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Threading the Needle: Spotlight on IGNITE's Technical Experts



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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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Threading the Needle: Spotlight on IGNITE’s Technical Experts

For the technical experts serving on the Impacting Gender & Nutrition through Innovative Technical Exchange in Agriculture (IGNITE) project, providing technical assistance (TA) is not simply a matter of knowing the subject matter.

‘Working with clients and being able to deliver technical assistance requires some amount of soft skills,’ observes Catherine Macharia-Mutie, deputy team leader for IGNITE. ‘Beyond you needing to be a technical expert—you have your nutrition skills, your gender skills—there’s much more [that is required] for you to be able to deliver to your clients.’

This was one of the many topics discussed by IGNITE technical experts during a virtual learning workshop held on August 22, 2023. Nearly a dozen IGNITE team members from Tanager shared best practices, insights, and challenges during the 90-minute session. The session brought together gender and nutrition experts, researchers, monitoring and evaluation specialists, and team leads. They joined the meeting from multiple countries and spoke about their experiences working with clients from both anglophone and francophone countries in Africa. The following are some of the issues that emerged from the discussion.

1. Client availability can significantly impact the timing of technical assistance delivery.

IGNITE worked with clients to determine the specific activities and materials to be provided, before technical assistance could be delivered. Because client leadership tends to be eager for technical assistance at this point, they would be actively involved in planning the scope of work.

While clients would express enthusiasm about the technical assistance to be delivered, it did not mean they would be available to receive the support on the agreed-upon timelines. IGNITE staff frequently experienced delays from the client side when they tried to deliver the technical assistance activities.

‘Since we are working with agriculture institutions that most of the time are working in seasons, we find that, yes, the material [we’ve agreed upon and developed] has been delivered, but there’s no one to receive it because most of the guys

are out in the field,' said IGNITE Gender Expert Winnie Osulah.

IGNITE staff employed a number of strategies to try to mitigate this issue. One was to try to synchronize work plans with client institutions—but this had its own challenges, as IGNITE's operational calendars often differed from those of their clients.

Additionally, before finalising scopes of work, technical experts would often go back to the client to confirm that the originally agreed-upon timelines would still work. Osulah offered a hypothetical: 'For example, when we're [planning on] doing staff training, are the targeted staff [actually] available during a given period of time?'

IGNITE's staff in Burkina Faso would share with clients a calendar of the intended activities for an upcoming month prior to starting the actual activity. 'So what we have [planned] in September, we already have shared [ahead of time] with clients to confirm the dates and their availability,' explained Sokhna Gaye, an IGNITE gender expert based in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso.

The staff would then follow up with additional reminders. During monthly meetings with the client liaison persons, the technical experts would provide advance notice of plans one to three months ahead. Gaye said that she would also follow up on any emails with a phone call to ensure clients had understood what she covered in the email.

2. Staff transitions — on both ends — creates difficulties.

The experts observed that staff transition at IGNITE or the client institution can create challenges. Client staffing changes can mean not only starting anew on the relationship building, but also on knowledge building. IGNITE Nutrition Expert Josias Compaore cited a Burkinabé client whose nutrition focal point had recently moved to another organisation. 'The new [focal point] that the client chose [did not have] any knowledge in the nutrition field. So, we have to begin with some training and [help] him to improve his work in the nutrition aspect,' he said.

Mary Thamari, an IGNITE gender expert based in Nairobi, Kenya, cited a client's reported experience in having to work with different IGNITE gender experts at different times during the relationship.

In this case, Thamari explained, the client's gender focal point had been well briefed on the IGNITE transition. Meetings also took place

between IGNITE's outgoing and incoming gender experts, to ensure a smooth handover. However, these changes had not been well communicated with the rest of the client's team. 'That can demotivate, or make a client feel that their needs have not fully been met,' she said, adding: 'To some extent, the clients might feel that there are some needs ... that have fallen through the cracks.'

3. Client knowledge levels impacted what IGNITE could do for — and with — the client.

While clients were often eager to learn about gender and nutrition issues—wherever their starting point—technical experts reported that working with focal points who are not gender or nutrition experts can add an additional challenge to delivering technical assistance.

'That limits the ability to pass on the information or to utilise the capacity you as the gender expert are providing to the teams who really need this information and this technical support,' explained Thamari.

Thamari and Olive Muthamia, an IGNITE nutrition expert, recounted a situation where they proposed certain services to a client in East Africa, only to have the client reject them. 'At the moment, [...] what we saw is that they did not understand the importance of that service to their overall business,' Muthamia observed.

The two technical experts had to quickly adjust tactics and 'step back,' Thamari said. 'We stepped back not as giving up but as a way of setting that culture with the client that we really want to listen, not to impose what we think, even if we know or we think that [the proposed service] is useful for them. I think our stepping back at this moment is really to observe. We still have regular conversations, so that along the way we can again try to link whatever other needs they bring to this service.'

