NUTRITION RESEARCH FACILITY
Knowledge and Research for Nutrition

LESSONS BRIEF

Experiential learning based on technical support for M&E of nutrition policies and programmes: April 2020 to September 2025

Nutrition Research Facility - November 2025

Nutrition M&E technical support provided by the Nutrition Research Facility

The Nutrition Research Facility (NRF) is established under the Knowledge and Research for Nutrition project funded by the European Union (EU) and implemented by Agrinatura. It responds to requests for evidence from decision-makers to support the design, monitoring, evaluation (M&E), and learning in relation to policies and programmes for better nutrition outcomes in low- and middle-income countries. Further information about the NRF can be found at the NRF website.

Based on specific demands from the EU Delegations (EUD), the NRF provided technical support on M&E to several programmes over the period - April 2020 to July 2025:

- Mauritania EUD - Nutrition programmes (nutrition-sensitive programme design analysis)
- Mauritius and Seychelles EUD - Four-country regional programme, nutrition M&E support programme focused on Madagascar (design of nutrition M&E, and longitudinal evaluative research)
- Madagascar EUD - Central Madagascar food security and agricultural value chain development programme (longitudinal evaluative research)
- Angola EUD - Food and nutrition security programme (Component 2 effectiveness review and impact analysis)
- Uzbekistan EUD - Strengthen national capacities on M&E of nutrition policies and programmes

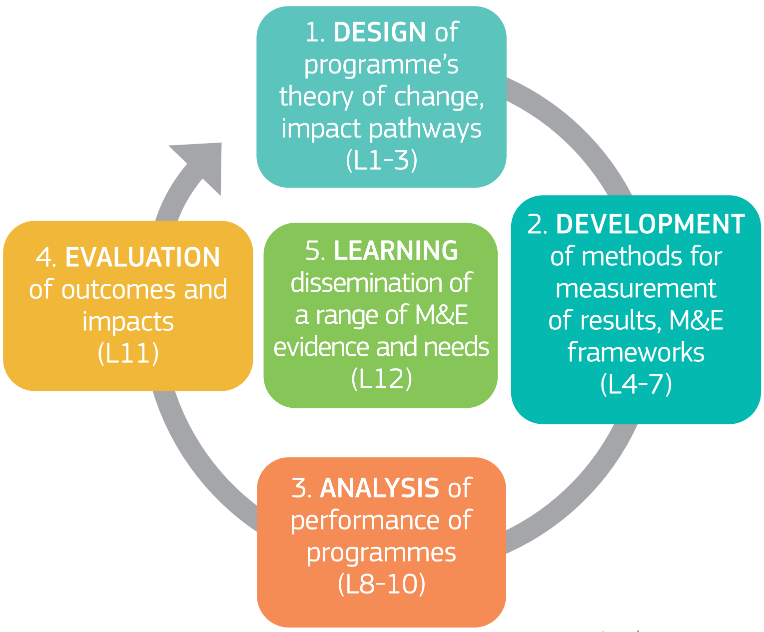
In the ongoing (2016-2025, extended to 2030) United Nations (UN) Decade of Action on Nutrition, a range of initiatives are underway, promising to contribute to the sustained and coherent implementation of policies, programmes and investments to eliminate malnutrition in all its forms. The EU's Action Plan on Nutrition (2015 – 2025) sets out clear objectives and strategic priorities for the EU's action for better nutrition. Relatedly, **Food 2030**[2] defines the EU's research and innovation policy framework for supporting the transition towards sustainable, healthy and inclusive food systems, that respect planetary boundaries.

Food 2030 is in line with, and supports the goals of the European Green Deal, Farm to Fork strategy and Bioeconomy strategy.

To monitor and evaluate actions undertaken in the implementation of these policies and strategies, M&E tools and approaches have been consolidated. The Nutrition Research Facility (NRF) conducted a comprehensive review of the existing measurement approaches on the M&E of nutrition-relevant actions[3]. Based on this, the NRF has compiled a collection of relevant nutrition and nutrition-sensitive M&E resources including frameworks, indicators and indices, methods and integrated tools, databases, dashboards and initiatives.

