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The Use of Focal Point Models to Increase Gender and Nutrition Integration and Mainstreaming Within Agriculture Institutions

A Case Study by IGNITE
July 2024

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

Agriculture institutions often appoint focal persons to facilitate nutrition, gender integration, or gender mainstreaming. The focal persons act as change agents within their organisations, advocating for and serving as sources of information on gender or nutrition technical areas. However, their impacts on integration and mainstreaming targets and outcomes often fall short of the intended goals.[1, 2]

Previous studies identified various factors that influence focal point persons' ability to successfully mainstream gender or integrate gender/nutrition within their organisations. The presence of passionate champions within an organisation, adequate training of focal persons on the subject

matter, supportive management, clear terms of reference to guide their activities, sufficient resourcing for mainstreaming efforts, and influential donors to help facilitate their roles within partner organisations or the projects they are implementing.[3] help to positively facilitate the focal point person's role.

On the other hand, there exist barriers to successful integration and mainstreaming of gender/nutrition. These barriers include lack of technical knowledge or background in relevant subject areas, insufficient training, isolation or low visibility within organisations, poor organisational understanding of gender and/or nutrition mainstreaming and

1   Mangheni, M. N., Musiimenta, P., Boonabaana, B. & Tufan, H. A. The genesis and performance of gender focal person structures in Rwanda and Uganda national agricultural organisations: A critique. 13, (2021).

2   Aryeetey, R. & Covic, N. A Review of Leadership and Capacity Gaps in Nutrition-Sensitive Agricultural Policies and Strategies for Selected Countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. Food and Nutrition Bulletin vol. 41 380–396 (2020).

3   Derbyshire, H. Gender Manual: A Practical Guide for Development Policy Makers and Practitioners. (2002)

integration, low funding of focal point activities, and competing work priorities.[4] Gaps still exist in understanding which structures are best suited for different types of agriculture institutions, what factors influence the success of gender and nutrition focal point models, and what synergies may exist when institutions integrate both gender and nutrition.

This case study aimed to fill these gaps by explaining how different models of gender and/or nutrition focal points within agriculture institutions impact the ability to mainstream gender at the institutional level and integrate gender and nutrition at the programmatic level. The study focused on focal point persons, specifically, to analyse and compare their integration and efficacy across a range of institutions representing the private sector and non-governmental organizations. Institutions selected for the study represent IGNITE clients. The results from this case study will contribute to the overall knowledge base of best practices in institutionalising gender and nutrition in agriculture institutions to achieve greater gender equality and/or nutrition outcomes.

Methodology

This case study sought to answer the following questions:

Primary research questions:

1. How did the different models of gender and nutrition focal points influence the ability to mainstream gender, integrate gender, or integrate nutrition within IGNITE clients' way of doing business?

2. What effects did these models have on gender mainstreaming, gender integration, or nutrition integration outcomes?

Secondary research questions:

1. What models of gender and nutrition focal point persons existed within IGNITE's client portfolio?

2. What factors contributed to the success of focal point structures in mainstreaming gender, integrating gender, and/or integrating nutrition within client organisations?

3. What trends and patterns existed in how organisations conceptualized, integrated, and provide support to gender and nutrition focal point persons?

4. How have these structures changed over time, with respect to function, resourcing, and

institutional engagement?

5. What synergies arose in mainstreaming, if any, when organisations integrated both gender and nutrition focal point persons and/or technical areas?

To explore these research questions, IGNITE used the following methods and approaches to explore

> ### Box 1. Focal Point Person Definition:
>
> - Are not full-time in the role but provide nutrition/gender support in addition to their "regular" work duties
> - Are not technical experts in gender or nutrition
> - May receive technical capacity building through formal certifications, trainings, etc
> - May be selected for the role based on personal interest or topic affinity
> - Are often not provided dedicated time or budget to carry out role-related duties
> - May be connected to technical experts outside of their organization to explain/support their efforts

1. **In-depth interviews** with 10 focal point persons from 7 agriculture institutions conducted in May and June 2022. The institutions were selected based on (1) their status as a client or local service provider (LSP) associated with IGNITE and (2) the presence of a focal person, as defined by the industry and IGNITE technical experts (**Box 1**).

2. **Purposive sampling** to identify focal point persons from participating organisations and convenience sampling to identify technical experts based on their relationships with the client organisations. Key management staff and technical implementers for semi-structured interviews were identified using the snowball approach, based on input from technical experts and focal point persons interviews. The respondents from donor organisations were identified using convenience sampling based on proximity and familiarity with IGNITE, and client organisations.

3. **Key informant interviews** (KIIs) with seven IGNITE technical experts to capitalize on their expertise and experience, and with six management staff who were responsible for implementing, managing, or resourcing focal point models. Technical experts were selected through convenience sampling, based on their relationships with their client organisations, while a snowball approach was used to select key management staff.