Muthamia agreed, 'Giving more time and engaging with the client over multiple times to [have them] understand the importance of that service is the best way to go about it.'

Is it at all possible to prevent such a situation from occurring in the first place?

'If an organisation is in a position to bring in an expert who is trained in that particular area, on gender and nutrition, or gender or nutrition, then that would be the ideal,' said Charles Karari, IGNITE's monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) manager. 'But if that is not possible, then the organisation just volunteers one person who

they feel could be their focal person. And it is up to our team of experts to work with that person, bring them to speed in understanding what is needed in the integration of gender and nutrition.’

As such, IGNITE experts agreed that continued engagement and ongoing mentoring was key to providing the most value to clients. The IGNITE team in Burkina Faso, for example, used the monthly client meetings to introduce new topics in gender and nutrition. During their client engagements, IGNITE’s East Africa team worked to find teachable moments that would connect to previously discussed topics.

4. Client assessments or diagnostics help build evidence — and create demand — for technical assistance support.

At the other end of the knowledge spectrum from brand-new focal points are the MEL teams found at client institutions. According to Karari, IGNITE clients, especially from the non-governmental sector had very well-developed monitoring, evaluation and learning systems. ‘They even have officers who are trained in monitoring, evaluation, and learning, or experts who are very well trained in data collection, analysis, and all that,’ he said.

While these staff are well-versed in their area of expertise, however, Karari said they did not often think about gender and nutrition. ‘In Burkina Faso, the microfinance institutions [we were working with] have been collecting all these huge data elements,’ he explained. ‘But they only analyse like five or six elements because they have never considered the importance of the other gender indicators—even though they collect them.’

Karari added, ‘Once they buy in to integrating gender and nutrition, then they’ll go into other areas, including monitoring evaluation and learning, and maybe even research.’

To cultivate that buy-in, IGNITE technical experts agreed that using client diagnostics or assessments was key. ‘I think for technical assistance, we should first be able to know where the organisation is—by diagnostics or then the next step, a formative assessment, so that all the assistance we’re giving is based on some evidence,’ Thamari said.

Macharia-Mutie agreed: ‘Creating evidence for TA support is critical.’

Gaye emphasised that conducting an assessment was particularly helpful, ‘because institutions often think they’re doing gender, whether they actually are or not.’

‘Using any assessment approach — diagnostic, audit, discussion in beginning for client uptake and identifying gaps — helps to let them see the gaps they have,’ she added.

Assessments also formed the basis of a tailored scope of work, allowing clients to commit to, and help determine, how the IGNITE technical assistance would unfold.

Demand creation may flow naturally after an assessment. ‘For clients we have done a diagnostic process [for], I would say that would be the first point where demand creation for services is created,’ explained Karari. ‘Because you can tell from each of the domains in the diagnostic process, based on

what they score, ... there is a plan to track changes across all those domains and subdomains. [And] if you need to do a training or develop a gender strategy, then how will you measure that gender strategy is useful to your organisation? That creates demand for other services, including monitoring and evaluation and accountability processes.’

5. IGNITE clients with donor-provided funding for gender and nutrition mainstreaming had different expectations from independently acquired clients.

In providing gender and nutrition-sensitive MEL training, Karari would ask IGNITE clients a key question: ‘I’ll go in and [conduct] a training that talks about the logical frameworks, their monitoring and evaluation plans, and whether they integrate indicators, gender or nutrition indicators. If not, [I would ask], how much are they willing to include [them] in the existing and future M&E plans?’

Of course, future plans — and whether gender and nutrition mainstreaming is incorporated into them — can depend on funding availability. Interestingly, IGNITE staff said that simply having the funding for these services did not guarantee a clear path forward.

‘Most of our demand usually feels like it is IGNITE driven because you’re the one to identify the gaps. And then we take the client through a process to understand why, you know, what it takes for them to address those gaps,’ said Osulah. She suggested that funding sources can play an unexpected role in client commitment or expectations.

For instance, IGNITE staff had observed that clients referred to the project by a donor would enter the relationship with expectations of

guaranteed services. With such clients, ‘we get into trouble when it comes to budgeting for the activities we need to give them. We experience a lot of scope creep in the sense that ... they tell us, ‘But [the donor] says that you’re supposed to be giving us this technical support,’ said Osulah.

She added, ‘But what does this technical support really mean? As far as I’m concerned, it is my time as a technical expert that has already been paid for by the donor, but [clients] expect that, you know, when you are sending people for training, we meet the logistical costs. They imagine we have the budget, but ... the only budget we have is for our technical time.’

On the other hand, clients who approached IGNITE of their own accord often had a good sense of what IGNITE could offer and what they themselves had to bring to the table.