The presented brief captures a synopsis of experiential lessons learnt from providing technical support on nutrition M&E to a range of EU programmes to inform future decision making and nutrition-sensitive M&E. The lessons brief is organised into five sections aligned with the five-point technical support on nutrition M&E provided by the NRF to different EU programmes (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Lessons aligned with the five-point technical support on nutrition M&E by the NRF



L = lessons

[1] United Nations Decade of Action on Nutrition (2016–2025) extended to 2030
[2] Food 2030 - Research and innovation - European Commission

[3] 'Nutrition-relevant' actions are programmes that have potential to contribute to nutrition outcomes, directly or indirectly. Nutrition-relevant includes both nutrition-sensitive and nutrition-specific interventions.
The Lancet describes the nutrition-specific interventions and programmes as those that address the immediate determinants of foetal and child nutrition in development and defines nutrition-sensitive interventions as those that address underlying determinants of foetal and child nutrition and development.

AGRINATURA is Europe's foremost alliance working in agricultural and nutritional research and development, including education, training, and capacity strengthening. The AGRINATURA Association includes thirty universities and research & development institutions, as well as other organisations working in agriculture, natural resources management, food, and nutrition, from 18 European Member States.

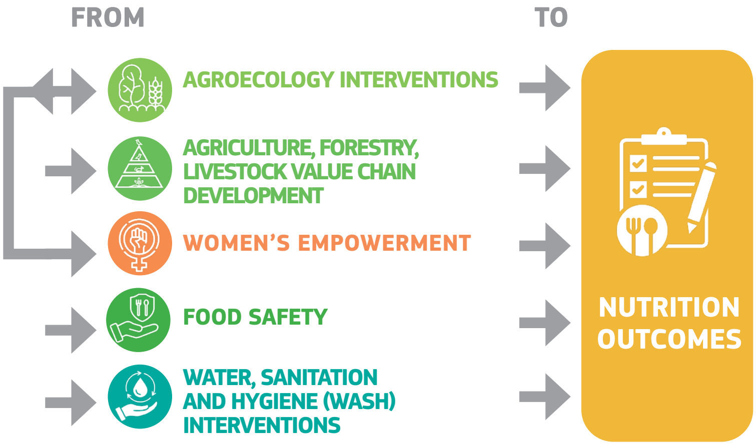
1.	DESIGN of programme's theory of change, impact pathways	L1 : Nutrition M&E should be based on analysis of impact pathway
		L2: Nutrition-sensitive programme design requires specific understanding of barriers to a healthy diet and address nutrition gaps for specific population groups
		L3: Nutrition M&E is more effective if target beneficiaries are well identified in programme design
2.	DEVELOPMENT of methods for measurement of results, M&E frameworks	L4: Measuring nutrition outcomes should be done in the context of a food system analysis
		L5: Nutrition M&E should be designed according to the specific value chain context
		L6: Optimal design and implementation of nutrition M&E requires robust consideration and coordination of different partner's budgets and capacities
		L7: Effective national nutrition surveys require up-to-date sampling frames and strong coordination among governments, UN and other agencies
3.	ANALYSIS of performance of programmes	L8: Broadening the lens to measure 'systemic' impact and governance reforms in nutrition M&E enhances understanding beyond specific indicators
		L9: Integrating established and new indicators and indices enhances tracking nutrition outcomes and strengthens nutrition M&E at the program, national and global level
		L10: Effectively designed nutrition M&E offers several opportunities for the analysis of cross-sectoral linkages and gender transformative aspects
4.	EVALUATION of outcomes and impacts	L11: Conducting robust research and process evaluations of nutrition-sensitive policies and programmes can provide evidence on a continuum from research to action
5.	LEARNING dissemination of a range of M&E evidence and needs	L12: Routine collection and repository of monitoring data is foundational for effective programmes (and evaluations)

1. Design lessons

Lesson 1: Nutrition M&E should be based on an analysis of impact pathways

Nutrition has been increasingly integrated into EU-funded rural development programmes over recent years to enable a multi-sectoral approach for addressing all forms of malnutrition. Within the portfolio supported by the NRF, nutrition components have often been introduced at a post-design stage—typically after the start of productive activities—which has constrained the ability to conduct a comprehensive analysis of nutrition impact pathways from the outset. Adding and monitoring indicators alone would not lead to nutrition outcomes. Without a robust and succinct analysis of how programme interventions of targeted activities can plausibly lead to nutrition outcomes, improvements to nutrition M&E will likely remain without effect..

