research support, and absorbed conference and dissemination costs that were not fully covered under the contract. They suggested that if full labour and overhead costs were accounted for, the true cost of implementation may have been significantly higher than the contracted value.

While sub-contracting partners reported adequate budgets at their level, the lead institution indicated that administrative transaction costs and in-kind contributions effectively subsidised delivery. This suggests that formal contract values may not fully reflect the real resource intensity of assignments and that administrative burdens were unevenly distributed within consortia arrangements.

Reporting and justification requirements were embedded within the service-contract framework and applied uniformly across assignments. While these requirements supported financial accountability, they also increased transaction costs for implementing partners and shaped the balance between analytical time and administrative compliance.

3. Resource Mobilisation and Technical Quality. Despite procedural constraints, the NRF was generally effective in mobilising specialised expertise through the Agrinatura network and associated research institutions. Informants consistently described outputs as technically rigorous and grounded in strong methodological foundations. In the value chains study, for example, the synthesis of 44 value chain reports represented a substantial analytical effort. Similarly, the Uzbekistan survey involved large-scale nationally representative data collection. These examples indicate that resources were successfully deployed to generate

complex analytical outputs. Efficiency concerns therefore relate less to technical execution and more to administrative processes and alignment with decision timelines. This indicates that efficiency constraints were less about technical capacity and more about delivery processes and alignment with decision timelines.

4. Cost-Effectiveness and Output Usability. In some cases, the relationship between analytical depth and operational usability raised efficiency questions. The value chains study, while conceptually robust, produced outputs that were described as analytically dense and difficult to operationalise. Where outputs required significant interpretation or lacked simplified tools for practitioners, the cost-effectiveness of translating substantial analysis effort into proportional influence was reduced. Similarly, in large-scale studies such as Uzbekistan, expansion of scope increased potential relevance but also introduced complexity and extended timelines. Without commensurate resourcing for analysis and dissemination, the return on investment in data generation was temporarily constrained. Some implementing partners also raised concerns regarding branding and attribution requirements under the service contract modality. In certain outputs, institutional logos and authorship recognition were limited despite substantial technical contributions by research partners. While this reflects standard contractual arrangements, informants noted that limited visibility may reduce incentives for research institutions to invest additional in-kind effort in dissemination and follow-on engagement. This highlights a broader structural feature of the delivery model, where contractual branding norms may not fully align with collaborative knowledge-production dynamics.

Overall, the NRF demonstrated adequate financial management and strong technical resource mobilisation, but operational efficiency was constrained by administrative complexity, reporting burdens, and procedural rigidity. Efficiency was strongest in structured analytical assignments with clearly defined scopes, and weaker in contexts requiring adaptive engagement or rapid response. The facility's service-contract modality supported technical quality but limited agility, creating a structural tension between rigor and responsiveness. The limited number of assignments explicitly framed under efficiency criteria in the evidence map suggests that efficiency considerations were more visible in stakeholder experience than in formal reporting structures. This suggests that efficiency constraints were driven less by the level of resources available and more by how those resources were structured, managed, and sequenced across the research-to-use pathway.

Impact

Evaluation Question 5: What was the impact of NRF interventions on the science-policy dialogue and nutrition policies and programs?

The NRF's impact is most evident at the level of intermediate and systemic change, including strengthened analytical capacity, improved evidence quality in programming discussions, and shifts in conceptual framing, rather than in directly attributable policy transformation or measurable nutrition outcomes. Evidence from tracer cases and stakeholder interviews indicates that these effects were most pronounced where NRF support was embedded within ongoing institutional processes or followed by additional investment. As a research and advisory facility, its influence operated primarily through catalytic and enabling pathways within broader policy ecosystems. The NRF's ToC assumed that demand-driven, high-quality evidence would contribute to improved decision-making in nutrition programming. However, progression from analytical output to formal policy adoption depended on contextual assumptions beyond the facility's direct control, including institutional absorption capacity, political timing, continuity of engagement, and the presence of policy windows.

1. Contributions to Programmatic and Institutional Change. Several tracer cases demonstrate tangible downstream effects beyond immediate technical outputs. In Kenya, NRF-supported research informed follow-on activities, including a UNICEF-commissioned national survey on school meals and the development of menu and guideline processes. The methodologies developed under the NRF were subsequently applied in additional research proposals and projects by implementing partners. These examples suggest catalytic impact, where NRF outputs contributed to subsequent investment and programme refinement. In Uzbekistan, the NRF enabled the design and implementation of a large-scale nationally representative nutrition survey, representing a significant expansion in the country's nutrition information base. While policy uptake of

findings remains in progress, the creation of a comprehensive dataset and strengthened technical capacity constitute structural contributions to the national evidence ecosystem. However, operational and coordination challenges during implementation delayed analysis and dissemination, slowing the translation of these contributions into policy influence. These examples indicate that NRF-supported activities contributed to strengthening systems and informing programme design, even where direct policy change is not yet observable.

2. Conceptual and Agenda-Setting Influence. In several cases, NRF outputs contributed to reframing how nutrition challenges were understood. The value chains study challenged prevailing assumptions that income and productivity gains automatically translate into improved nutrition outcomes. Informants described the framework as influencing internal policy discussions and providing a reference point for integrating nutrition considerations into value chain analysis. While this influence was primarily conceptual, such reframing represents a meaningful form of impact within policy processes, particularly in shaping how problems are defined and what types of solutions are considered. Similarly, in Uzbekistan, the introduction of socio-economic determinants into nutrition analysis broadened the framing of nutrition beyond food safety, contributing to a more systems-oriented understanding of the issue. Conceptual shifts of this nature are difficult to quantify but are consistent with the types of impact expected from evidence-generation facilities.

3. Strengthening the Science–Policy Interface. The NRF contributed to strengthening dialogue platforms and interactions between researchers and policymakers. In contexts such as Kenya, integration within established coordination forums enabled sustained engagement between ministries, development partners, and research institutions. Survey responses indicate that a large majority of stakeholders perceived NRF outputs as influencing their work, suggesting that evidence was entering decision spaces. However, the durability of these interactions varied. In several cases, engagement was closely tied to specific assignments rather than institutionalised processes. This suggests that while the NRF was effective in convening and facilitating dialogue, it was less successful in embedding sustained science–policy interfaces beyond the lifespan of individual activities. As such, impact on the science–policy interface appears stronger at the level of episodic dialogue than long-term structural transformation.

