



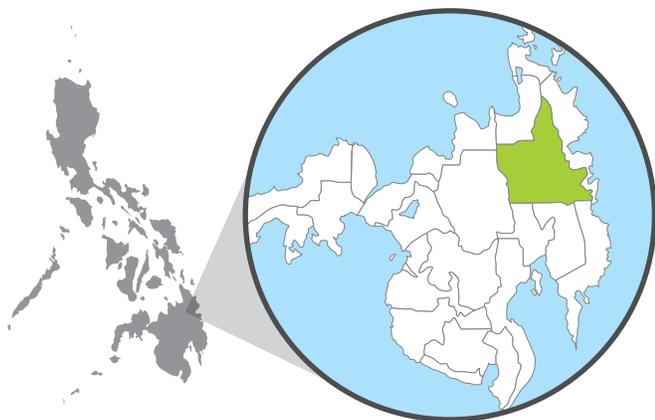
EVALUATION SUMMARY

FOOD SECURE, RESILIENT, AND STRONGER HOUSEHOLDS (FRESH) PROJECT

Lutheran World Relief (LWR) commissioned an external evaluation of its three-year project addressing food security and nutrition in vulnerable farming households in Talacogon, Agusan del Sur Province, Philippines. The evaluation, which was conducted in September 2016, assessed the project's relevance, connectedness, coverage, efficiency, effectiveness, sustainability and impact and captured lessons learned.

PROJECT SUMMARY

The FRESH project, which spanned January 2014 to September 2016, aimed to improve the food security and livelihoods of 900 vulnerable farming households in the following barangays (villages) in Talacogon, located in the northeast of Mindanao: Causwagan, Del Monte, Labnig, San Agustin, San Nicolas, and Zillovia. Through FRESH, LWR worked with local partner Philippine Partnership for the Development of Human Resources in Rural Areas (PhilDHRRA) to increase farming households' agricultural production, income, and knowledge of proper health and nutrition practices using the PD-HEARTH approach¹. The project also encouraged the adoption of diversified and integrated farming systems (DIFS) in order to foster nutrition-sensitive crop production.



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¹ Positive Deviance/Hearth Nutrition Program (PD-Hearth) is a home-based and neighborhood-based nutrition approach for children who are at risk for malnutrition in developing countries. The program uses the 'positive deviance' approach to identify the behaviors practiced by the mothers or caretakers of well-nourished children from poor families and to transfer such positive practices to others in the community with malnourished children. The 'hearth,' or home, is the location for the nutrition education and rehabilitation sessions. (CORE, A Resource Guide for Sustainably Rehabilitating Malnourished Children, 2003)

EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

The evaluation used both quantitative and qualitative methods to collect and analyze project data. To solicit quantitative feedback, a random sample survey (LQAS methodology) was conducted using Android devices, which included both project participating and non-participating households in the targeted six barangays. 114 households responded to the survey.

To gather qualitative data, the evaluator reviewed documents, conducted key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs), and recorded observations during a field visit. The KIIs were conducted with key municipal and barangay local government officials, officers and members of project participating Self-Help Groups and Farmers Associations, barangay health workers and nutrition scholars (BHW/BNS) and members of the PD-HEARTH team. PhilDHRRA field staff including the Project Coordinator and the two Community Development Officers were also interviewed. The FGDs held in each barangay involved an equal number of male and female project participants.