6. Encouraging clients to be proactive and promoting accountability can help ensure smoother delivery of technical assistance.

Despite the challenges with client expectations, IGNITE staff agreed on the value of having a mix of both referred and independently acquired clients. While clients who came to IGNITE of their own accord often understood their roles in the relationship, Team Lead Maureen Munjua pointed out that they sometimes did not know what services they needed. ‘So I see it being a mix of us guiding what they need and then also shaping with them what they [want],’ she said.

‘It’s a mix I would not want to let go, because it also provides a lot of learning,’ agreed Osulah.

The experts agreed that clarity with clients, however, was necessary. Encouraging clients to be proactive — and holding them accountable — would also ensure a smoother process for delivering technical assistance.

‘I think for me, what I want to say is that probably after the referral, there needs to be a way we engage so that it’s not like it is us prompting the client but rather ... see how best we make [the process] more client driven,’ said Clarice Kionge, IGNITE’s institutional development manager.

Similarly, Thamari said, ‘I wish there could be a progression of technical assistance that we



propose to say, ‘This is what IGNITE offers, because this is the best practice of the tried and tested assistance you need for you to get gender-mainstreamed or nutrition-sensitive in your organisation.’ Such a progression could, she suggested, offer client accountability and prevent issues of clients outrightly rejecting offered services and leaving both parties at an impasse on the next steps.

‘So if we offer an approach for social behaviour change communication or another approach for whatever it is, we can have now, like, kind of recipes: ‘You can go this pathway or this pathway.’ But the beginning point is already defined,’ Thamari said, because of the prior diagnostic or assessment that establishes a baseline of what is needed (See #5).

7. Ultimately, delivering technical assistance is a matter of threading the needle: Technical experts must possess seemingly opposing traits to successfully serve clients.

While subject matter expertise is critical in delivering technical assistance, the IGNITE technical team’s experience shows that an expert’s toolbox must be deep and varied to succeed. It would be helpful, for example, if the expert possesses the following:

A delicate balance of management skills and savvy in partnership engagement. In order to keep growing institutions’ competencies in gender and nutrition, technical experts must both manage an institution’s focal points as well as, in a way, its leadership. A scope of work must be agreed upon, work plans must be explained and reviewed. ‘Everything to some extent requires client management [to ensure buy-in],’ observed Kionge. But, she added, ‘You also need to be able to see them as a [part of your] team. So you’re a manager—but at the same time you are developing partnerships. For me, that means you need to understand how to nurture partnerships and sustain that partnership, even as you manage that client.’

An analytical mind, with a flair for creativity. An IGNITE technical expert needed to be able to assess and analyse where an institution was in terms of its gender and nutrition mainstreaming and how the institution could be guided to the next step. ‘We have to be solution-driven, and there is a need for a technical expert to see in an analytical way how we can improve what

institutions are doing,’ said Gaye, the gender expert in Burkina Faso. IGNITE developed a variety of gender and nutrition assessment tools, sensitization trainings, and modules to assist with this.

But, as Gaye pointed out, customisation was necessary to adapt to each client’s differences. Experts also needed to consider how they could ensure client buy-in and engagement. ‘We need this innovative way of thinking in addition to the analytical way of thinking,’ she said.

Sales and persuasion skills — tempered by an ability to be patient. Team Lead Munjua pointed out that the start of an IGNITE–client relationship often like a marketing pitch: ‘We are selling a service, and you have to almost pitch why that service is beneficial for that institution. So you don’t go into that conversation from a purely technical perspective,’ she said. In that sense, persuasion skills were handy to have.

But technical experts cannot be pushy. ‘You need to be able to convince the client that what you’re offering is good, but also be able to be patient when things don’t work out,’ said Macharia-Mutie.

Macharia-Mutie concluded: ‘I think for me IGNITE has been more testing the expert [than anything else]. So you have all the expertise, but somebody doesn’t think they need it or somebody doesn’t think they have the time for what we want to offer. So how do you still float . . . in that circumstance so when [the client] comes tomorrow, you will still be able to be happy to deliver what they want?’

Conclusion

The IGNITE project model heavily depended on the technical experts to deliver tailored technical assistance to its clients. As this case study demonstrates, such an approach requires a careful cultivation of relationships, and a lot of patience on both sides. IGNITE’s experts had to dig deep into their soft skills and innovative activity management, to create demand for the project’s services, keep the client committed to the process and ultimately deliver on agreed activities in a timely manner. For any technical assistance project, forging a collaborative relationship with the recipient agency is just as important as having the required technical expertise on board. This case study has also demonstrated some useful approaches that technical assistance projects can employ for a fruitful relationship with their clients.

This case study was written by **Mayu Mishina, Senior Director of Strategic Communications, 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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