4. Limits to Policy-Level and Outcome-Level Impact. Evidence of formal policy change directly attributable to NRF outputs is limited. In most contexts, policy decisions were shaped by multiple actors and influences, and NRF contributions formed one element within broader processes. Timing misalignment, limited follow-on engagement, and administrative constraints reduced opportunities for sustained policy embedding. These constraints limited the extent to which NRF-generated evidence could be embedded within ongoing policy processes, reducing continuity from evidence generation to decision-making. In Uzbekistan, delays in data analysis and dissemination have postponed potential policy use. In the value chain case, conceptual influence did not consistently translate into operational programming shifts. Given the advisory nature of the facility and the relatively short timeframe of several assignments, expectations of measurable nutrition outcome changes would not be realistic. Impact pathways are inherently indirect and often require longer time horizons to materialise fully.

5. Strength of Contribution. Drawing on portfolio-level evidence from the evidence map and document review, complemented by survey responses and illustrated through tracer case analysis, the strength of the NRF’s contribution to observed changes can be characterised as follows:

- **Moderate to strong for organisational and procedural change** (e.g., survey systems, MEL frameworks, methodological adoption)
- **Moderate for conceptual and agenda-setting influence** (e.g., reframing of nutrition-sensitive value chains and analytical approaches)
- **Limited or still emerging** for formal policy change and downstream outcome impact, reflecting both the advisory nature of the facility and the time horizons required for policy processes

This distribution reflects a pattern in which NRF contributions were strongest where activities directly engaged implementing institutions, and weaker where influence depended on broader system-level uptake or downstream policy processes. In several cases, stakeholders explicitly noted that activities may eventually influence policy processes once dissemination and analysis are completed, indicating that some impact pathways remain open. Consistent with this assessment, the evidence map identifies only a small number of outputs explicitly coded under impact criteria, reinforcing that formal documentation of system-level change is limited.

It is also important to note that several NRF-supported activities were completed or finalised relatively recently within the evaluation period, and in some cases dissemination and analysis processes were still ongoing. Given the indirect and iterative nature of research-to-policy pathways, particularly in complex nutrition systems, some impacts may materialise over a longer time horizon than captured within this evaluation. As such, the absence of observable policy-level change in certain cases should not be interpreted as absence of influence, but rather as indicative of the time-lag inherent in evidence-informed policy processes, particularly for large-scale or system-oriented interventions.

Overall, the NRF's impact is best understood as catalytic and systemic rather than transformative. It contributed to strengthening national evidence systems, enhancing analytical quality, and influencing conceptual and programmatic debates. However, translation of these contributions into sustained policy and programmatic change was uneven and often dependent on factors beyond the scope of NRF support, including timing, follow-on resourcing, and institutional ownership. Its strongest impacts are visible in institutional capacity and procedural practice, with more limited evidence of direct policy transformation within the evaluation period. Given the facility's mandate and modality, this pattern is consistent with expected pathways of influence for research and advisory mechanisms operating within complex policy environments.

Sustainability

Evaluation Question 6: What is the likelihood that NRF outputs are utilised in future research, M&E plans, programmes and policies?

The sustainability of NRF-supported results varies by type of output and by the extent to which activities were embedded within institutional systems. Evidence from tracer cases and stakeholder interviews indicates that sustainability is uneven and largely dependent on institutional embedding rather than the intrinsic quality of outputs. Sustainability prospects are strongest where technical capacity was strengthened and tools were integrated into routine processes, and more uncertain where outputs remained stand-alone analytical products or where dissemination and follow-up engagement were limited.

1. Institutionalisation of Tools and Systems. Several tracer cases demonstrate conditions conducive to sustainability. In Uzbekistan, the NRF supported the development of national survey protocols and strengthened technical capacity for nutrition data collection. Although analysis and dissemination are still underway, the enhanced technical capability within national institutions represents a structural gain likely to persist beyond the life of the project. Sustainability in this case depends on continued use of the dataset and integration of findings into national monitoring systems. However, delays in analysis and dissemination, linked in part to operational and coordination challenges during implementation may affect the timeliness of this integration and reduce immediate sustainability prospects. In Kenya, NRF-supported methodologies were applied in follow-on research and informed guideline development processes. The fact that implementing institutions adapted and reused methodological approaches suggests embedded procedural learning rather than one-off output use, increasing the likelihood that practices will persist beyond the life of the original activity. These examples indicate that sustainability is strongest where activities resulted in strengthened institutional capacity and replicable tools.

2. Continuation of Networks and Relationships. The NRF facilitated connections between EU actors, research institutions, and national stakeholders. In several contexts, particularly Kenya, these engagements were embedded within existing coordination platforms, increasing the likelihood that relationships will continue

independently of the facility, but it is worth noting that there was no mention of EU participation in national-level activities. However, in cases where engagement was closely tied to a specific assignment, relationships were less formalised. In the absence of structured follow-on mechanisms or institutional anchoring, these connections are unlikely to be sustained systematically. Without dedicated mechanisms for continued brokerage or follow-up, some science–policy interactions may revert to pre-existing patterns.

3. Risk Factors Affecting Sustainability. Several factors may limit sustained use of NRF-supported outputs:

- Limited dissemination resourcing. In Uzbekistan, delays in analysis and dissemination have postponed integration into policy processes, reducing the likelihood of near-term use and institutional uptake.
- Administrative and contractual rigidity. Heavy reporting burdens and limited flexibility may reduce incentives for implementing partners to invest additional in-kind engagement beyond contractual requirements, limiting continued engagement after formal activity completion.
- institutional ownership gaps. In some contexts, ownership of data and responsibility for use were unevenly distributed across ministries. Where outputs were not fully institutionalised within formal procedures, sustainability remains contingent on continued championing by individual actors, making it more vulnerable to disruption.

