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## Integrating Gender and Nutrition into MEL: Lessons from IGNITE



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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## Introduction

Monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) plays a pivotal role in the success and sustainability of agricultural projects. By systematically tracking progress, identifying challenges, and assessing outcomes, MEL frameworks enable stakeholders to tailor interventions effectively. In the context of gender, MEL allows for the identification of disparities in access, participation, and benefits among men and women, paving the way for equitable opportunities and outcomes. It can help gauge the impact of agricultural projects on dietary diversity, food security or gender equality, thereby guiding adjustments to enhance nutritional outcomes. Through rigorous monitoring and evaluation, agricultural projects can better address the diverse needs of communities, promote gender equality, and contribute to improved nutrition outcomes, fostering long-term resilience and development.

From 2018 to 2024, the Impacting Gender & Nutrition through Innovative Technical Exchange in Agriculture (IGNITE) project supported 35 agricultural institutions in Africa to integrate gender and nutrition into their work<sup>1</sup>. This case study aims to assess the needs of IGNITE clients<sup>2</sup> in intra-organisation monitoring, evaluation, and utilisation of gender and nutrition data. IGNITE focused on five clients: Caisse Mutuelle Du Burkina Faso (CMBF), Promotion du Développement Industriel, Artisanal et Agricole (PRODIA), Sasakawa Africa Association (SAA), African Agricultural Technology Foundation (AATF), and Solidaridad East and Central Africa. Of these, AATF, SAA, and Solidaridad are large, African agricultural institutions that were supported by IGNITE from Year 1, while CMBF and PRODIA are microfinance institutions that started their engagement with IGNITE in Year 3.

<sup>1</sup> For more information on IGNITE, visit <https://tanangerintl.org/portfolio/ignite/>.

<sup>2</sup> IGNITE clients are African institutions in Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Tanzania that work together with IGNITE to design, implement, and evaluate nutrition-sensitive and gender-integrated agriculture interventions.

For this case study, IGNITE conducted key informant interviews (KIIs) with MEL teams from SAA, PRODIA and CMBF, to assess the extent of gender and nutrition mainstreaming into their MEL processes. The study used questions from the IGNITE Gender Diagnostic Tool related to gender and nutrition data collection, analysis, and use.<sup>3</sup> The tool provides a standardised checklist to assess current MEL capacity and identifies barriers that client MEL teams are facing when it comes to gender and nutrition mainstreaming. IGNITE complemented the KIIs with a desk review of recent diagnostic reports for AATF and Solidaridad, which used the same diagnostic tool. IGNITE's annual feedback survey results for all clients were also reviewed.

This case study begins with an assessment of clients' MEL capacity and explores the status of gender and nutrition mainstreaming within MEL processes. The study then identifies barriers to gender and nutrition mainstreaming, highlights the approaches used to help clients strengthen their MEL teams, and offers recommendations.

## Current MEL Capacity of IGNITE Clients

MEL capacity on gender and nutrition varies across IGNITE clients, depending on how long the client has worked with IGNITE and how large the organisation is. The three long-standing IGNITE clients covered in this case study have dedicated MEL teams responsible for overseeing data collection, analysis, and reporting, and efforts are made to ensure systematic data collection and analysis. These clients employ diverse strategies for data collection, with varying levels of data security and quality assurance measures in place. The two other clients, who are newer to IGNITE and are smaller organisations, have less developed systems and processes.

## Dedicated MEL Teams

### 1. Many IGNITE clients have dedicated MEL teams, but some do not.

Those with dedicated teams communicate regularly with management and MEL representatives in each country office. For example, at SAA, regional teams coordinate reporting from project managers in different countries and are responsible for consolidating donor reports. MEL teams lead the data collection, analysis, reporting, and learning process, and data collection guidelines exist to guide these activities. On the other hand, for CMBF and PRODIA, the MEL process is less formalised,

with management or specific departments sometimes accessing information collected by field teams but lacking a dedicated structure or team. Some of their projects have a dedicated MEL staff person, and some do not. Those with dedicated MEL teams reported that they had an easier path towards integrating gender and nutrition into their work, as progress can be monitored in a systematic way.

