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Leveraging IGNITE to Expand Technical Areas: Spotlight on Fair & Sustainable



A Case Study by IGNITE

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The Impacting Gender and Nutrition through Innovative Technical Exchange in Agriculture (IGNITE) project was a technical assistance programme, implemented by Tanager and its learning partners, in four African countries from 2018–2024. The project supported 35 African agricultural institutions across 18 countries to integrate gender and nutrition into their business operations and agricultural interventions.

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Leveraging IGNITE to Expand Technical Areas: Spotlight on Fair & Sustainable

IGNITE LSP

Fair and Sustainable Consulting Ethiopia (F&S)

Profile:

International consultancy and social enterprise, supporting clients in different thematic areas in agribusiness

Working with IGNITE since: 2021

Offices: Netherlands (HQ), Ethiopia and Kenya

Typical Clientele:

International NGOs and Private Sector clients, Government Actors and Local Organisations

Impetus to Become IGNITE LSP

F&S had specific reasons for wanting to become an IGNITE Local service provider (LSP) in Ethiopia. The social enterprise consultancy firm already had a background in gender, implementing gender mainstreaming and gender inclusion activities for clients.

‘We did not have as bold a profile in nutrition,’ says Hibiye Tesfaye, F&S’s interim general manager and gender expert, who served as the lead writer for the firm’s proposal to become an IGNITE LSP. ‘So we have the gender part. If we get the assignment, then we will have exposure on the nutrition part—that was the motivation [for the application].’

The calculation paid off.

‘The moment we started working with IGNITE, the more that we started to engage on projects that also have nutrition components,’ says Lensa Girma, agroecology, nutrition, and food systems consultant for F&S. ‘As a consulting firm, we mostly used to focus on market value chains and empowerment. But thanks to IGNITE, we get a chance to [apply] more of the nutrition tools [to our work].’

F&S served as an IGNITE LSP for 3 years. From the staff testimony, it is clear that the role provided several benefits—and not just in terms of growth in nutrition, a technical area new to them. The role introduced new dimensions to existing work with clients and opened up new business potential. It also enhanced the firm’s capacity in its mainstay area of gender.

‘Before we started engaging with IGNITE, we had some projects that we were really involved in [in food security], but we weren’t doing the big picture when it comes to nutrition,’ says Girma. ‘The more we know about the concepts and tools, the more we start to engage on nutrition assignments. So, it really changed us and given us a picture where we can also incorporate nutrition in the projects that we are working for.’

Incorporating Nutrition into Existing Projects

Following capacity building by IGNITE, F&S staff started to proactively incorporate elements of what they had learnt into client projects. For example, F&S has been involved in a pre-existing project before IGNITE, where it has been building the general capacity of a technical vocational college for the past five years. One of the project components involved establishing a daycare center where employees of the college could leave their children while they taught.

Because school lunches are not provided in Ethiopia, these parents were packing lunches for their young children. F&S’s new found knowledge in nutrition prompted the staff to look into the quality of those packed lunches. ‘When we saw what kind of meals

[parents] were bringing for their kids, [we realised] it’s not really what is essential for the children but what is convenient to put in the lunchbox,’ Tesfaye explains. To address this, F&S produced a manual and organised training for the parents and the school on the importance of nutritious food for young children. The training included how to safely pack a balanced meal in a lunchbox. Tesfaye adds that the training by IGNITE also prompted her to become more deliberate about what she packs in her own children’s lunches.

In another case, F&S was assessing the impact of women’s involvement in a coffee value chain. These assessments usually inquire how respondents use the income generated from the activity: ‘What do you do with the money? Do you buy clothes? Do you do this?’ says Tesfaye.

This time, Tesfaye and Girma proactively added a nutrition-oriented question, prompted by their training by IGNITE. They asked project participants whether their increased income had led them to change the types of meals they make. Tesfaye points out that while F&S was not there to measure nutrition for the project, the questions brought in new perspectives on gender: ‘I can boldly say that we process some of the information from nutrition perspectives [now, due to] our exposure working with Tanager. It has helped us to open our eyes to see the gender dynamics from a nutrition perspective.’

That perspective has allowed F&S to offer its newly built capacity to clients. As Girma says, ‘Before, [clients] ... focus more on the food security issue, [on] empowerment for job creation. But the more we tell them that we also have experts at home and that we can do a nutrition assessment, the more they



become interested in the agenda. They're like, 'OK, what if we also commit to these kinds of tools, this kind of assessment, rather than only looking at the food security part, since nutrition is a byproduct?'