Thus, it is important to map out the pathways to impacts on nutrition outcomes at the programme design stage. These include, for example:



Conducting this 'pathway to impact' analysis, while involving communities and stakeholders in a reflective process, helps to identify gaps, barriers, and opportunities, in programme design to achieving nutrition outcomes. This can then potentially lead to targeted steps and interventions for nutrition-sensitive programme designs (see the next lesson).

Lesson 2: Nutrition-sensitive programme design requires specific understanding of barriers to a healthy diet and address nutrition gaps for specific population groups

Integration of nutrition in programme design requires a specific understanding of the barriers for addressing nutrition and the drivers that support or inhibit the achievement of nutrition outcomes. A thorough analysis of programme designs should be based on several existing frameworks. An NRF document (framework and tools for nutrition M&E) compiled these frameworks and the context in which they can be utilised in an integrative and complementary way for improving nutrition and nutrition-sensitive programme designs. The most relevant, significant and useful frameworks are:

- Nutrition in the framework of the SDGs
- UNICEF conceptual framework on malnutrition
- Lancet Framework for action to achieve optimum foetal and child nutrition and development
- EU's Results and indicators framework for nutrition
- Design and monitor nutrition-sensitive agriculture and food
- Nutrition Situation Analysis
- Compendium of Indicators for Food System Assessment
- The IFAD framework of nutrition-sensitive value chains
- Food System Dashboard

Utilising these frameworks allows for the programme design intent to be articulated through a theory of change that specifically includes 'pathways to impact' aimed at achieving nutrition outcomes.

Lesson 3: Nutrition M&E is more effective if the group receiving support are well identified in programme design

Many programmes aim to positively impact dietary diversity e.g., measured through the Minimum Dietary Diversity for Women (MDD-W) and for Children (MDD-C). In these contexts, participants are women (15 to 49 years) and children aged 6 to 23 months. If programmes do not specifically target these groups or ensure that interventions effectively reach them as intended, any nutrition M&E mechanism may struggle to identify and survey the appropriate participants within the intervention group. Furthermore, when the composition of the participants is not well defined or monitored - such as the demographics of women or children aged - it becomes difficult to accurately assess the reach and representativeness of programme outcomes. It is also important for the programme design to succinctly state all groups who will participate in the interventions, such as producers or consumers or both. Producers and consumers would have different profiles. Some producers produce for selling and some producers also consume their own (potentially nutritious) produce. If the programme is targeting both groups, then nutrition M&E would entail research at both producer and consumer levels.

2. Lessons about developing and implementing methods, frameworks and measurement systems

Lesson 4: Measuring nutrition outcomes should be done in the context of a food system analysis

Measuring the nutritional status of individuals and communities alone has limited value and may only provide a snapshot of the situation without addressing the underlying factors that influence nutrition outcomes. Measuring change along the lines of a food system is beneficial to gain the required holistic view, for example through programmes that measure indicators related to price, food availability, food access, food choices and desirability, market diversity etc. This will ensure that nutrition M&E is embedded into food systems transformation processes and shed light on the drivers for why nutrition outcomes are being achieved or not.

Lesson 5: Nutrition M&E should be designed according to the specific value chain context

Nutrition M&E for food and agricultural value chain development programmes needs a customised design based on the specific pathways through which value chains potentially lead to nutrition outcomes. Based on an NRF study, the following three aspects are crucial for designing nutrition M&E:

- **Supply chains:** Focused on measuring production and supply nodes of the value chain, such as seeds, production, productivity, transportation etc.
- **Food environments:** Focused on measuring primary and secondary processing added nutrition value, access, availability, affordability of nutritious food etc.
- **Consumer behaviours:** Focused on measuring acceptability, desirability, and actual consumption of nutritious food.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS USED

The working definitions of the terms used in this brief are:

- **Dashboard** is a visual summary or presentation of the performance or impact of a programme or policy at different levels (programme, (sub)national and regional/global). A dashboard usually provides a snapshot picture of food and nutrition security data, compiled from diverse sources. This classification includes databases as well, which are a compilation/ consolidated analysis of data on a specific theme (e.g. dietary diversity) for different programmes or countries.
- **Frameworks** are foundation or building blocks for designing nutrition M&E plans. Frameworks provide broader strategic thinking and guidance that are helpful for designing and implementing nutrition M&E at different levels (programme, (sub) national and regional/global).
- **Indicators** are measurable variables or metrics that provide information about a specific aspect of a programme, process, or system. Indicators are used to assess progress, performance, and outcomes, helping to evaluate whether objectives and goals are being met. They can be quantitative (numerical data) or qualitative (descriptive data) and are often used in M&E frameworks to track changes over time, inform decision-making, and guide improvements.
- **Indices** are composite measurements that include several indicators to measure the performance of a nutrition policy, programme or investment. An index involves computation of a value based on the values of associated indicators, using a logical formula or indexing methodology.
- **Methods and tools** are specific approaches and instruments for data collection or analysis that can appropriately and sensitively capture and analyse data in diverse settings or contexts of nutrition-relevant programmes. Methods and tools can be applied as a stand-alone approach or can be combined as part of a nutrition M&E plan of a policy, programme or investment.
- **Platforms and initiatives** are multi-stakeholder networks or alliances working towards a specific vision or purpose to achieve improved nutrition outcomes and impact at different levels (programme, (sub)national and regional/global).

Lesson 6: Optimal design and implementation of nutrition M&E requires robust consideration and coordination of different partners' budgets and capacities

The NRF experience indicates that budgets are an important limiting factor in terms of designing and implementing effective nutrition M&E. In most programmes, budgets for M&E are inadequately allocated. Organisations like OECD, UNDP, Oxfam, and Save the Children recommend allocating 3-7% of the total programme budget for M&E activities[4]. However, for most programmes (including nutrition-sensitive programmes), M&E budgets do not reach these recommended levels. Further, experience shows that nutrition M&E capacities need strengthening across the board. It is equally important to ensure that clear M&E responsibilities and time allocations are established not only within individual projects but also within programme coordination structures within the institution. Without clearly allocated capacities and roles, even well-designed M&E systems risk remaining underused or inconsistently implemented.

Designing effective nutrition M&E also requires multi-disciplinary expertise, including epidemiological, nutrition, public health and, economic and epidemiological experts. A Train the Trainer (TtT) approach can be effective in this context because it leverages the expertise of knowledgeable individuals to train others, thereby enhancing the overall capacity for M&E in nutrition-relevant programmes. By involving experts in the design process, the training can be more tailored and relevant, ensuring that the programmes are effective in addressing nutrition goals. Additionally, having a variety of expertise is crucial for analysing and interpreting nutrition M&E data. At the same time, nutrition M&E is instrumental in improving programmes and policies when multi-sectoral collaboration (e.g., agriculture, education, health, WASH, etc.) is coordinated and strengthened amongst partners.

Lesson 7: Effective national nutrition surveys require up-to-date sampling frames and strong coordination among governments, UN and other agencies

National nutrition surveys are being carried out by several countries, either as stand-alone or as part of other survey streams. These are important endeavours as nationally representative data can guide programme and policy design as well as implementation. Conducting these surveys effectively requires an up-to-date sampling frame with a complete list of the smallest sampling units to ensure accuracy and representativeness. Investing in an up-to-date population unit database not only supports various national surveys, including nutrition assessments, but also enhances public health planning, resource allocation, policy and programme development, M&E, research facilitation, crisis response, and inter-agency collaboration. UN agencies such as FAO, UNICEF and WHO have developed several different tools and protocols for effectively conducting national nutrition surveys. These can be best capitalised with extensive coordination and cooperation among these agencies alongside governmental bodies. Without cooperation and coordination among different stakeholders, several misalignments such as inconsistent methods, duplicated efforts, data gaps, conflicting findings, inefficient resource use, delayed responses, and poor policy implementation are likely to occur in designing, implementation, analysis and reporting of the nutrition surveys. These can best be avoided by facilitating a common and shared vision among all stakeholders for generating robust and useful nutrition data and for using nutrition data for better evidence-based policies and programming.