## Data Collection and Analysis Capabilities

### 2. There is a lot of variability in the data collection and analysis capabilities across IGNITE clients, which impacts how gender and nutrition can be integrated into MEL.

Clients reported using different strategies, tools and methodologies for data collection, ranging from manual data collection to the use of tools such as Microsoft Excel. Data collection processes also vary by country office and by project. Some projects use electronic data collection, while some use paper forms and enter the data manually. In some cases, manual calculation is used for gender and nutrition indicators like the Women's Dietary Diversity Score or the Food Consumption Score. Some clients received MEL training in 2023 and decided to leverage cloud storage for cross-country data. Larger projects in one country utilises specific project management software for efficient management. Another client reported that it had received training on Open Data Kit (ODK), a free survey software, but these skills do not appear to be housed in each country office or project.

The newer IGNITE clients reported that data collection processes are carried out by field staff, including loan officers and facilitators; they often lack dedicated data collectors. Data collection is therefore only a byproduct of project implementation. The demographic information collected during this process may be disaggregated by sex, but tracking gender and nutrition indicators is difficult, as no dedicated data collection and analysis is conducted for related data.

## Use and Sharing of MEL Data by Gender and Nutrition Programmes

### 3. Clients acknowledge that sharing of MEL gender and nutrition data with project teams plays a vital role in improving programme design

<sup>3</sup> As part of its work, IGNITE developed a diagnostic tool to identify areas where institutions can work to institutionalize gender and nutrition, and assess the progress of an institution towards the goals of gender and nutrition mainstreaming. The tool scores institutions across six domains: 1. Policies and Approaches; 2. Culture and Capacity; 3. Budgets; 4. Data Collection; 5. Data Analysis & Use; 6. Do No Harm.



## and implementation, by facilitating learning through review and discussion.

One MEL team reported that it produces office reports containing field summaries, detailed findings, and recommendations for management, quality improvement officers, and other stakeholders. The identified gaps prompt requests for support, and annual quality monitoring results are discussed in quarterly meetings. The team at another client reported that it conducts annual output monitoring and midterm evaluations, sharing the results with management for future planning. Data is also presented during quarterly reviews or discussed with project teams for validation. Despite these positive examples, the case study established that for some clients, gender and nutrition were only recent considerations, and there were no dedicated internal processes in place for sharing data.

### 4. External sharing of MEL gender and nutrition data varies across teams and countries.

For some clients, reports and analyses are shared regularly with donors, with government partners, and at annual stakeholder meetings with all partners, or occasionally shared with implementing beneficiaries like model nutrition villages. A client in Burkina Faso reported that it shares monitoring data with supervisory institutions periodically, particularly data on the number of women accessing credit. However, some clients acknowledged a lack of formalised structures for analysing this data to guide programme implementation effectively.

### 5. Clients emphasise the importance of having documented guidelines to ensure that every staff member has sufficient knowledge on gender and nutrition integration.

Clients see this as a crucial step towards ensuring that their programmes collect and use gender and nutrition data. Additionally, new IGNITE clients envision using MEL data to inform the creation of products that are responsive to gender considerations as the next step in their implementation journey.

## Current Status of Gender and Nutrition Mainstreaming Within MEL Data

Some IGNITE clients have made significant progress in integrating gender and nutrition within their monitoring and evaluation data collection, but others

are at the start of this work. Some clients reported that gender and nutrition indicators were collected on a regular basis and according to standardised MEL guidelines. However, the two newer IGNITE clients, CMBF and PRODIA, reported that they were just getting started on mainstreaming gender and nutrition in MEL processes and had not yet defined any indicators. Nor had they integrated them as part of regular data collection activities. Similarly, performance objectives on gender and nutrition were not yet defined, indicating an important area for future collaboration. Despite not having specific indicators, the clients expressed willingness to integrate gender and nutrition considerations into their data collection processes to better understand programme participation and effectiveness.

