



Delivering for Nutrition in India: Insights from Implementation Research

September 14-18, 2020

Virtual event

Key messages

- The nutrition community in India gathered at the third India-focused implementation research conference “[Delivering for Nutrition in India: Insights from Implementation Research](#)” from 14-18 September 2020. At this event, participants reviewed evidence to inform the implementation of current policy and program initiatives.
- Coinciding with the national nutrition month (or Poshan Maah), the insights derived from data and evidence presented at this first-ever virtual conference on nutrition implementation research, are expected to provide insights to inform the National Nutrition Mission (or POSHAN Abhiyaan) and shed light on key vulnerabilities that need to be addressed to improve nutrition outcomes in India.
- Here are the key insights from sessions:
 - **Child growth:** Both stunting and wasting are disturbances to the overall normal patterns of growth in the first two years and share similar causes. Prevention should therefore be the mainstay of the programmatic focus, focusing on maternal nutrition, child health and infant feeding practices. Additional support will be needed for vulnerable 1000-day households in context of COVID-19. Efforts to screen and treat malnourished children and support their households remain an urgent need. Preventing both forms of child undernutrition and treating wasting today will prevent later development consequences.
 - **Maternal, infant and young child nutrition practices in the first 1000 days** must remain a focus given the poor state of maternal and infant diets, but program efforts must recognize that these practices are affected by a range of factors (knowledge, skills and motivation along with household resources, caregiver time and workload). Therefore, bringing together behaviour change efforts with other programs to fully support 1000-day households will be essential to help households practice good nutrition.
 - **Anemia:** Anemia affects women and men across India; research has focused on understanding use and uptake of iron supplements among women, but more attention is needed to addressing adolescent anemia and on addressing men’s anemia. As with other challenges, anemia is caused by factors other than iron intake, and those additional factors such as infection, inflammation, other nutrients, all need attention.
 - **Food supplements** in nutrition programs: Scientific evidence supports the inclusion of high-quality food supplements in nutrition programs. For India, in addition to updating nutritional composition of foods included in the ICDS, for women and for children, more efforts are now needed to address implementation areas that affect the reach, quality and uptake of these foods across state models. Efforts are also needed to deepen the integration of food supplements with other aspects of the program.
 - **Cash transfer programs:** PMMVY’s design is well-targeted to the 1000-day window but research suggests that efforts are needed to increase awareness of the cash transfer program, to make program enrolment processes easy, reduce payment delays to ensure timely age-targeting, and connect the PMMVY cash transfers more effectively with existing ICDS and health services to enhance impact.
 - **COVID-19 and nutrition:** Several new findings are emerging from researchers across India on COVID-19 and aspects of nutrition. Creating routine opportunities to



review research findings with researchers in India and to invest in distilling insights for policy across different data sources and data types.

- **Strengthening the building blocks of delivery systems:** Research highlights that different aspects of the current systems delivering nutrition interventions need to be strengthened as these are the building blocks for high quality program delivery. Investments are needed in infrastructure, financing and human resources. Emerging findings on the use of technology suggest positive impacts on program implementation but more is needed to make technology solutions even more effective at scale. Findings on data use provide new insights into how program implementers at multiple levels use data for program improvement; these insights should be carefully considered. Finally, a range of efforts remain important on supporting the operational and technical capabilities that can support high quality program delivery. A key recommendation is to review the research and program experiences on these four areas to help ongoing efforts on systems strengthening.
- **Convergence:** Despite many program efforts aimed at convergence, the current state of effective convergence – i.e., reach of key programs to vulnerable 1000-day households – remains out of reach. Both research and new implementation efforts are needed to ensure that multiple programs and interventions, together, create a *circle of protection* for every 1000-day household.
- **Food systems:** Food systems include all the ways in which nutritious food reaches our plates and across rural and urban India, more efforts are needed to consolidate previous research that cuts across issues of agriculture-nutrition linkages, food fortification, food in public programs, and unhealthy food environments. Food systems efforts need to go beyond agriculture-nutrition linkages and be more comprehensive, especially because food environments are changing rapidly both in urban and in rural areas.
- **Closing research gaps and improving use of research in programs.** Sessions focused on highlighting areas of nutrition implementation research that need more attention in India – fortification, nutrition behaviors in the first 1000 days, quality of nutrition interventions and services, and convergence to reach 1000-day households were key gap areas that were identified. In addition, approaches to strengthen research and policy linkages were also discussed, including stronger linkages between state governments and local researchers, as well as engagement processes that improve research integration into programs.



About the Event

Delivering for Nutrition in India: Insights from Implementation Research was the third India-focused nutrition implementation research conference and the first ever virtual conference on nutrition implementation research. Previous in-person conferences were held in 2016 and in 2019.

Background

India's major nutrition efforts - POSHAN Abhiyaan, and initiatives like 'Anemia Mukht Bharat' and 'Eat Right India' – aim to address malnutrition in all its forms in India. These efforts recognize the importance of the first 1000 days of life, the value of scaling up effective interventions, the critical role of improving nutrition-related behaviors for all, and of addressing the underlying social determinants of India's malnutrition challenge through actions in diverse sectors. They also explicitly recognize the importance of political and administrative leadership and of tackling governance and strengthening systems. Crises like pandemics and natural disasters have the potential to stall progress, but not if programs adapt, transform and redeploy with new vigor.

Why implementation research?

The success of these massive efforts across India ultimately depend on improving coverage and quality of interventions and effectively addressing social, economic and other factors that can support families to adopt healthy diets and lifestyles. Implementation research can help identify challenges, test solutions, and inform program scale-up and sustainability. There remain multiple challenges to achieving coverage, continuity, intensity and quality of the nutrition interventions delivered across systems in India. Implementation research can help to identify challenges and solutions.

Process

Through an open call, abstracts were invited on research studies and implementation experiences focused on various aspects of POSHAN Abhiyaan and other platforms supporting actions for nutrition. Selection of abstracts for oral presentation and posters was made through a double-blind review process. The conference program featured three [pre-conference workshops](#), three plenary lecture sessions, 12 thematic sessions based on selected oral and poster presentations, three social hangouts and opening and closing panels with policymakers and research funders.

Participants

The conference convened academics, implementers, development partners, and policymakers from multiple institutes on a common platform to share and discuss evidence on strengthening the implementation of maternal and child nutrition initiatives.

Expected outcomes

The discussions and deliberations emerging from this conference are expected to convey, in a collective voice, the research-based insights to nutrition stakeholders and policymakers to bolster actions for tackling India's nutrition challenge.