4. Conceptual and Analytical Legacy. In addition to procedural sustainability, several activities contributed to longer-term analytical shifts. The value chains framework, for example, continues to inform internal discussions on nutrition-sensitive food systems. Although operational uptake was limited, conceptual reframing may influence future analytical and programming approaches, representing a form of longer-term, indirect sustainability. Similarly, strengthened MEL practices and exposure to evidence-informed methodologies may shape institutional norms over time, even where immediate policy change is not visible.

5. Transferable Lessons for Future Mechanisms. While the NRF itself will not continue, several elements of its approach demonstrate sustainability potential in transferable form:

- Demand-driven topic selection
- Embedded engagement within national coordination platforms
- Integration of capacity strengthening alongside research generation
- Multi-country analytical synthesis to inform EU-level dialogue

However, evidence that these approaches translated into sustained system-level change is limited. In most cases, these elements were applied at the level of individual assignments rather than institutionalised across systems or maintained beyond the life of the activity. As such, the NRF's more durable contributions appear to lie in demonstrating potentially valuable approaches, rather than embedding them in ways that ensured continuity. Sustainability therefore lies not only in the persistence of specific outputs or approaches themselves, but also in the institutional and methodological practices introduced with stronger institutional anchoring and follow-through.

Overall, sustainability prospects are moderate and uneven across the portfolio. Results are most likely to endure where activities strengthened institutional capacity, embedded tools within formal systems, or generated replicable methodologies. Sustainability is less certain where outputs were delivered without structured follow-up, where dissemination was incomplete, or where institutional ownership remains diffuse. In several cases, the absence of continued engagement beyond initial delivery limited the transition from short-term outputs to sustained use. Given the advisory and catalytic nature of the facility, sustained impact depends primarily on the degree of institutional embedding achieved during implementation.

Evaluation Question 7: To what extent did the NRF add benefits to what would have resulted from EU Member States', other donors', and the country/region intervention only?
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The EU added value of the NRF lies primarily in its ability to mobilise transnational expertise, provide a neutral convening platform across multiple stakeholders, and address cross-country and cross-sectoral evidence gaps that would have been unlikely to be addressed at the same scale, speed, or level of coordination through national or bilateral mechanisms alone. However, added value varied by context and was more visible at EU and systemic levels than in certain country-specific assignments.

1. Mobilisation of European and International Expertise. Through the Agrinatura network and affiliated institutions, the NRF was able to mobilise specialised expertise across disciplines and countries. In the value chain study, for example, the synthesis of 44 VCA4D reports required technical capacity and comparative perspective that would have been difficult to assemble without EU-level coordination. The study contributed to EU-level policy dialogue on nutrition-sensitive food systems, reflecting the facility's capacity to operate across geographic and institutional boundaries. Similarly, in Uzbekistan, the NRF enabled the design and implementation of a large-scale nationally representative survey. Informants indicated that such a complex undertaking would likely not have occurred in its current form or at comparable scale without EU funding and coordination support.

2. Convening Power and Neutral Platform. In several contexts, the NRF benefitted from the perceived neutrality and legitimacy associated with EU-supported mechanisms. In Uzbekistan, the activity originated from a request by the EU Delegation and facilitated collaboration among multiple national and international actors. The EU's position as a development partner enabled engagement across ministries and institutions. At EU level, the NRF contributed to internal policy debates and facilitated cross-country exchange of analytical insights. The ability to convene stakeholders around shared evidence questions represents a distinct added value relative to isolated national research efforts. However, in Kenya, informants suggested that while NRF funding expedited research processes, similar work may eventually have occurred through other channels. In this case, EU added value appears to have been primarily catalytic (accelerating and financing) rather than uniquely enabling, highlighting variation in the degree of additionality across contexts.

3. Cross-Country and Comparative Perspective. The NRF's multi-country portfolio allowed for comparative learning and synthesis beyond individual country contexts. The value chains study drew on evidence from 28 countries, enabling broader reflection on nutrition-sensitive agricultural systems. This comparative dimension represents a level of scale and synthesis not typically achievable through national programming alone and enabled the generation of insights that informed EU-level policy dialogue beyond individual country contexts. Similarly, cross-regional consultations that informed topic selection facilitated exchange of priorities across Africa and beyond. This approach contributed to identifying evidence gaps with regional relevance rather than purely national scope.

4. Filling Strategic Evidence Gaps. Survey respondents widely perceived the NRF as addressing priority evidence gaps. In several instances, activities focused on areas that were underexplored or insufficiently integrated within existing policy frameworks, such as linking value chain analysis to nutrition outcomes or strengthening national nutrition data systems. This suggests that EU support enabled work that complemented rather than duplicated other initiatives, particularly in areas requiring coordination across sectors, disciplines, and governance levels.

5. Limits to EU Added Value. EU added value was less pronounced where activities were primarily embedded within strong national systems with established research capacities. In Kenya, for example, existing national coordination platforms and institutional expertise were already well developed. While EU funding accelerated implementation and supported methodological refinement, stakeholders indicated that similar research might have proceeded eventually without NRF support, suggesting lower additionality in contexts with strong pre-existing capacity. Additionally, administrative rigidity and branding requirements associated with the service-

contract modality occasionally limited visibility for implementing partners and may have affected incentives for extended engagement. These structural features moderated, but did not negate, EU added value. This indicates that EU added value was context-dependent and strongest where coordination gaps or capacity constraints were more pronounced. In addition, some stakeholders raised concerns regarding branding and institutional visibility under the service contract modality. While national institutions were substantively engaged in several country-level assignments, limited co-branding and visibility of partner-country institutions led to perceptions of a predominantly institutional positioning in branding and visibility of the facility. Although this did not undermine technical collaboration, it suggests scope for strengthening institutional co-ownership and mutual visibility in future mechanisms.

