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## Gender and Nutrition Impacts as Agricultural Institutions Respond to COVID-19



**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.



# Gender and Nutrition Impacts as Agricultural Institutions Respond to COVID-19

## Introduction

COVID-19 impacted farming households and the way agricultural institutions conduct their work. Numerous studies exist (including from IGNITE partners Laterite and 60 Decibels) that show the impact of COVID-19 on household-level socioeconomic, gender, and nutrition outcomes. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the vulnerability of agricultural households and the marginalised groups within them, indicating the need for agricultural institutions to adapt their strategies during crises. While COVID-19 was unprecedented, other crises are increasing including political conflicts, droughts, infestations, and others related to climate change. Agricultural institutions implementing gender and nutrition-sensitive agriculture interventions must be able to adapt.<sup>1</sup>

This case study has three sections:<sup>2</sup>

1. **Impact of COVID-19:** An overview of how the pandemic impacted households from a gender and nutrition perspective.
2. **IGNITE Client<sup>3</sup> Reaction:** Insights into how IGNITE's clients (agricultural institutions) adapted to the pandemic.
3. **Lessons Learnt:** Lessons from IGNITE clients, along with insights from gender and nutrition experts, highlighting ways agricultural institutions might react to future crises.

<sup>1</sup> The lessons within this case study focus specifically on the intersection of gender and nutrition for agricultural institutions during a crisis in sub-Saharan Africa. The insights and recommendations presented are meant to supplement any emergency response protocols for crisis situations.

<sup>2</sup> IGNITE used both primary and secondary data sources for this case study. Data was primarily qualitative in nature, except for some data from secondary research on the household impact of COVID-19, which was collected through a literature review.

<sup>3</sup> IGNITE used the term 'clients' for the institutions with which it worked. These include African NGOs, private sectors organizations, and governments.

# Impact of COVID-19

## Impacts on Agricultural Households

As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded, research captured the impact of the crisis on smallholder farmers. The research and feedback from IGNITE clients showed that the pandemic had the most impact on agricultural households in the following ways.

1. Decreased market access (both for buying and selling)
2. Declining nutritional quality

3. Strained household dynamics between men and women
4. Lack of income opportunities
5. Reduced farm-level productivity, primarily due to government shutdowns and diminished access to high-quality inputs

IGNITE clients also noted the emotional burden that accompanied the smallholder farmer's experience. The COVID-19 pandemic was unique in that it affected multiple growing seasons in a broader geographic area than most disasters, and made migration difficult, if not impossible.

### Impact on Gender

COVID-19 had a direct impact on women from agricultural households primarily due to 1) a disproportionate increase in labour burden,<sup>4,5</sup> 2) increased risk of domestic violence, and 3) compounded economic exclusion. Often, social expectations dictate that care and domestic responsibilities fall to women and girls.<sup>6</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic brought an increased need for sanitation and the related water collection; school closures; and family members falling sick, which added to the risk of increased exposure. Additionally, research shows that 'crises exacerbate ... gender ... inequalities and place women, girls ... at increased risk of gender-based violence (GBV) and intimate partner violence (IPV)'.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the pandemic dramatically affected women's incomes and women-owned businesses, primarily through reduced market access and decreased time for income-generating activities.

In agriculture programming, adjustments like shifting to farmer-targeted push-messages and data collection via mobile phones inherently favour men's voices, as women do not often own or use cell phones. The reduction in group meeting sizes as a result of the pandemic was a disadvantage to women who were responsible for childcare (and could not bring children to meetings), as well as women responsible for increased burdens, like domestic work (collecting additional water for sanitation) and care work (increased number of sick family members). The pandemic highlighted a renewed global focus on the importance of gender issues; the impact was so devastating that increased attention and focus is necessary for long-term recovery.

### Impacts on Nutrition

Research showed that 'the [COVID-19] crisis [undermined] the ability of farms and agri-enterprises to ensure consistent supplies of food to markets due to closures, labour shortages resulting from illness, and slowdowns in operations caused by physical distancing and lockdowns'.<sup>7</sup> In particular, rural markets were hit with unemployment and reduced incomes, along with increased food prices,<sup>8</sup> impacting not only households, but also the mechanisms that produce and supply food for urban and peri-urban populations.