[4] The Right Budget Allocation for Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E)

3. Analysis lessons

Lesson 8: Broadening the lens to measure 'systemic' impact and governance reforms in nutrition M&E enhances understanding beyond specific indicators

Nutrition M&E tends to be narrowly focused on measuring change through specific indicators in programme intervention areas. However, many programmes aim to achieve a broader impact like institutionalisation and governance reforms, including in areas where the programmes are not implemented directly. Many programmes are designed to achieve transformational impact or 'systemic' impact, meaning that they aim to create significant and lasting changes in the broader systems they operate within, rather than just delivering short-term or isolated benefits. Nutrition M&E should pay attention to measuring the indirect contributions of the programme as well as the transformational impact, including on institutionalisation and governance reforms that may positively impact nutrition outcomes in the medium- and long-term. The methodological challenge of measuring indirect and transformation impacts could be addressed through designing suitable rubric-based[5] and qualitative assessment approaches. Adopting a theory of transformative change is important here because it allows for a systematic assessment of the broader systemic impacts.

Lesson 9: Integrating established and new indicators and indices enhances tracking nutrition outcomes and strengthens nutrition M&E at the national and global levels

The NRF's M&E experiences suggest that combining reliable indicators, indices, tools, and methods can lead to tailored M&E designs for nutrition programmes. These resources can guide adjustments in a single household survey (administered to participants of a programme) to measure multiple programme indicators effectively. However, it is crucial to use these resources within the right context and follow standard protocols, as failing to do so may lead to inaccurate analyses and interpretations. The NRF identified the following resources as the most relevant and useful for programme-level nutrition M&E:

- Minimum Dietary Diversity of Women (MDD-W)
- Diet Quality Questionnaire (DQQ)
- Minimum Acceptable Diet for children (MAD) – a composite indicator including Minimum Dietary Diversity (MDD) and Minimum Meal Frequency (MMF)
- Household Dietary Diversity Index (HDDS)
- Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES)
- Coping Strategy Index (CSI)
- Poverty Probability Index (PPI)
- Multi-dimensional Poverty Index (MPI)
- Tool for Agroecology Performance Evaluation (TAPE)
- Simplified approach to measurement women's empowerment in an agriculture/value chain development context (SimWE)

The NRF M&E experiences indicate that methods such as evaluative and implementation research along with tools such as the Diet Quality Questionnaire (DQQ), MDD-W, FIES and the Coping Strategy Index (CSI) offer advantages of harmonised methods of data collection and analysis. When applied at an appropriate level and when relevant to the theory of change and after critical consideration on how they represent populations, geographic areas and timing (e.g. season), data from these tools can be consolidated at sub-national, national and global levels. The NRF has taken inspiration from these well-tested methods and tools, while designing tailor-made nutrition M&E of several EU programmes.

Lesson 10: Effectively designed nutrition M&E offers several opportunities for the analysis of cross-sectoral linkages and gender-transformative aspects

The NRF experience indicates that achieving nutrition outcomes critically depends on the effectiveness of multi-sectoral programmes. Nutrition M&E, therefore, needs to generate multi-sectoral data and analyse interactions, associations and causality among these data sets. The NRF experiences have been useful in producing empirical evidence on inter-linkages between, for example, agroecology, WASH, food safety women's empowerment and nutrition. These analyses can reveal basic drivers as well as some of the underlying causes of under- or overnutrition. Analysis of cross-sectoral linkages and gender-transformative aspects can guide policies and programmes in specific contexts for strengthening these linkages by addressing basic drivers and underlying, structural causes.

4. Evaluative lessons

Lesson 11: Conducting robust implementation /evaluative research and process evaluations can provide evidence on a continuum from research to action

Gaps in programme design (as highlighted in the lessons above) can undermine achievement of nutrition outcomes, however, the quality of implementation of policies and programmes is equally important. This is where M&E provides a crucial role. The NRF experience indicates that implementation research[6], and process evaluations, provide robust course-corrective evidence for improving actions. This type of evaluation is crucial for assessing the effectiveness of policies and programmes in terms of achieving nutrition outcomes. This type of research can utilise experimental[7] or quasi-experimental[8] approaches, fulfilling both 'accountability' and 'learning' objectives.