Overall, the EU added value of the NRF was strongest in its capacity to mobilise transnational expertise, support comparative and cross-country analysis, and catalyse complex activities that required coordination beyond national capacities. Added value was more visible at EU and systemic levels than in all country-level assignments, where catalytic acceleration rather than unique enablement was sometimes the primary contribution. This suggests that the NRF's additionality lies less in replacing existing national efforts and more in enhancing scale, coordination, and analytical coherence across contexts. The facility's role in convening stakeholders, addressing strategic evidence gaps, and strengthening analytical coherence across contexts constitutes its most distinct added value within the nutrition evidence ecosystem.

3.4. Cross-Cutting Issues (GESI, Climate, Rights-Based Approach)

Evaluation Question 8: How effectively has the NRF integrated gender, equity, climate and rights-based approaches?

Integration of cross-cutting issues across the NRF portfolio is uneven and varies in depth. Evidence indicates that GESI considerations are more consistently reflected in analytical outputs than climate and rights-based approaches. However, across themes, integration is generally stronger at the level of analytical framing than in methodological design, monitoring systems, or sustained policy influence.

1. Analytical Integration Across Outputs. The evidence map indicates that a majority of WP2 and WP3 outputs incorporate gender and equity dimensions within analytical framing, often through disaggregation of findings or explicit reference to disparities. In contrast, climate and rights-based considerations appear less frequently and are more selectively embedded in outputs. This pattern is consistent with KIIs, where respondents frequently noted that gender and equity were “expected” components of nutrition analysis and were routinely included in background framing and findings sections. Climate and rights-based lenses, however, were described as emerging considerations that were not yet systematically mainstreamed. Tracer cases reinforce this distinction. In Lao PDR, participatory methodologies enabled the inclusion of community-level perspectives on dietary practices and barriers, reflecting relatively strong equity integration in analytical design. In Uzbekistan, analysis incorporated socio-economic determinants of nutrition, broadening the framing beyond food safety and production. These examples demonstrate substantive attention to equity in problem diagnosis. By contrast, in the value chain study, climate and rights-based themes were referenced in framing discussions but were not consistently operationalised through dedicated analytical modules or structured recommendations.

2. Integration in Study Design and Methodology. While cross-cutting issues are frequently referenced in analytical sections, there is more limited evidence that they consistently shaped research questions, sampling strategies, theory of change development, or methodological tools. Stakeholders suggest that integration was often guided by general institutional expectations rather than explicit cross-cutting design frameworks. In several assignments, gender and equity considerations were incorporated through disaggregation of data or inclusion of vulnerable groups in consultations, but less frequently through dedicated analytical hypotheses or scenario modelling. Climate and rights-based approaches were less systematically embedded in methodological design. Where mentioned, they were more likely to appear in narrative framing than in operational components such as indicators, modelling frameworks, or implementation guidance. This

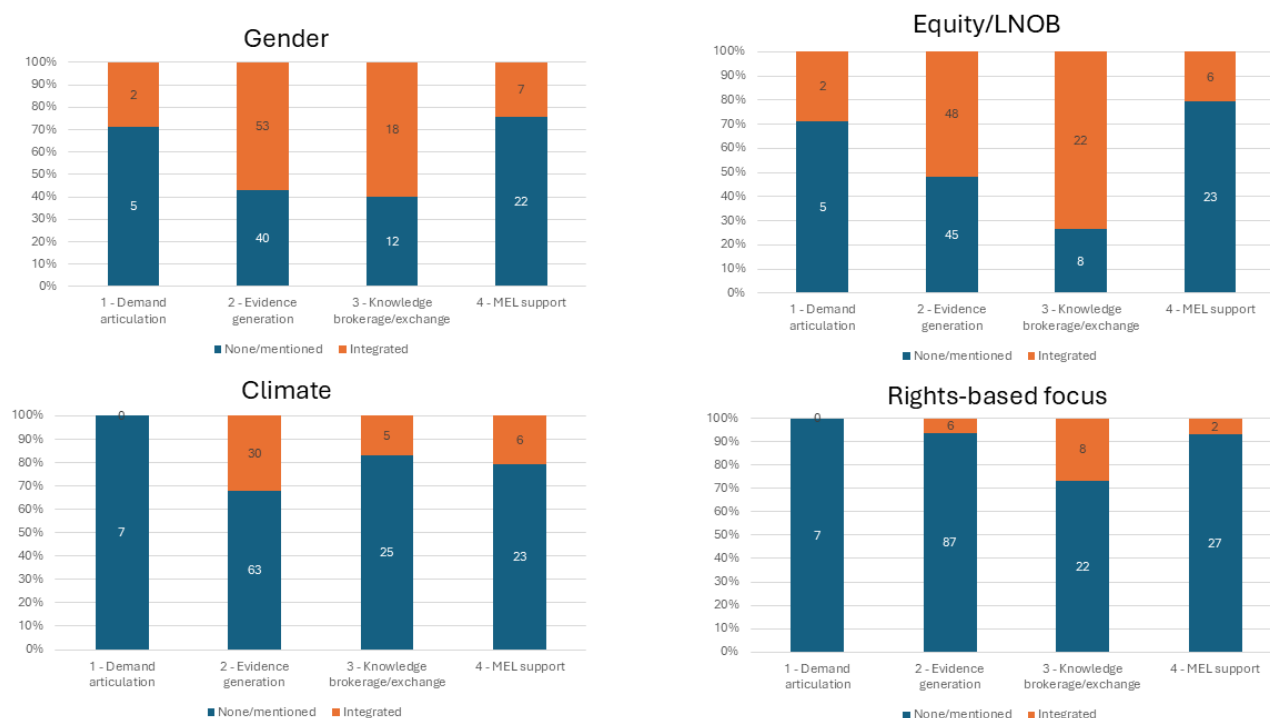
indicates partial mainstreaming rather than full structural integration.