IGNITE clients noted an increase in community awareness around nutrition and health, spread through government messaging. Households took steps to build immunity such as restricting alcohol consumption and incorporating exercise. Rapid assessments from IGNITE clients showed that most participating households reduced consumption to two meals per day. Clients in Burkina Faso reported that households faced reductions in on-farm subsistence and milk production, as well as consumption reductions (specifically around animal proteins) related to market-level stressors such as market closures, disrupted trade, unavailability of products, lack of diversity, and increased prices. Because of market disruptions, some families resorted to eating spoiled or infested crops, increasing consumption of aflatoxins and poor-quality food, and exacerbating nutritional problems.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ifpri.org/publication/gender-sensitive-social-protection-critical-component-covid-19-response-low-and-middle>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.acdivoca.org/2020/04/gender-social-inclusion-and-covid-19-report/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/publications/gender-implications-of-covid-19-outbreaks-in-development-and-humanitarian-settings>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.fao.org/3/ca8996en/CA8996EN.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32559276/>

## Impacts on Gender + Nutrition

During the pandemic, agricultural households were not subject to the singular influence of ‘gender’ or ‘nutrition;’ instead, these factors often work in combination, increasing the amount and severity of impact. For example, some cultural norms dictate women and children eat meals after men have finished. During times of scarcity and restricted market access, the limited nutrition and food security available for the household is further diverted away from women. Without sufficient, healthy food, women are more susceptible to illness, putting their health at risk, along with their ability to maintain income-generating activities and empowerment progress. When women make their own money, they tend to have greater decision-making power over that income. Further, when women control the decisions around household food, nutrition outcomes are generally stronger. Women who are supported in their economic and social-empowerment endeavours are better able to access information, markets, and a variety of foods that improve the nutrition outcomes of the overall household. On the other hand, as pandemic-era gender norms dictated that women would spend more time at home, they had more time and visibility to monitor household health and think about nutritional needs.

### IGNITE Client Reaction

Through qualitative interviews, IGNITE clients described their responses to the pandemic, some of which were more gender or nutrition-sensitive than others. While the strategies employed differed, the overwhelming finding is that an organisation’s strategic mindset and operational strategy with respect to gender and nutrition before the crisis dramatically influenced how it responded during the crisis.

The pandemic forced IGNITE clients to adjust not only how they did their work (e.g., organisational adaptations such as reducing in-person contact, instituting new lines of communication, physical distancing, providing personal protective equipment), but also what actual work was being done on the ground (programmatic adaptations). The following are some of the ways IGNITE’s clients responded during the crisis:

- **Conducting rapid assessments** to quickly collect information while expanding traditional data collection methods to gather gender and nutrition insights.
- **Engaging in Social and Behaviour Change (SBC) messaging** around household nutrition goals.
- **Reducing farmer group sizes** to promote social distancing.

- **Adjusting the location of programmes and services**, when trade and transportation were limited. For example, one dairy project added additional milk collection points to reduce farmer travel.
- **Adding digital elements to the programmatic strategy**, including e-extension platforms, mobile phone distribution, WhatsApp groups, or crop-specific apps for advice.
- **Promoting ‘women as the solution’** to community-facing issues like caretaking, convening, mobilising, and information-sharing.
- **Building on women-led community-based solutions.** One programme supported women-managed kitchen gardens to supplement nutrition, after women themselves started the initiative.

### Lessons and Recommendations

The effects of the global shutdown from the COVID-19 pandemic and the related disruption were not altogether unique: many agricultural institutions have worked through civil unrest, war, drought, floods, and pest infestations. The following collection of lessons learnt from the response to the COVID-19 crisis (March 2020 – June 2021), can help agricultural institutions prepare for similar crises, and react in a gender or nutrition-sensitive manner. IGNITE identified lessons across three phases of the crisis cycle:



#### Before a Crisis

Deliberate Preparation

Behaviours and systems to incorporate before a crisis enable a gender and nutrition-sensitive response.