The rationale for conducting this type of evaluation is both to understand the quality of the processes of programme implementation (i.e., the 'how)', as well as the quality of outcomes (i.e. the 'what' and 'how well') that are achieved for a group of participants who received programme support (usually in comparison to those who did not).

[5] A rubric is a structured evaluation tool and a process that outlines specific criteria and performance standards at different scale (e.g., downward movement, business as usual, small positive movement, strong positive movement, significant /transformational shift). Progress and impact on different transformational process and outcomes can be assessed on a suitably designed 5-point scale.

[6] Implementation /evaluative research is defined as a disciplined and systematic action research conducted to arrive at an assessment of processes, outcomes and impact of a programme with the purpose of providing information that will be of use in decision making at program and policy levels

[7] An experimental study involves the manipulation of one or more independent variables to observe the effect on a dependent variable, typically using random assignment to control or comparison and intervention groups to establish causality.

[8] A quasi-experimental study examines the effect of an intervention on a dependent variable but lacks random assignment to groups and may be carried out with or without a control or comparison group.

Effective M&E requires a comprehensive approach whereby research methods are combined with process evaluations using a mixed-methods approach[9]. When combining qualitative insights with quantitative data, researchers can obtain a holistic view (and a direction of travel) of programme effectiveness and participant experiences. This comprehensive approach allows for a better understanding of how various factors (e.g., community engagement, resource allocation, contextual factors and stakeholder involvement) may affect programme outcomes.

A qualitative component is essential and complements quantitative analyses rather than serving as a mere tick-box exercise. The NRF has effectively employed mixed-methods research for nutrition M&E across various programmes. Experience shows that in predominantly quantitative research designs, it is crucial to integrate the collection, analysis, and reporting of qualitative data. This qualitative data uncovers the mechanisms and reasons behind trends, behaviours, and outcomes, offering insights that quantitative data alone may miss. Throughout NRF's assignments, the qualitative aspect of nutrition M&E consistently provided direction, context and depth to quantitative findings. Therefore, qualitative insights should be viewed as complementary and deserving of attention from programme and M&E teams involved in nutrition M&E design and delivery.

5. Learning lessons

Lesson 12: Routine collection and repository of monitoring data is foundational for effective programmes (and evaluations)

Regular monitoring of programmes (continuous or periodically), such as process evaluations, to generate relevant and reliable data can enable effective decision-making as well as adaptive programme management. Routine monitoring should not only track processes, outputs and short-term outcomes, but also inform on the demographics of the participant population, thereby strengthening programme targeting (see Lesson 3). Robust routine monitoring is fundamental for providing up-to-date data on participants and the implementation progress to assess programme outputs and understand who is being reached. This in turn feeds into external evaluations at key moments of the project management cycle.

Beyond accountability, routine monitoring plays a key role in confirming whether nutrition impact pathways are being followed as intended and in supporting evidence-based and results-based programme management. This enables programme managers to make timely and informed adjustments based on emerging data and trends.

Routine monitoring is most useful and efficient when designed from the very beginning of the programme, jointly by M&E experts and technical managers. Bringing routine monitoring data together in the format of a repository or dashboard helps in ensuring that data is mobilised around key themes and decision-making needs of the different actors and stakeholders in the programme. This can ensure that data needs are clearly understood and aligned with the programme's theory of change/transformation, including the specified pathways to nutrition impact. Such a process requires interdisciplinary skills and capacities among the programme team and M&E focal points. Many challenges of conducting effective routine monitoring can be overcome when its strategic role and operational value are fully recognised within programme management structures.

This NRF experience provides perspectives on, a) how to design better nutrition M&E system, b) how to generate evidence to strengthen programme implementation and policy engagement, c) practical ways to improve technical support on M&E for EU-funded (and other) programmes. This lessons brief provides comprehensive insights and serves as a 'call to action' for programme managers and M&E teams to work together in a coordinated and structured manner to design and implement effective nutrition M&E systems.

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[9] Mixed-methods research is an approach that combines both qualitative and quantitative research methods in a single study.