3. Integration within MEL and Monitoring Systems. Evidence from multiple sources, including assignment documentation, tracer case analysis, KIIs, and survey responses suggests varying interpretations of the extent to which cross-cutting themes were embedded in NRF-supported MEL systems. Assignment documentation for certain activities, such as the AFAFI and SANOI programmes, demonstrates that gender indicators and dedicated analytical tools (e.g., Minimum Dietary Diversity for Women and women’s empowerment indicators) were incorporated within monitoring and evaluation frameworks, including baseline–endline evaluation designs. However, KIIs and survey responses more frequently highlighted improvements in analytical quality and technical monitoring capacity rather than the systematic integration of cross-cutting indicators within ongoing monitoring systems. In Uzbekistan, for example, MEL strengthening focused primarily on technical robustness and survey implementation, with less emphasis on embedding longitudinal tracking of cross-cutting dimensions. Taken together, the triangulated evidence suggests that cross-cutting themes were incorporated in specific assignments and analytical stages but were not consistently institutionalised across NRF monitoring structures.

4. Translation into Programmatic and Policy Influence. Evidence of downstream influence is strongest for equity-related considerations. In Kenya, findings on disparities in school food environments informed follow-on research and contributed to development of national school meal guidelines. KIIs indicate that equity-focused findings were directly referenced in discussions on targeting and standards, suggesting movement beyond analysis into programmatic refinement. In contrast, there is limited evidence from tracer cases, or the evidence map that climate or rights-based analyses translated into concrete policy shifts. These dimensions were more frequently referenced descriptively than operationalised into implementation guidance or policy instruments. Several stakeholders noted that while cross-cutting considerations were acknowledged, they were not always central drivers of assignment design or downstream recommendations.

The evidence map further supports these patterns. While many outputs are coded as integrating GESI at some level, relatively few are coded under impact or policy uptake categories in relation to cross-cutting themes. This suggests that integration is visible in documentation but less frequently linked to demonstrable downstream change. Overall, cross-cutting issues were partially and unevenly integrated across the NRF portfolio. Gender and equity considerations were more consistently incorporated into analytical framing and, in some cases, informed programmatic refinement. Climate and rights-based approaches were integrated more selectively and were less systematically operationalised. Across data sources, integration appears strongest at the level of analysis and diagnostic framing, and weaker in methodological design, institutionalised monitoring, and policy-level embedding. While progress is evident in mainstreaming equity considerations, deeper structural integration of climate and rights-based approaches would require more explicit incorporation into research design, indicator systems, and implementation guidance pathways.

Figure 6. Depth of cross-cutting theme integration by work package



Note: Numbers indicate the number of coded references to each theme.

3.5. Tracer Case Synthesis

Purpose of Tracer Case Analysis. Four tracer cases were selected to examine how NRF-supported activities functioned in practice and to assess pathways from demand articulation to evidence generation, dissemination, and use. The cases were chosen to reflect diversity in geography, thematic focus, work package configuration, and origin of demand:

- Global Nutrition-Sensitive Agri-Food Value Chains (WP2–WP3; Member State request)
- School Nutrition Interventions in Kenya (WP1–WP3; consultation-originated)
- Nutrition-Sensitive Agroecology in Lao PDR (WP1–WP2; consultation-originated)
- Understanding the Nutrition Landscape in Uzbekistan (WP4; EUD request)

Full case analyses are provided in Annex H. This section synthesises cross-case insights that inform the evaluation findings across DAC criteria.

Alignment with Demand and Relevance. Across all four tracer cases, initial topic selection reflected clearly articulated demand. In the Kenya and Lao PDR cases, research topics emerged from structured regional consultations. In Uzbekistan, the activity responded directly to a formal request from the EU Delegation. The global value chain study originated from Member State demand at EU level. This confirms that the NRF's demand-driven architecture functioned as designed at the point of scoping. Stakeholders consistently described topics as timely and relevant when initiated. However, cross-case comparison reveals that relevance over time depended heavily on:

- Alignment with evolving policy cycles
- Timeliness of delivery
- Continued engagement beyond initial scoping

Where outputs were delivered within active decision windows (e.g., Kenya), perceived relevance remained

high. Where analysis or dissemination was delayed (e.g., Uzbekistan), immediate relevance diminished despite strong initial alignment.

Uptake Pathways and Nature of Influence. The tracer cases illustrate three distinct patterns of influence:

1. Catalytic and Programmatic Influence – Kenya

The Kenya case demonstrates the strongest observable uptake pathway. NRF-supported research informed:

- A UNICEF-commissioned follow-on national survey
- Development of national school meals menu guidelines
- Additional research proposals and funded projects

Influence occurred both procedurally (method adoption) and programmatically (informing guideline development). Uptake was facilitated by:

- Embedding research within existing national coordination forums
- Active dissemination through local networks
- Continued engagement by implementing partners beyond contractual obligations

2. Conceptual and Agenda-Setting Influence – Global Value Chains

The value chain study primarily influenced internal EU-level conceptual debates. It challenged assumptions linking productivity gains directly to nutrition outcomes and provided a framework for integrating nutrition into agricultural value chain analysis. While operational uptake at country level was limited, the case demonstrates conceptual and analytical impact at EU level. However, the density of outputs and limited translation into practitioner tools constrained downstream application.

3. System-Building and Data Infrastructure Impact – Uzbekistan

The Uzbekistan case represents strong institutional and systemic contribution. NRF support enabled the design and implementation of a large-scale nationally representative nutrition dataset, strengthening national data systems and technical capacity. At the time of evaluation, policy-level uptake remains limited due to ongoing analysis and incomplete dissemination. This case highlights that large-scale data generation requires sustained post-collection support to realise impact.

4. Localised Procedural Influence – Lao PDR

The Lao PDR case demonstrates strong local-level engagement and procedural change through participatory agroecology interventions. Findings informed community practices and contributed to university curriculum and training materials. However, the village-level focus limited scalability and national-level policy influence, illustrating a trade-off between contextual depth and policy generalisability.

Enablers of Uptake. Cross-case analysis identified several recurring enabling factors:

- **Embedding within existing coordination platforms.** In Kenya, integration into national technical working groups and ministry forums facilitated dissemination and uptake.
- **Clear origin of demand from institutional actors.** Cases initiated by EU Delegations or Member States (Uzbekistan, value chains) demonstrated stronger EU-level engagement pathways.
- **Iterative engagement beyond report delivery.** Where implementing partners proactively continued dissemination (Kenya), uptake pathways strengthened.
- **Practical and adaptable methodologies.** Reusable tools and survey protocols supported sustainability (Kenya, Uzbekistan).