Gender Transformative Changes

Serving as an IGNITE LSP appears to have added value to F&S on other fronts.

While gender was already a technical area in the firm, the experience with IGNITE expanded its gender knowledge base. F&S had previously largely worked with organisations to implement gender at the household level. However, working with IGNITE clients such as Digital Green and Sasakawa Africa Association built the capacity of the firm to tackle gender at the national and larger institutional level.

'[Working as an IGNITE LSP] has enhanced our understanding ... of gender from a higher level, in a way,' Tesfaye says. 'It has strengthened our mechanism,' Tesfaye adds, noting that she has revised F&S's gender training materials and methodology following IGNITE training.

The firm has also benefited from its relationship with Tanager, as well as with the other IGNITE LSPs.

'Counting on our experience working with Tanager [through IGNITE], we have applied for [proposals] that are at the regional level. We profile ourselves that we are a Tanager LSP, and Tanager is working in this country so in a way we have that exposure. We can also use the LSPs in Tanzania, Nigeria, and Burkina as our partners in a way. That has given us confidence that we have that bigger network, and we qualify to take the bigger assignment[s],' Tesfaye says.

Cascading Knowledge to Enhance Learning

Even staff not specifically involved in IGNITE projects have benefited from F&S's status as an IGNITE LSP. Emmy Mugasia is an associate consultant for F&S in Kenya who attended an IGNITE-led monitoring and evaluation (M&E) training in October 2022. The training focused on gender and nutrition indicators in agriculture programming.

Mugasia does not do any direct work with IGNITE but had been invited to the session as an F&S staff member. But the training has stuck.

'It was one training [session], but I've been able to use [what I learned] to share with other organisations,' she says.

After the workshop, Mugasia immediately put her new knowledge to use on a client evaluation for an international women's economic empowerment organisation. Later, she partnered with a gender expert colleague on a community engagement and gender analysis for an international conservation organisation.

'The project was gender-blind, so they wanted us to look at it and provide gender indicators,' Mugasia explains. She says she was able to actively contribute to the assignment, thanks to the IGNITE training.

In this way, Mugasia has been able to cascade knowledge and skills gained from IGNITE's training to other organisations.

'Without [IGNITE] equipping us, I don't think it would have been as smooth as it went. So, I'm really grateful,' Mugasia says, noting that she still refers to the notes she took from the session.

Challenges with LSP Model

'The Nature of Consultancy'

Mugasia's example illustrates IGNITE's impact. It is not always a smooth path from training to application, however, as a consulting firm, F&S operates with a slightly different structure than some of the other IGNITE LSPs. According to Clarice Kionge, institutional development manager for IGNITE, F&S's consultancy status may have been an advantage when the project was choosing LSPs.

'If you look at technical assistance and what Tanager is doing [through IGNITE], the thinking was, if we can get someone offering services—which is literally what F&S does—then this must be the right fit,' Kionge explains.

As a consultancy, F&S operates with a small full-time staff. Associate consultants, who are independent, or freelance are recruited onto projects on an as-needed, contract basis. In this way, F&S can maintain a roster of consultants in various technical areas in a budget-efficient way. As Tesfaye notes, if F&S does not have enough client work for full-time staff, 'they become a cost.'

But this also means that some technical areas, such as M&E, do not have full-time staff. Further, the F&S consultants who received IGNITE training did not automatically work on IGNITE projects. Nor is there any guarantee that the trained consultants would be available to work on those F&S assignments with gender and nutrition components.

There is also the matter of what clients deem to be important.

Simone Reinders, an associate consultant in M&E, research, and knowledge management for F&S Kenya, benefited from an IGNITE-led social and behaviour change training in April 2023. She uses her training to identify how social and behaviour change can add value for the clients and incorporates the approach into proposals. She has also suggested behaviour change as an extra element for measurement on M&E projects. Since the IGNITE training, however, she has not had many opportunities to work on projects focused on gender or nutrition, and few of her clients



have implemented her suggestions on social and behaviour change.

‘I think that’s the nature of consultancy. I don’t have a lot of say in how an organisation works or what they choose to do,’ Reinders explains. ‘We both know that in the NGO world, there are a lot of people who do not go much beyond what their funders want and need. In some cases, you will mention [social and behavior change], and there will be interest. But whether it actually happens remains a question.’