## Project Planning, Theory of Change and Implementation Plans

### 6. Long-standing IGNITE clients demonstrate varying levels of integration of gender and nutrition considerations into their project planning.

While logic models exist with clear activity–outcome linkages, at the time of this case study, some projects had yet to fully incorporate these dimensions, though strategic plans were in place for future integration, and foundational baseline assessments and stakeholder engagements are ongoing.

### 7. Some newer IGNITE clients are in the initial stages of implementing logical frameworks and theories of change discussed in training sessions. They have also made recent advancements such as using dashboard tools to monitor implementation.

One such client was engaged in two major projects related to gender and nutrition, and actively transitioning from planning to implementation. Although they had yet to establish an action plan, discussions had commenced regarding short- and long-term goals for integrating gender and nutrition into the organisation. Another client that had recently started engaging with IGNITE reported that while discussions had taken place regarding logical frameworks and theories of change during past training sessions, many aspects of these plans were yet to be implemented. However, recent developments, including the introduction of a dashboard tool in collaboration with IGNITE, were expected to significantly impact organisational change.

## Gender and Nutrition Indicators and Collection of Data

### 8. While some IGNITE clients regularly collect sex-disaggregated data on gender and nutrition indicators, others are just starting this work.

Some long-standing IGNITE clients reported that gender disaggregation of data continues to happen across all projects, although fewer nutrition indicators had been collected since the existing projects had not yet integrated nutrition-sensitive approaches. There also had not been a process in place for sharing best practices in gender and nutrition integration, as no case studies had been compiled in the past.

### 9. The two IGNITE clients in Burkina Faso are in the process of updating various manuals and systems, including their information and management system, to integrate gender-sensitive data collection.

They acknowledged that without this process, certain information on project beneficiaries and outcomes would have been inaccessible. The clients were also developing performance indicators for gender and nutrition but had not yet finalised them at the time of the case study.

## Barriers to Gender and Nutrition Integration in MEL

Despite significant progress, challenges and limitations in MEL capacity were evident across the teams, underlining the importance of the support they received from IGNITE. The challenges ranged from project planning, to limited data monitoring and analysis capacity, to the lack of dedicated MEL teams.

**Planning challenges:** A client in Nigeria reported that the main challenge they faced was the lack of common planning at the beginning of the year, due to multiple projects with multiple pillars. Each project or pillar conducts its planning independently, leading to potential duplication of efforts and inefficiencies, which only become evident mid-year during implementation. The timing of project budgeting is also a potential barrier, as budget predictions for the coming year are filled out mid-year while the project team is still in the field, and any MEL data resulting during this time can no longer be incorporated. For example, MEL data showed that a nutrition project targeting community seed availability could have been better delivered

in a group-based approach, but implementation could no longer be redesigned, as the budget was already completed, and implementation, underway. The MEL team recommended for a common focus and the adoption of project management software to address such challenges in future.

**Lack of capacity or resources:** A client in Ethiopia expressed desire for the capacity to monitor project status remotely, as the current monitoring process requires field visits, which can be time-consuming and resource intensive. This problem is compounded by the lack of internet access while in the field, making electronic data collection impossible. In other target areas, not all projects had access to dedicated MEL teams, which can hinder effective monitoring and evaluation. Additionally, budgetary constraints created limitations on the ability to carry out MEL activities effectively. These challenges made collecting gender and nutrition data in a systematic and efficient manner difficult.

**Lack of data analysis processes and software:** A client in Burkina Faso reported that they lacked a structured process for data analysis within its organisation, and was not using specialised software for project management or database management, relying instead on manual processes or Excel for data management. This made tracking progress on gender and nutrition indicators difficult, as the data are communicated and analysed in an ad-hoc manner and can no longer be effectively incorporated into project design.

**Lack of linkage between MEL and programme decisions:** One client reported need for assistance in understanding how to use the information extracted from MEL systems effectively. Further, there was no clear-cut process in the institution for how MEL data informs programme implementation, particularly in integrating gender and nutrition considerations into their operations.