Constraints to Uptake. Several structural constraints were visible across cases:

- **Timing misalignment.** All four tracer cases experienced delays relative to initial planning. Of 18 research activities reviewed portfolio-wide, 17 exceeded planned timelines. Delays were linked to administrative processes, underestimated analytical complexity, and methodological adjustments.
- **Under-resourced dissemination.** Knowledge brokering was uneven. In Kenya, dissemination relied largely on implementing partner initiative. In Uzbekistan, dissemination was pending at time of evaluation. In the value chain case, translation into operational guidance was limited.
- **Administrative rigidity and transaction costs.** In Kenya, substantial in-kind contributions were required to manage reporting and budget constraints. Administrative burden likely reduced resources available for analytical refinement and policy engagement.
- **Scale–Generalisation Trade-Off.** Highly localised studies (Lao PDR) achieved strong contextual relevance but limited national policy traction. Broader conceptual studies (value chains) achieved EU-level dialogue but limited field-level application.

Patterns Across DAC Criteria. The tracer cases reinforce key findings across evaluation criteria:

- **Relevance** was consistently strong at inception but more variable over time depending on timeliness and follow-up.
- **Effectiveness** was strongest at procedural and institutional levels, more limited at formal policy level.
- **Efficiency** challenges were systemic, particularly in timeline management and administrative burden.
- **Impact** was primarily catalytic and ecosystem-strengthening rather than directly transformative.
- **Sustainability** depended heavily on institutional embedding and methodological transfer rather than stand-alone reports.
- **EU Added Value** was most visible in cross-country synthesis and large-scale data mobilisation.

Across tracer cases, collaboration with national research institutions played an important role in strengthening the science–policy interface. In Kenya, the partnership with APHRC facilitated dissemination and follow-on research. Similar dynamics were observed in Uzbekistan through collaboration with the International Strategic Centre for Agri-Food Development (ISCAD) and in Lao PDR through partnerships with the National University of Laos and the National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute (NAFRI). These institutional partnerships strengthened contextual relevance and helped anchor evidence within national research and policy networks.

Implications for Future Mechanisms. The tracer case analysis suggests that the NRF model is most effective when:

- Research is embedded within institutional processes from inception
- Dissemination and brokerage are resourced and structured
- Timelines align with policy cycles
- Outputs are translated into practitioner-facing tools
- Institutional co-ownership is visible and sustained

Without these enabling conditions, technically strong outputs may remain under-utilised. Table 2 summarises planned and actual durations and budgets across the tracer cases, illustrating variation in scale and implementation timelines.

Table 2. Planned and Actual Duration and Budget of Selected Tracer Cases

Topic	Planned Duration (months)	Actual Duration (months)	Planned Budget (EUR)
Nutrition-Sensitive Agri-Food Value Chains	8	20	49,600
School nutrition interventions in Kenya	18	24	77,488
Nutrition-Sensitive Agroecology in Lao PDR	24	24	635,775
Understanding the Nutrition Landscape in Uzbekistan	13	15 (at last reporting - activity ongoing)	158,000

4. Conclusions

4.1. Overall Assessment

The NRF represents a strategically relevant mechanism for strengthening the science–policy interface in nutrition and food systems programming. Its demand-driven architecture and structured integration of evidence generation, knowledge exchange, and MEL support, reflect a coherent ToC aligned with EU external action priorities. Across the evaluation period, the NRF mobilised high-level expertise and generated technically credible outputs that addressed identified evidence gaps. Its most consistent contributions lie in improving analytical quality and supporting institutional learning within nutrition programming contexts. Influence on formal policy and programmatic transformation was more variable and context-dependent, reflecting both the advisory nature of the NRF and the complexity of policy ecosystems. Overall, the NRF delivered substantial technical value, while operating within structural and contextual parameters that shaped the depth of downstream policy embedding.

4.2. Overarching Strategic Conclusions

Across criteria, four strategic conclusions emerge:

1. **The NRF model is structurally coherent and strategically aligned with EU priorities.** Its demand-driven design provides a credible **framework** for connecting research to policy dialogue but was constrained by procedural rigidity.
2. **The NRF’s strongest contributions are institutional and methodological.** Its comparative advantage lies in strengthening evidence systems and analytical capacity rather than directly driving policy change.
3. **Policy influence depends on embedding and continuity.** Influence was more visible where research was integrated into institutional processes and supported by sustained engagement.
4. **Future EU evidence mechanisms seeking greater policy influence will require clearer structuring of brokerage, integration across functional components, enhanced flexibility, and explicit alignment with policy timelines.**

4.3. Transferable Lessons Learned

Beyond the specific performance of the NRF, the evaluation identifies several transferable lessons relevant to future EU-supported evidence and MEL mechanisms:

Lesson 1: Demand-driven design enhances legitimacy, but requires sustained iteration

Initial alignment strengthens ownership, but sustained relevance depends on continued engagement and adaptation to evolving policy contexts.

Lesson 2: Evidence and brokerage must be integrated

Technical quality alone does not ensure policy influence; structured engagement and follow-up mechanisms are necessary to support uptake.

Lesson 3: Institutional embedding underpins sustainability

Durable impact is strongest when methodologies and systems are integrated into organisational processes rather than delivered as stand-alone outputs

Lesson 4: Accountability and agility must be balanced

Contractual rigor supports quality assurance, but policy relevant research requires responsiveness to decision cycles.

Lesson 5: Co-ownership strengthens mutuality and long-term influence

Visible collaboration and shared institutional ownership enhance mutuality and sustained uptake.

4.4. Conclusions by DAC Criteria

Relevance

The NRF was highly relevant to stakeholder priorities and EU strategic frameworks. Its demand-driven model ensured that assignments emerged from articulated evidence needs rather than externally imposed research agendas, reinforcing legitimacy and alignment at inception. Survey and interview evidence confirm strong perceived alignment with priority gaps in nutrition and food systems programming. Relevance over time, however, depended on delivery timing and sustained engagement. Where outputs aligned with active policy windows and ongoing institutional processes, practical usefulness was strengthened. Where timelines extended beyond decision cycles, influence was reduced. The NRF's design ensured strong initial alignment, but sustained relevance required greater agility and iterative engagement mechanisms.