During the project site visit, the evaluator interacted with project participants and observed the standing vegetable gardens, project-built infrastructure, pre- and post-harvest facilities and a seed bank. The evaluator also observed the PD-HEARTH team as they conducted sessions in a few of the project barangays.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

RELEVANCE

The evaluation found the project to be very relevant for the following reasons:

- The project was particularly relevant for 271 of its beneficiaries, as some were laid off laborers from the wood processing and tree plantation industries who did not possess the agricultural skills to make an alternative livelihood from farming until they received the necessary training provided by the FRESH project.
- Since most of the participating households only had a small area of land on which to farm, the project's promotion of cultivating vegetables, which is an activity that does not require much space, was appropriate.
- Given the occurrence of El Niño during project implementation, the project interventions aimed at improving farmer resilience such as Climate Smart Agriculture (CSA), seed banking and DIFS were immediately put to the test. The DIFS increased food availability during the lean periods. CSA techniques like mulching and mixing of rice hull in the soil helped farmers adapt to climate change and prepare for extreme weather events. Additionally, the introduction of seed banks enabled the majority of farmers to grow crops from their own stocks of seeds despite the El Niño-caused drought.

COVERAGE

The FRESH project reached a total of 900 individuals, including 644 women and 256 men. The project included both farmers and laborers who had been laid off after the closing of nearby wood processing plants. Also included in the project were families with malnourished children. Some of the project participants had previously been involved in an earlier PhilDHRRA project, the Agusan Marsh Climate Change Adaptation Project (AMCAP), and the FRESH project provided some continuity as far as the learning on climate change adaptation strategies.

CONNECTEDNESS

LWR purposefully connected FRESH project activities to local government programs on agriculture, health and nutrition. The FRESH project's agriculture activities were linked to the local government's agriculture production program, Integrated Community Food Production, which includes livestock, organic agriculture and bio-intensive garden (BIG) activities. LWR also based the project's improved nutrition outcome on Talacogon Municipality's strategic plan to address local incidences of malnutrition, Oplan Talacogon Kontra Malnutrition (Operation Plan Talacogon against Malnutrition). The project mobilized barangay nutrition scholars, health workers and agriculture workers to further integrate its efforts into the larger government initiatives.

EFFECTIVENESS

This project's effectiveness is evidenced by project participating households' increased access to food and improved nutritional status. The evaluator's survey at the end of the project indicated the following increases for survey respondents:

- Dietary diversity increased from 1.9 food groups to 4.0 for children and 4.7 for women.
- 51% of project participants state they have more food available year round, though they still experience two months of food insufficiency on average. They largely attributed this increase in food availability to the project's input support.
- 94.1% of the 288 targeted malnourished children participating in the project reached their normal weight according to their age. This increase was largely attributed to the PD-HEARTH approach and promotion of vegetable production and consumption. This success has led local governments of other barangays and municipalities to adopt the PD-HEARTH approach.

It was also reported that 90.3% of 623 project households increased agricultural production of rice and corn by 10 to 20% per production cycle with support from the project despite severe episodes of drought and rat infestations.

EFFICIENCY

According to information gathered from FGDs and key informants, government seed distribution is always delayed and nuanced with social power dynamics, and government support for pre- and post-harvest facilities is limited. Compared to such government programs, the FRESH project provided timely and fairly distributed inputs and addressed specific production gaps identified by the project participants.

The PD-HEARTH approach, which has been well received by both local government officials and communities, has proven to be cost-effective. Compared to the local government's supplementary feeding program, it does not depend on external support. The project was able to rehabilitate a malnourished child for just over PhP 400 (USD 8.33), including training and materials. This is compared to the government's nutrition program that costs an average of PhP 1,500 (USD 31.25) per malnourished child. Moreover, the children participating in the government program would likely revert back to malnutrition after the government support ended.

SUSTAINABILITY

The evaluation identified the following areas which project participants are able to continue beyond the project:

- **Vegetable production:** Continuing production demands only limited resources. Even households producing only for consumption are now able to buy seeds.
- **Nutrition:** The evaluation found that the PD-HEARTH approach was well received at the household, community and local government levels. PD-HEARTH's emphasis on using locally-available food within the community (e.g. backyard and communal vegetable gardens) combined with the adoption of child caring practices from positive deviant mothers has contributed to behavior change among the mothers of malnourished 0-5 year-old children. Also, the training of BHWs and BNSs has ensured that local government-supported community workers integrate the PD-HEARTH approach into their practices, continuing to support project participants as well as new families with malnourished children after the project's end. Local government units assured the evaluator that they intended to incorporate the PD-HEARTH approach and the DFIS model into their development plans and sectoral programs.