#### During a Crisis

Thoughtful Reaction

A framework for the decision-making process when crises occur.



#### After a Crisis

Continued Care

How an agricultural institution can optimise the recovery process.

## Before a Crisis: Deliberate Preparation

Agricultural institutions can prepare to make gender and nutrition-sensitive reactions during a crisis by dedicating time and energy to deliberate, thoughtful preparation well in advance.

### 1. Integrate critical gender and nutrition concepts into daily habits and organisational culture

Gender and nutrition-sensitive considerations become more natural for institutions that place an everyday focus on 'gender mainstreaming' and 'nutrition mainstreaming,' throughout all steps of programme design and implementation process. This advance buy-in can help ensure gender and nutrition remain high priority issues during crisis management. Integrating gender-responsive and nutrition-sensitive resilience-building activities and thinking into programming will also help households prepare for crises.

IGNITE experts recommend all projects (even those not explicitly operating for nutrition) assess household diet over time. This will help build a nutrition-sensitive mindset while preparing the team to react to any changes in household nutrition and food security that become evident in a crisis.

### 2. Build capacity of program staff around gender and nutrition

All organisation staff, from management to junior level, can benefit from comprehensive gender and nutrition training. Prepared, effective staff who are skilled in best practices around gender and nutrition can add value to the project, regardless of the situation. Their proficiency and attention to key issues during an emergency can ensure responses are gender and nutrition-sensitive across each programme and area of expertise. Promote a Collaboration, Learning, and Adaptation (CLA) approach and conduct 'Pause and Reflect' practices to keep the big-picture gender and nutrition goals front-of-mind.

One IGNITE client engaged a technology service provider to jointly develop a mobile extension platform for remote agricultural advice. Another client shared field data with the country's Ministry of Agriculture to inform response policy.

### 3. Build key relationships to leverage in crises

Agricultural institutions with deep connections to

a variety of public and private sector actors can leverage networks in a crisis to react more quickly, advocate and negotiate collectively, expand beneficiary reach, and reduce dependency on a single supplier or partner, which in turn reduces risk in programmatic activities.

Field-level 'gender champions' from one IGNITE client leveraged established relationships to monitor household effects in context, and they spotted and promoted good ideas (like kitchen gardens) that women were initiating.

### 4. Develop robust data systems for ongoing use

Agricultural institutions with healthy Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) systems in place before a crisis, with appropriate gender and nutrition indicators, can be ready for thorough data collection and analysis when making adaptive decisions. Beyond basic MEL best practices, the organisations should ensure that:

- MEL staff and enumerators are trained on gender-sensitive data collection and gender concepts.
- The data system Integrates gender, nutrition, and food security metrics (e.g., minimum dietary diversity for women (MDD-W), resilience measures) into data collection practice from the beginning, enabling a crisis reaction that is more informed and understands changes resulting from the crisis.

IGNITE experts recommend having several types of gender analyses tools (full blown, abbreviated, rapid) ready-to-go. This saves 'tool development' time during a crisis and allow management to choose the best option based on safety regulations and budget.

### 5. Develop a crisis action plan

The Crisis Action Plan should be the organisation's general emergency plan and should be applicable in any situation. Beyond providing overall safety guidance and establishing communication channels, action plans should consider:

- Types of crises likely in the programme area (e.g., Is the area more prone to floods or earthquakes? What are likely disruptions from the political space?).
- How potential crises, and their fallout, are likely to affect gender and nutrition, particularly around markets and resource availability.
- Data-collection and communication tools that cover basic well-being measures (e.g., food security, nutrition, resilience, gender, violence, income).

## During a Crisis: Thoughtful Reaction

Often, crisis management is characterised by frantic decision-making, limited data, changing access to resources, and pressure to ‘do something’. An agricultural institution can engage in thoughtful reaction to ensure gender and nutrition-sensitive adaptations support staff and beneficiaries through the crisis.