Coherence

The NRF demonstrated strong conceptual coherence within the EU nutrition evidence ecosystem and was widely perceived as complementary to parallel initiatives. External coordination at assignment level was generally effective. Operational coherence across the WP1–WP4 chain was more uneven. Structural compartmentalisation of WPs and reliance on informal coordination mechanisms limited consistent end-to-end integration from demand articulation through policy embedding. The design logic was coherent and complementary, but stronger institutional integration would have enhanced systemic functioning.

Effectiveness

The NRF was effective in generating technically robust evidence and strengthening MEL systems. Effectiveness was most evident at organisational and technical levels, particularly where activities included capacity strengthening and were embedded within existing coordination platforms. Policy-level transformation was more variable and context-dependent. Uptake was strongest where outputs aligned with live decision processes and where engagement extended beyond report delivery. The NRF operated primarily through catalytic and enabling mechanisms, with clearer evidence of procedural and conceptual influence than of formal policy reform. Evidence suggests that influence pathways were strongest where NRF assignments were implemented in partnership with established national research institutions.

Efficiency

The NRF mobilised specialised expertise and delivered high-quality outputs. However, efficiency was influenced by administrative complexity and extended timelines in several assignments. The service-contract modality supported accountability and methodological rigor but constrained flexibility and responsiveness to policy cycles. In some cases, administrative transaction costs and in-kind contributions by implementing partners increased the effective resource burden. Efficiency was therefore technically strong in output delivery but structurally constrained in temporal responsiveness.

Impact

The NRF's impact is best characterised as catalytic and systemic. Its most tangible contributions include strengthened institutional capacities, improved data systems, conceptual reframing of nutrition challenges, and enhanced quality of evidence informing programme discussions. Direct attribution to formal policy change is limited, consistent with the advisory nature of the facility and the time-lag inherent in policy processes. Impact pathways operated within broader policy ecosystems involving multiple actors. Influence was strongest where activities were embedded within institutional processes and accompanied by sustained engagement.

Sustainability

Sustainability prospects depend primarily on institutional embedding rather than the intrinsic quality of outputs. Where methodological tools, survey systems, and analytical practices were integrated into routine processes, prospects are strong. Where outputs remained stand-alone products without structured anchoring, sustainability is more uncertain. The most durable elements of the NRF's legacy lie in strengthened capacities and methodological transfer rather than in individual analytical reports.

EU Added Value

The NRF's EU added value lies primarily in its ability to mobilise transnational expertise, facilitate comparative analysis, and operate as a neutral convening platform across stakeholders. Added value was most visible in assignments requiring cross-country synthesis or where national capacities were limited. In stronger capacity contexts, EU support was catalytic, rather than uniquely enabling. While the NRF mobilised European expertise effectively, some stakeholders noted perceptions of predominantly institutional positioning in branding and visibility; future mechanisms could strengthen co-ownership with partner-country institutions to enhance sustainability and mutuality.

Cross-Cutting Issues

Cross-cutting issues were integrated unevenly across the NRF portfolio. Gender and equity considerations were more consistently incorporated into analytical framing than climate and rights-based approaches. Integration was strongest at diagnostic level and less systematically embedded in methodological design and monitoring systems. While cross-cutting analysis was substantively present in several assignments, deeper operational integration would be required to translate analytical inclusion into sustained programmatic influence.

5. Recommendations

The recommendations below focus on strengthening the NRF model's ability to translate high-quality evidence into sustained policy and programmatic influence, while preserving its core strengths in technical rigor and demand responsiveness.

5.1. For DG INTPA/F3

Recommendation 1: Institutionalise structured engagement and dissemination mechanisms

Future facilities should include mechanisms to monitor how outputs are used by policymakers and implementing institutions. This phase should include:

- Targeted engagement with relevant Commission services, Member States, EUDs, and implementing partners to ensure visibility and policy relevance
- Strategic use of high-visibility international and regional platforms (e.g., major nutrition and food systems fora) to amplify research outputs
- At least one regional dissemination mechanism aligned with demand-generation regions to strengthen partner-country engagement and reduce perceptions of predominantly institutional

positioning in branding and visibility

- Clear responsibility for stakeholder mapping and proactive outreach to ensure participation of relevant decision-makers
- Dedicated budget lines within assignments to support dissemination activities and participation of implementing partners
- Follow-up engagement (6–18 months post-delivery) to monitor and support use of results

These engagement mechanisms should be embedded from the outset of future facilities rather than treated as optional dissemination activities.

Recommendation 2: Integrate systematic use-tracking into programme design

While NRF tracked outputs, it did not systematically track how those outputs were used after delivery, limiting both accountability and learning. Future mechanisms should integrate systematic use-tracking into programme design:

- How outputs are used
- By whom
- In what decision processes
- Over what timeframe

Possible approaches include a combination of qualitative and quantitative tracking methods, such as:

- periodic follow-up surveys with EU Delegations and implementing partners
- light-touch outcome harvesting to identify instances where NRF outputs informed decisions
- citation tracking in policy documents, programme proposals, and technical guidance
- follow-up interviews with key stakeholders 6–18 months after delivery
- monitoring references to NRF outputs in EU policy dialogues, partner-country strategies, or donor coordination platforms.

This could include light-touch outcome harvesting, follow-up surveys, and structured post-delivery engagement reviews. Systems should be proportionate and embedded within existing MEL processes to avoid excessive reporting burden.