Tesfaye echoes this sentiment. Citing M&E, for example, she acknowledges: ‘We are aware that there is a better way of doing M&E when it comes to gender and nutrition, ... how to feed data, how to do analysis. But sometimes the challenge is to apply it to other assignments. It also depends on the interest of those clients.’

Limitations on LSP Operations

Another, perhaps unexpected, challenge for F&S, was its relatively modest engagement with IGNITE clients. F&S worked alongside Tanager’s IGNITE staff to provide capacity building and training for Digital Green and supported a gender and nutrition research assignment for Sasakawa Africa Association.

‘I feel like the investment [from IGNITE] is way bigger than what we have delivered. We want to have more engagement with the clients and more clients,’ Tesfaye says. ‘There were times where I requested

[of the IGNITE team], ‘Can we also do mapping? Partnerships? Can we pitch on behalf of you and attract more clients?’ Because I know how well-designed the training materials are, how the expert label—the Tanager label—[will be effective]. I felt that we can really do bigger.’

Kionge notes the demand for IGNITE services in Ethiopia was lower than what some of the other LSPs in other countries experienced.

‘It did not have anything to do with Fair & Sustainable, and it had nothing to do with our technical assistance service,’ Kionge says. ‘It has just been, I think, the kind of priorities that the clients have had in Ethiopia.’

She adds: ‘Our clients in Ethiopia were donor-dependent. Their priorities are this deadline, and the timeline [of implementation]. All that [affected] how they [took] the IGNITE work.’

What held F&S back from going out and trying to pitch for more clients independently?

The way Tesfaye tells it, the IGNITE arrangement limited what F&S felt it could do on its own. She explains, ‘We are a local service provider hired by Tanager. So in a way, we have an expectation to be told [what to do]. That’s also how our working framework is: We have counted activities, then we just follow that.’

Opportunities for More

Tesfaye sees opportunities to continue to expand IGNITE's footprint in Ethiopia, however..

'With the training materials, the training methodologies, the process I see from the Tanager team, we could profile products, training products for organisations that are engaged in agriculture and nutrition,' she suggests. 'So, we can deliver training with resource materials, certify, coach them, follow them, and see the different levels of engagement,' she adds.

Another starting point may be rooted in the Gender and Nutrition Learning Network, which IGNITE launched in Ethiopia in August 2023. The F&S staff who worked directly with IGNITE staff to organise the activity agree that it was a valuable event that received considerable interest from the attendees. But F&S staff appear to harbor some uncertainty on the next steps.

Having observed a real desire by the participants' for more networking, Reinders suggests a follow-up forum, with built-in networking time and practical tools that make it easy for organisations to engage in partnerships. 'Implementers wanted donors, and donors wanted implementers,' she says of the first forum. She suggests that IGNITE's well-developed framework and tools can offer a useful starting point for stakeholders, with F&S implementing them more broadly.

Tesfaye sees a similar opportunity. 'We see our role on networking [to be] bringing similar like-minded organisations to coming to one way of doing things that we could produce different guidelines. We could identify an area of influence at the policy level,' she says, noting the potential for a network to draw attention to significant issues.

'I want to see more engagement, for Tanager to get engaged with different organisations, to become more visible at the country level,' Tesfaye declares. 'In Ethiopia, we are 85 to 90% dependent on agriculture. Nutrition is also our priority, yet we struggle to address it. I see it's the fertile ground to promote the issue at a bigger level.'

The opportunities are there—but so, too, is the need for more technical assistance such as IGNITE, contends Tesfaye. When asked about areas where F&S might need more capacity building or technical assistance, she answers: 'We feel that we want to get more engaged and want to be more involved on a bigger scale. And whenever you put us at the bigger scale, we need the support, coaching, and the M&E.'

Lessons and Recommendations

- 1. Continuous capacity building for LSPs strengthens technical assistance delivery on gender and nutrition integration; however, clients decide on the support desired.**

F&S staff reported having greatly improved on how they offer technical assistance to clients. The nutrition portfolio, which initially was low, has grown, and F&S has continued to strengthen its gender portfolio. However, F&S faces a major challenge during the delivery of technical assistance because most of its clients are development organisations funded by donors implementing programmes with pre-determined design and deliverables. Based on the gender analysis and nutrition diagnostic report, F&S and Tanager can advise the client on how to mainstream gender and integrate nutrition into their work, but it is up to the client to express interest or decide on the assistance needed.