Women in Barangay Del Monte of Agusan del Sur, prepare a meal in the kitchen as part of a PD Hearth session which targets nutrition and malnourishment of the children in the community.

94.1% of malnourished children participating in the project reached their normal weight according to their age.

The evaluation also noted areas where sustainability poses some challenges:

- **Equipment maintenance:** The farmers potentially lack the funds and expertise to repair some of the farming equipment provided through the project.
- **Access to quality seeds:** Since the seeds provided during the project only last two harvest cycles, farmers will need to purchase their own once the project ends, and there is no mechanism to help them do that if their crop production is too low to bring in enough income to afford the seeds.

IMPACT

The evaluation identified the following long-term impacts of the FRESH project:

- Nutrition in Talacogon Municipality has improved. The municipality has risen from third lowest performer to second runner up on the list of local governments with the lowest malnutrition rates. The improved nutrition will have a long-term effect on the health and development of both adults and children.
- The success of the PD-HEARTH approach in the FRESH project has contributed to local government officials adopting it in Veruela and Santa Josefa municipalities.
- The local government's adoption of the project-promoted DIFS model and improved farming techniques is contributing to the food security of other community members.
- The pre- and post-harvest facilities are contributing to increases in farmer incomes, allowing farmers to begin collectively saving for the maintenance of the facilities and farming equipment.



CONCLUSION

The evaluation noted the following weaknesses of the project: the potential unsustainability of the farming equipment and facilities' maintenance, lack of sufficient storage for produce and the lower engagement level among farmers who managed the facilities after the first year. The uncontrollable weather and pest infestations also limited the success of some of the project's agriculture activities.

However, the evaluation also found several important achievements of the FRESH project. For farmers and laborers, the project introduced improved rice and corn varieties, reduced post-harvest losses and increased income. The nutrition components of the project increased dietary diversity and food availability among households, rehabilitated malnourished children and introduced a model local governments could replicate in other areas. The project's goal of improving food security was achieved.



Mr. Aninadab Cabigkes Araniego, a PD-HEARTH team member of the FRESH project, shows bottles of organic pesticide and the same fertilizer made from vermin tea and indigenous microorganisms

CONSIDERATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

LWR MANAGEMENT RESPONSE

- With PD-HEARTH approach coupled with DIFS, the project was able to reduce malnutrition incidence by more than 80%. LWR considers the FRESH project to be a very successful intervention and concurs overall with the findings of this evaluation. However, LWR recognized that future projects will have to do more to build the resiliency of vulnerable farming households, help them cope with the impacts of drought and ensure the availability of food during the lean season..

EVALUATION ACTION ITEMS

The following recommendations from the evaluation will be considered and applied or continued as appropriate to LWR's existing and future projects in areas with high prevalence of social conflict:

- LWR will continue to implement food security projects (contingent on funding) that emphasize the production and utilization of diverse, safe and nutritious foods.
- In future projects, LWR will consider including activities which promote group savings as well as communal food storage facilities when appropriate.
- LWR will study the feasibility of supporting an existing farmer group in a project to produce and sell quality seeds year-round at affordable prices to other local farmers.

ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

- Changing behaviors related to food utilization, as promoted in this project through the PD-HEARTH approach, is just one important pillar of food security. In future projects, LWR should implement activities which promote behavioral transformation that contribute to all pillars of food security (availability, access, utilization and stability) in addition to more income-generating activities.
- As the synergy between government and NGO services contributed much to the success of the project, LWR is reminded that collaboration among the government, NGOs and the business/private sector is essential in order to successfully scale up projects and will continue to strive to do this in the future.



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