## Approaches Used by IGNITE to Strengthen MEL Teams

### 10. Clients reported that IGNITE employed different approaches to help them to mainstream gender and nutrition into their MEL operations.

In collaboration with clients, IGNITE facilitated the development of comprehensive theories of change, gender and nutrition indicators, and project implementation plans. IGNITE also conducted in-depth gender analyses and studies on gender and nutrition, and offered training on, for example, understanding social norms and employing effective sampling techniques. Moreover, IGNITE supported clients in analysing internal processes, leading to recommendations for updating procedural manuals

and adapting products and services based on gender analysis findings. IGNITE offered clients technical assistance, which took various forms. For example, two IGNITE clients were trained on development and use of dashboards for displaying and retrieving sex-disaggregated project data, while others received training on data collection and cloud data storage. This holistic approach empowered clients to incorporate gender and nutrition considerations into their operations, fostering more inclusive and evidence-based agricultural projects. The progress made in gender and nutrition integration provides evidence that IGNITE's support helped to operationalise these programmatic dimensions and to develop the internal capacity of MEL teams to engage with gender and nutrition data and successfully use it to guide project implementation.

## Lessons and Recommendations

### Clients still had outstanding need for support from IGNITE to further mainstream gender and nutrition into their MEL activities.

For some newer IGNITE clients, the case study found evident gaps in their data analysis capabilities, and no explicit focus on gender within their current data analysis processes. This suggests the need for further training and the adoption of appropriate software tools to enhance their data management and analysis practices. Training could focus specifically on gender and nutrition indicators and practices for gender and nutrition-sensitive data collection. Data processing and management might include assistance with analysis and formalising the data processing procedures, project management software, or training on dashboard usage.

For IGNITE clients who have had ample time to establish their internal processes for gender and nutrition, the next steps would be capitalising on existing data collection guidelines to fully incorporate nutrition-sensitive indicators and data collection methods into their MEL processes, and further improving on institutional learning processes by using their established MEL structures to continue guiding programme implementation.

For agricultural organisations looking to integrate gender and nutrition into their MEL processes, IGNITE recommends focusing on a few key areas:

### Have a dedicated MEL staff person or team in place that regularly tracks progress and communicates results to management.

- Ensure that there is a theory of change and logic model that guides project design.

- Ensure there are relevant gender and nutrition-sensitive indicators in the theory of change or logic model, with specific, measurable, and actionable targets.
- Collect sex- and commodity-disaggregated data whenever possible, at regular intervals and in a timely manner.
- Analyse gender and nutrition data at regular intervals and in a systematic way, and track progress against performance benchmarks. Follow up on a regular basis with project teams to ensure projects progress as planned.

### Ensure that budgeting, project implementation, and MEL gender and nutrition data collection are interconnected processes and not operating separately.

- Time project planning and budgeting in such a way that the latest MEL gender and nutrition data can be incorporated to guide design.
- Ensure project implementation is flexible to incorporating feedback from beneficiaries in the field and that inefficiencies can be corrected throughout.
- Make use of tools such as dashboards or project management software to keep track of project performance and guide implementation based on gender and nutrition MEL data.

## Conclusion

When mainstreaming gender and nutrition in an agricultural institution, it is critical to make data-driven decisions to ensure programmes are having their intended impact. Organisations that are at the start of their journey towards mainstreaming gender and nutrition often miss some fundamental MEL elements, like knowledge of key gender and nutrition concepts and indicators, and a MEL framework designed to capture this information. Other organisations further down the mainstreaming journey might face more advanced challenges, such as learning how to collect high-quality gender and nutrition information and using it effectively and consistently across the organisation.

## Resources

IGNITE has developed tools for institutions on this journey, including the Diagnostic Handbook, tips on gender-sensitive data collection, resources on gender and nutrition-sensitive indicators, and many others which can be found on our Resource Hub. Agricultural institutions integrating G&N in their MEL frameworks are encouraged to consult these resources as a guide.

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## 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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