- 2. LSPs may need to market their services differently to overcome client resistance.**

In some instances, clients may have a defined package of services that they use LSPs for, limiting the opportunity to receive new technical assistance. To counter this, LSPs may have to approach their client engagements differently, such as through more client education about the value of various services or using different marketing tactics. Not all LSPs may know how to effectively sell their services and they may require additional support to address this challenge.

- 3. There is significant value-add for organisations that become LSPs. However, success requires institutional support and buy-in.**

Becoming an IGNITE LSP offered these F&S several advantages. The role enhanced the organisation's reputation, expanded technical capacity, opened new funding opportunities, and provided access to a new roster of clients. Success, however, is not guaranteed. Becoming an effective LSP requires institutional support and a long-term outlook on the strategic value of investments, as continuous resourcing of technical experts is needed. As previously noted, organisations also need to have an interest in diversifying into new services and a client base that supports

this interest. Organisations may also fare better when they have existing institutional capacities and systems upon which to build.

4. Knowledge transfer¹, direct capacity building, and networking strengthen LSP capacity, positioning them to cascade IGNITE learnings and service offerings to others.

Despite LSPs being experts in their field and clients having varying needs, F&S staff reported having learnt a significant amount themselves when co-delivering technical assistance services to clients. This was cascaded to its projects that have a focus on women's empowerment, gender, and nutrition.

On knowledge brokerage, IGNITE facilitated knowledge sharing among LSPs through various platforms, including a research summit, LSPs summit, and some training tailored specifically for LSPs to enable them to share their best practices, learn from each other, connect, and explore potential areas of collaboration. F&S noted that these engagements, including the opportunity to work and learn alongside other IGNITE LSPs, were beneficial for the continued development of its technical capacity. Overall, these efforts contributed to increased learning and networking and have the potential to increase demand for IGNITE services from clients.

5. Creating and strengthening local networks offers a gateway to advance gender and nutrition integration.

Tanager and F&S launched the gender & nutrition learning network for different stakeholders in the agri-food sector to share their best practices, models, and tools on gender mainstreaming and nutrition-sensitive agricultural approaches. The network, which brings together IGNITE local partners, development partners, researchers, policymakers, and the private sector, also allows participants to collaborate amongst themselves to avoid duplication of efforts, leading to greater impact.

The network elicited excitement amongst stakeholders. However, there is still much support needed to strengthen it, define its structure of operations, and follow up with members to keep up the momentum. F&S and Tanager can take advantage of such forums to share more about their work as well as learn from clients, interact with potential new clients, and explore opportunities for engagement with other key stakeholders in the agri-food sector.

The LSPs from IGNITE implementation countries have also formed their own network to share successes, challenges, and existing opportunities for offering technical assistance to clients. This enhances learning and opportunities for future collaboration.

6. Scale training to other programmatic staff to enhance efficiency and service delivery.

IGNITE targeted gender, nutrition, and M&E experts in its training. However, F&S staff interviewed suggested that such training should be extended to other staff—especially those in finance—for better delivery of services. For instance, training on gender-responsive budgeting requires experts with a financial background, and someone knowledgeable in gender. Given potential staff capacity issues that arise from a consultancy framework, extending training to other programmatic staff would be beneficial to the entire team.

Conclusion

F&S is expected to deliver technical assistance on gender and nutrition integration to clients even beyond the IGNITE project. From interviews with staff, it seems that knowledge transfer has been achieved from their engagement with IGNITE, as well as a technical transfer of tools. Although they have gained additional technical expertise in gender and nutrition, F&S staff still require continuous technical support, especially on M&E, as well as guidance in steering the gender and nutrition learning network. It is therefore important that LSPs continue to receive ongoing coaching and support for continuous quality improvements as they grow into their roles.

¹ A process by which knowledge, ideas and experience move from the source of knowledge to the recipient of that knowledge.

This case study was written by Mayu Mishina, Senior Director of Strategic Communications; and Sharon Anyango, Communications and Knowledge Management Manager, Tanager

IGNITE Partners

Tanager, an ACDI/VOCA affiliate, is a global development organization that empowers people to realize life-changing economic and social opportunities. We have 30 years of experience implementing gender-transformative and nutrition-sensitive agriculture approaches, connecting actors across the production supply chain, fostering knowledge and access for women and other marginalized groups, and unlocking sustainable, climate-smart economic opportunities for all.

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