### 6. Apply a systematic process for data-driven, comprehensive adaptation

The onset of an emergency can feel overwhelming as organisations scramble to revise standard operating procedures and adjust to a rapidly changing situation. To formulate reactions that are well-planned, an organisation should apply a context-specific process that is flexible but methodical. The goal is to remain adaptable (for example, performing steps in parallel, based on need) while focusing on the aims of the proposed pivot. IGNITE clients that took a more measured approach to the pandemic built more robust responses. The following steps provide an outline to support the decision-making process during a crisis:

#### First: Review the Theory of Change and goals.

Create opportunities to ‘Pause and Reflect’ on the work that the agricultural institution already does and what the goals are. Then identify what needs to change in the crisis environment. Organisations should recognise that project indicators might no longer be achievable or applicable during the crisis. Be prepared to adjust programming away from planned activities, but in ways that will still aim toward high-level goals.

**Second: Gather data on relevant gender and nutrition indicators and crisis-specific indicators.** Consider all potential sources of data. Use resources wisely, and start with what is available (e.g., government reports, World Health Organisation data, surveys run by other trusted organisations). Leverage and adapt tools, rather than developing new ones. Finally, reassess the validity of the gender analyses, and collect sex-disaggregated data to establish a new baseline.

**Third: Analyse the data.** Take a careful but rapid approach to data analysis and use both a household nutrition lens and a gender-responsive lens to evaluate lessons. Remember, the crisis has a human component, so consider who is affected within the data. Be aware of complicated relationship dynamics (e.g., not every household is monogamous), which might influence resource distribution, and individual vulnerability can often go uncaptured and unseen. Understand on-the-

ground changes for households about i) income, ii) productive assets, iii) time-use (especially for women), iv) market access (physical access as well as ability to purchase or sell). Recognise and account for increased burdens on women, including time use, domestic and care workload, access to resources and income, nutrition, and safety.

#### Fourth: Plan and take thoughtful action.

Organisational responses during a crisis will be best positioned for genuine relief if the decision-makers are intentional about:

Assessing if the organisation has the gender and social inclusion capacity for the new reality. If not, ask for help and seek out training to ensure staff are ready.

- Making feasible suggestions that reflect the new on-the-ground realities.
- Remembering the bigger goals and preparing to adjust the project scope.
- Considering out of the box solutions such as cash transfers, working with the government to distribute social safety nets, or supporting and promoting the organic solutions that women and communities are already doing to cope with the crisis.
- Integrating gender and nutrition-sensitive expertise and data throughout all the programming steps and adjusting, based on the new programme goals.
- Assessing equity to ensure everyone (particularly women) can participate in the current version of the programme. If not, pinpoint why and fix it.

**Finally: Repeat.** Crisis situations change quickly, so continuous feedback and re-assessment are critical. Plan for continuous data collection and internal meetings to reassess the approach.





### Data Collection Check List

- **Did the organisation assess if it has the resources and knowledge** needed to design an appropriate survey? If not, ask for help.
- **Design appropriate tools** that focus on only critical information.
- **Ask what has changed** since (or because of) the crisis, to reveal risks and **coping strategies**. Include gender/safety questions and food/nutrition questions.
- **Detail a collection methodology that reaches women and** note the drawbacks of selected methods. For example, reaching respondents by phone is more likely to get men or wealthy households, and women might not feel safe to speak openly. Imperfect methods may be necessary in a crisis, but be conscious of the choice, and report it in any findings.
- **Understand the timeline.** Streamline the collection by focusing on priority data points, and consider increasing the data collection frequency, as crises can change rapidly.
- **Consider the holistic picture**, of value-chain actors. Gather producers, processors, transporters, or other relevant parties around the table to include all in a holistic discussion that builds data for a collective response.