Recommendation 3: Increase flexibility in commissioning and delivery modalities

A structural tension between technical rigor and operational agility constrained responsiveness. Greater flexibility in contracting and implementation arrangements would allow research activities to better align with policy cycles and evolving evidence needs. The current service-contract structure can limit operational flexibility. Fee-based service contracts require multiple approval steps for scope or staffing adjustments, which can slow adaptation during implementation. By contrast, global-price service contracts or framework arrangements may allow greater flexibility in managing evolving analytical requirements and timelines. Future instruments may benefit from exploring contracting modalities that balance accountability with greater operational agility. Future and ongoing instruments should incorporate:

- Flexible commissioning windows and delivery modalities
- Faster contracting procedures for rapid-response assignments
- Clear cut-off points between research and dissemination phases

- Contingency funds for scope adjustments and dissemination
- Stronger feasibility and scope management at design stage, including:
 - realistic assessment of data systems, analytical requirements, and partner capacity
 - phased or staged approaches for complex activities
 - alignment of scope with intended use and decision timelines

This is particularly important given the diversity of NRF assignments, which range from rapid analytical inputs to large-scale survey and data-generation activities. In more complex cases, underestimated operational and analytical requirements contributed to delays and reduced alignment with policy windows.

Consider blending framework contracts with rapid-response technical assistance modalities.

Recommendation 4: Leverage EU convening power through strategic partnerships and co-financing mechanisms

EU added value was strongest where coordination across actors was required. Explore co-financing arrangements with Member States or coalitions of interested countries to:

- Increase investment in priority evidence areas
- Strengthen political ownership of outputs
- Expand uptake pathways across EU institutions

This approach is particularly relevant for politically salient or high-priority issues, where coordinated investment and ownership can accelerate uptake and policy influence. This could include thematic consortia co-funded by Member States aligned with EU nutrition priorities.

5.2. For Agrinatura / Implementing Partners

Recommendation 5: Strengthen integration across functional components

Future mechanisms should ensure stronger coordination between demand articulation, research generation, and policy engagement components, including:

- Integrated planning across demand articulation, research, brokerage, and MEL
- Joint work-planning sessions across functional components at key milestones
- Clear internal accountability for transition from research to policy engagement
- Dedicated roles or functions responsible for bridging research outputs to uptake pathways
- Clear designation of responsibility for uptake and follow-on engagement within each assignment (e.g., lead institution, NRF team, or dedicated brokerage function)

Avoid treating evidence generation, dissemination, and uptake as separate or sequential streams, instead, design them as an integrated process from inception.

Recommendation 6: Strengthen partner country co-ownership

Evidence suggested perceptions of predominantly institutional positioning in branding and limited visibility of partner-country institutions. Future facilities should increase visibility and participation of partner-country institutions through collaborative design, shared branding, and joint dissemination by:

- Co-hosting regional dissemination events in partner countries
- Allocating budget for participation of partner-country researchers at global conferences and EU-level

fora

- Increasing visibility of local institutional logos, co-authorship, and leadership roles
- Where feasible within a demand-driven service model, NRF could explore structured research collaborations (e.g., institutional partnerships or joint supervision arrangements)

This would strengthen co-ownership, improve uptake, reduce perceptions of extractiveness, and enhance sustainability. Strengthening co-ownership will enhance legitimacy, support sustained engagement, and improve the likelihood of uptake and continuity beyond project timelines.

Recommendation 7: Ensure predictable allocation of expert time within contractual arrangements

In several assignments, access to senior expertise was constrained by competing commitments and underestimated workload assumptions. Future evidence mechanisms should ensure that contracts include realistic staffing provisions and protected time allocations for key experts. This would support continuity of engagement, improve responsiveness to stakeholder needs, and reduce reliance on ad hoc or in-kind contributions from implementing partners. Future contracts should:

- Include protected time allocations for key experts
- Ensure realistic staffing assumptions
- Align expertise mobilisation with expected workload

This would improve both timeliness and continuity of engagement.

5.3. For Future/Other EU Evidence Instruments and MEL Mechanisms

Recommendation 8: Structure assignments in sequenced phases

Assignments should be organised in clearly defined phases:

1. Demand articulation and scoping
2. Research and analytical production (with firm timelines)
3. Policy engagement, advocacy, and use-tracking period

In practice, this phased approach could incorporate a co-creation stage in which demand articulation is followed by joint prioritisation of research topics between INTPA/F3, EU Delegations, and implementing partners. Early agreement on research scope would allow specific Agrinatura experts or institutions to be mobilised for clearly defined research activities, improving both ownership and the predictability of expert engagement. Phase 2 should have defined completion points to ensure sufficient time remains for policy engagement and uptake.

Recommendation 9: Invest strategically in high-visibility dissemination platforms

Dissemination was uneven and often dependent on partner initiative. To ensure consistent visibility and uptake of NRF-supported evidence, future mechanisms should systematically engage with high-visibility global and regional forums to increase visibility and policy uptake by:

- Budgeting for structured participation in major international events (e.g. Nutrition for Growth, ICN, regional fora)
 - This should include less formal platforms as well, including the ENN website and Global Nutrition Cluster (GNC), as relevant. This would help to ensure the science-to-policy translation.
- Organising annual EU-level knowledge-sharing events

- Where feasible, co-hosting at least one regional event aligned with demand-generation regions

Alternatively, establish competitive internal windows for activity teams to apply for dissemination support.

5.4. Summary of Strategic Orientation

Taken together, these recommendations suggest that future EU evidence mechanisms should:

- Preserve the NRF's demand-driven strengths
- Strengthen integration across functional components
- Formalise brokerage and uptake monitoring
- Increase flexibility in delivery
- Enhance partner-country ownership and visibility
- Explicitly design for influence, not just production, including resourcing for dissemination, engagement, and use-tracking

The NRF model provides a strong for evidence-informed decision-making in nutrition programming and MEL. Future mechanisms can build upon this foundation by embedding structured dissemination, flexible commissioning, and explicit use-tracking systems to maximise catalytic impact.

6. Annexes

The following annexes are included in accordance with ToR requirements:

- A. Terms of Reference (ToR)
- B. Names of Evaluation Experts and Their Companies
- C. Data Collection Instruments (Evaluation Methodology)
- D. Evaluation Matrix
- E. Intervention Logic / Logframe (Nested Theory of Change)
- F. Stakeholder Mapping
- G. Literature and Documentation Consulted
- H. Tracer Case Summaries
- I. Recommendation Matrix