Working to Improve Nutrition Through Participatory Cropping Systems Research in Malawi

The Soils, Food and Healthy Communities Project, Ekwendeni, Malawi

Ekwendeni Hospital
PATH Canada
IDRC
Outline of Presentation

- Background
- Rationale
- Research questions, approach & methods
- Results: 1) community response; 2) food security; 3) nutritional outcomes.
- Challenges
- Implications and future plans
- Questions
Agriculture & Nutrition Links

- Agricultural production improvements alone are less likely to improve nutrition.*
- Interactions with other crops.
- Effects on labor, especially for women.
- Uses of crop sales.
- Nutrition problems linked to other issues e.g. sanitation

92% of households live in rural areas and rely on own-food production.

Three-fifths of population cannot meet basic daily needs.

49% stunting in under-five children in 2001.

Major food crops: maize, cassava, groundnuts, beans, millet, sorghum, sweet potatoes.
What was (part of) the Problem?

- High rates of child stunting observed in mobile clinics.
- High food insecurity.
- Low N inputs and low maize yields.
- Fertilizer unaffordable.
- Communities expressed interest in alternatives to commercial fertilizer.
- Lack of knowledge or access to alternative N sources (legumes, manure).
A Word about Child Malnutrition

- Malnutrition contributes to approximately 55% of under-five child mortality.
- ~20% of Malawian children do not reach the age of 5 years.
- Poor child growth is associated with decreased cognitive and physical capacity and increased prevalence of chronic disease in adulthood.
Why Legumes As a Solution?

- Edible legumes provide food source while improving soil.
- Legumes are self-pollinating and can add N to soil.
- Legumes already grown by most farmers in region but not optimized.
- Previous research on ‘best bet’ legume options in Malawi.
‘Best Bet’ Legume Options*

- Pigeonpea (*Cajanus cajan*) and groundnut (*Arachis hypogaea*) intercropped
- Pigeonpea and soybean (*Glycine max*) intercropped
- Maize (*Zea mays*) and pigeonpea intercropped
- *Mucuna pruriens*
- *Tephrosia voglii*

How Will Legumes Affect Soils, Food and Healthy Communities?

- **Soils**: Crop residue incorporation improves soil fertility.
- **Food**: Increased legume production/types; increased maize production.
- **Health**: Feeding legumes to young children or selling legumes and buying nutritious food improves child growth.
- **Communities**: Working together on research increases capacity of communities to solve problems.
Research Approach

- 7 pilot villages to test legume options
- 10 x 10 m plots
- Farmer Research Team (FRT) in each village
- Mother-baby trials
- Any village member can test legume options
- Interdisciplinary research team work with FRT to assess legume options
Research Methods

- Semi-structured interviews and focus groups.
- Participatory rural appraisal methods such as food security ranking to develop local indicators.
- Pre-post, control-intervention longitudinal survey design of 240 households including anthropometric and dietary data.
- Yield data collected annually by FRT.
- Soil nutrient data on a sub-sample annually.
Results I. Community Interest

- Participating Households
- Women Farmers
- Villages

Year:
- 2000-01
- 2001-02
- 2002-03
- 2003-04
- 2004-2005

# Households
- 0
- 500
- 1000
- 1500
- 2000
- 2500
- 3000
- 3500
- 4000
- 4500

# Villages
- 0
- 20
- 40
- 60
- 80
- 100
- 120
- 140

Legend:
- Participating Households
- Women Farmers
- Villages
Farmer Research Team Model

- Effective at spreading information
- Heavy workload
- Village leaders can play critical role
- Link with hospital important to success
- Issue of reporting research results
Results II. Agriculture


- Maize & Ppea
- Ppea & Gnut
- Ppea & Soybean
- Mucuna
- Tephrosia
Maize Color after Legumes
(August 2002, n=89)
Why Choose Pigeon Pea & Groundnut or Pigeon Pea & Soya Beans?

- Food insecure households need edible legumes!
- Pigeonpea harvested late in dry season.
- Groundnuts are higher yielding than local varieties, high in oil.
- All 3 crops are fed to children in porridges.
- All crops good sources of gifts and bartering.
Results III. Food Security

- Farmers reported increases in food availability in homes.
- Pigeonpea valued especially for late dry season availability.
- Conflicts within the home over use of legumes.
Seed Flows

19 out of 21 farmers interviewed in 2004 had shared seed because:

- ‘Wedding gift’
- Exchange for labor
- Help in times of need
- Try new variety
- Social obligation
## Legume Expansion (Interviews N=21)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Treatment</th>
<th># of Farmers</th>
<th>Estimated Area (ha)</th>
<th>Increase (from 10x10 m)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gnut &amp; Ppea</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>50 times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gnuts only</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>50 times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ppea &amp; Soya</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>50 times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maize &amp; Ppea</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>25 times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mucuna</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>25 times</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Nutrition Findings I

- Role of grandmothers critical in early child feeding.
- Early introduction of watery porridge.
- Informal chatting as source of knowledge transfer.
- Labor shortage in rainy season for feeding young children.
Nutrition Education

- Nutrition village teams.
- 4 themes: breastfeeding, legume recipes, family cooperation, frequent feeding of young children.
- SFHC community nutritionist provides training on each theme.
- Recipe days, dramas, role plays, informal chatting.
Nutrition Findings II

Legume Consumption in Children
(August 2002 n=88)
Frequency of Legume Consumption

Children (%) Consuming Legumes > 3x/week
(August 2002, n=88)

- Groundnut
- Soya bean

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency (%)</th>
<th>Groundnut</th>
<th>Soya bean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0%</td>
<td>Intervention: 25%</td>
<td>Control: 0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5%</td>
<td>Intervention: 25%</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Intervention: 25%</td>
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<tr>
<td>30%</td>
<td>Intervention: 25%</td>
<td>Control: 0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>35%</td>
<td>Intervention: 25%</td>
<td>Control: 0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40%</td>
<td>Intervention: 25%</td>
<td>Control: 0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Challenges

- Success of project led to over-extension.
- Involving scientists in community program.
- Maintaining enthusiasm of FRT.
- Addressing ‘gender’ in respectful ways.
- Village-level politics.
- Broader structural factors e.g. 2002 famine.
Research & Development Link Has Challenges & Rewards!

**Benefits**
- Technologies tested in ‘real life’ and adapted to fit conditions.
- Hospital links facilitated community relationships.
- Information from development activities fed back into research.
- Research information spread quickly to farmers, other organizations & programs.

**Conflicts**
- Quality of data (e.g. control communities).
- Collection of data can be too time-consuming.
- Reporting research to communities effectively.
- Expansion from testing legume options to promoting them.
- Involving farmers in a meaningful way in research.
Future Directions

- Involving grandparents in nutrition education.
- Linking agricultural topics to nutrition with ‘clubs’.
- Adapting legume options for AIDS-affected families.
- Improved germplasm and management (e.g. pests) of legumes, especially soybeans & pigeonpeas.
- Farmer apprenticeship to maintain FRT enthusiasm.
Conclusion: Agriculture Can Help Improve Nutrition

- Agriculture is only one of many factors that affect food security and nutrition.
- If food security and nutrition are goals, need to build into research design and activities.
- Conflicts between research and development activities need to be considered.
- Participatory research helps shed light on social factors that influence outcomes.
- Participatory research allows community to take ownership of research and development activities.
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- Ekwendeni Hospital
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