### Adjusting Scope

- **Keep market systems moving** through critical value chain actors, like producers, output market actors, processors, and collectors.
- **Preserve basic income**, specifically in sectors and industries that engage women and girls.
- **Keep food on the table**, either through income or supplementary food sources.
- **Provide access to new or existing markets or facilitate new mechanisms that provide equitable opportunities for women.**
- **Focus on gender-equitable access to finance**, and advocate for women-owned enterprises.



### Data Collection Check List

An agricultural institution must thoughtfully consider reactions during a crisis. Any actions (or inaction)

- **Must meet women and men where they are**, in their new realities. Understand what people are enduring, what has changed about their lives, and what their most urgent needs are to 'do no harm.'
- **Recognise that human crisis reactions have a mental health component.** Beneficiaries (and staff) are not in peak-performance mode when they are experiencing disaster. This framing impacts both data collection and programmatic reactions. Any effort should ask: Is it worth asking these questions if the respondents are suffering? Is it worth demanding beneficiary time and attention when they should focus on their wellbeing?
- **Maintain anti-poverty progress in whatever way possible.** Households may be forced to sacrifice assets and savings, or businesses may have a reduced capacity for resilience post-crisis. They will be less likely to engage in regular programming, as priorities will have shifted, and needs will be different. Programmes should diverge from stated activities and output, if it supports long-term household resilience and programmatic viability.
- **Ensure adaptations consider the 'who' as well as the 'what'.** That is, examine who the adaptation is meant to impact, and assess if equitable access to the programme has shifted.
- **Approach with empathy for beneficiaries.** Separate the personal and organisational experience of the crisis from programmatic reactions. Impacts to operating life (e.g., working from home) will differ from the challenges and realities for women and men that the organisation serves.



## After a Crisis: Continued Care

An agricultural institution can optimise the recovery process and further promote gender and nutrition-sensitive outcomes after a crisis has occurred.

### 7. Remember that recovery takes time

Smallholders will be recouping assets and wealth for many years after a crisis, and programming and interventions must continue to reflect their realities. Agricultural institutions must consider how to remain gender and nutrition-sensitive as time use, total wealth, and income streams may be distorted.

### 8. Look for emerging opportunities within the new reality to promote high-level goals

As market dynamics such as pricing, labour sources, and inputs availability, may have shifted in the crisis, seek out and take advantage of emerging gaps. For example, an institution might help farmers to gain local market share during international trade-bans or use emerging digital platforms as tools to collect and analyse new data in real-time with a gender equity lens.

### 9. Learn from the crisis

Agricultural institutions can use ‘pause and reflect’ sessions to understand what worked, what did not

work, and why. They can use these lessons to update crisis plans, collect data that would be useful for other crises, and plan resilience into the work that they do, among other deliberate preparation lessons detailed above.

### 10. Advocate and raise awareness

Help governments and partners to understand the consequences of crisis-related policies (e.g., closed trade borders and movement restrictions) and their effects on smallholders and market systems, particularly those that do not generate tax revenue and therefore remain ‘unseen’ at high levels.

## Conclusion

For agricultural institutions, including IGNITE clients, the global COVID-19 pandemic required quick decisions and pioneering adaptations. Reflection and learning from client experience and the advice of experts can help organisations prepare to respond to future crises with a gender and nutrition-sensitive lens. The lessons and recommendations outlined in this brief reflect best practices that agricultural institutions and projects can apply to safeguard beneficiaries in times of emergency, while preserving progress toward development goals.



This case study was written by **Tessa Ahner-McHaffie, Senior MEL Specialist, Laterite; John Di Giacomo, Senior Research Associate, Laterite; and Tanager Technical Experts**

## 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.

**Laterite** is a data, research, and advisory firm dedicated to providing high-quality research services for social impact in East Africa. We provide technical advice on the design and implementation of research projects, development interventions, and socio-economic policies. We strive to deliver impactful research that helps decision-makers find solutions to complex development problems.

**60 Decibels** is a tech-enabled social impact measurement and customer intelligence company, spun out of Acumen. We make it easy for companies and organizations to listen to the people who matter most. Using our Lean Data approach, we collect social impact and customer feedback data through phone surveys and other methods.

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