4   Rozel Farnworth, C. Gender Aware Approaches in Agriculture Programs: A Study of Sida-supported Agriculture Programmes

Table 1. Sampling summary			
Total Organizations:	7	Total individuals interviewed:	29
Clients: NGOs	3	Focal points	10
Clients: Private sector	2	Technical experts	7
Clients: LSPs (NGOs)	2	Technical implementers	2
Countries represented	8	Management staff	6
		Donor representatives	4

4. **Semi-structured interviews** with two technical implementers, or individuals responsible for carrying out gender/nutrition implementation, to examine organisational awareness and efficacy of focal points. These individuals were chosen through a snowball approach.

5. One **focus group discussion**, with staff from the donor organisation, identified using convenience sampling, based on proximity and familiarity with the IGNITE project, and its client organisations.

A summary of the study participants is included in **Table 1. Annex 1** presents an overview of focal point models identified at IGNITE client institutions.

Findings

Focal point models existing within IGNITE's client portfolio

1. Institutions tend to conceptualise focal points as coordinators or implementers of gender and nutrition integration, rather than as facilitators of institutional mainstreaming.

Mainstreaming and integration are similar strategies with distinct, yet synergistic goals. Integration is a process that focuses on incorporating gender and/or nutrition at the implementation level – in projects, programmes, or activities. This could include, for example, incorporating key nutrition concepts into extension agent trainings and services. Mainstreaming, on the other hand, occurs at the organisational level and focuses on incorporating gender and/or nutrition considerations into larger processes, culture, and capacity development, such as adopting an institution-wide gender policy.

The study established that the seven institutions sampled employed different models of focal point structures: (i) Having one focal person to integrate both gender and nutrition; ii) focal points focusing on one technical area only – gender, nutrition, or M&E; (iii) different focal points working on gender and nutrition; (iv) one focal point, who may have expertise in another technical field. Some organisations also had multiple focal points in one technical area, either as a cascading network of focal points or per project. **Annex 1** contains further descriptions of the models.

When asked about a focal point person's typical roles and responsibilities, the focal point persons interviewed, management staff, and technical implementers described activities related to supporting integration at the programmatic level more often than tasks related to institutional mainstreaming. One gender expert confirmed this conceptualisation, based on their experience working with focal points at a variety of institutions:

'First and foremost, most of the focal persons are usually at the level of gender integration. But very rarely on both. I doubt that they are ever informed at the mainstreaming level. So, most of the impact will be on the integration part because they are so program focused. And even the absorption of such a person to a full-time position is, more often than not, based on the kind of programs that an organization is running and the level of gender integration that is require' – Gender expert

When compared by type of institution, focal point persons in the private sector companies appeared to perform almost exclusively integration-related activities. Both private sector companies covered in the study did not have gender or nutrition policies, a key component of mainstreaming standards[5]. It is likely that having a focal point model that is heavily integration-focused impacts the extent to which gender or nutrition mainstreaming can be fully realized at an institution.

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[5] https://genderstandards.org/standards/

The type of individuals that institutions recruited as focal points provided further evidence that they are viewed more as coordinators or implementers of gender and nutrition integration. Many of the focal point persons interviewed held formal roles in programming or marketing, where they had direct access to or oversight of institutional programmes, which would make it easier for them to implement integration activities. Additionally, most reported that their activities were funded through project-level funds earmarked specifically for gender or nutrition integration activities, which rarely allows for more institutionally focused mainstreaming pursuits. Others reported having institutional funding specifically for gender or nutrition activities.

2. Whether organisations institute focal points to provide technical assistance at the program level (integration) or at the institutional level (mainstreaming) depends on several factors.

Decisions regarding the use of focal point persons and their activities are based on a diverse range of factors, often stemming from what mainstreaming stage an organization is in. Those earlier in the process are usually, though not always, focused more on integration, delaying engaging a full-time expert until more mainstreaming tasks are required. Other organisations implement focal point structures to focus on mainstreaming activities, before looking at integrating at the programmatic level, as one management staff described:

'We just have to finalize the [gender] guideline and see the areas where [it] will lead us and then we can decide whether we need a full-time person or not.' —Management staff

The factors that shape focal point structures, as reported by management staff and technical experts, fall under the following categories. Structure, in this instance, involves (1) the placement of the focal point within the organization (2) their decision-making authority, and (3) the formality of their roles and responsibilities.

Institutional expertise: The decision on whether to hire an expert is dependent on an organisation's goals and the availability of in-house skills applicable to integration or mainstreaming.

'We have a nutrition program running in all these countries and these are the people who are in charge of implementing those nutrition programs. So, the decision to appoint a focal person is very easy. They are already the ones in charge' —Management staff.

As an organisation continues its mainstreaming journey, different skills will likely be required, which can be obtained through focal point capacity building or engaging external experts.

Task requirements: Organisations may decide to use focal point persons based on the technical complexity of gender/nutrition activities, which also depends on the mainstreaming stage they are in. In some cases, focal point persons perform simpler integration activities while consultants or experts are employed for more technically complex mainstreaming exercises.

'We have gender focal points, they are sometimes under monitoring or other sectors, but they have little skill or background on gender and try to ensure gender mainstreaming in their programs. But if [we] want to really monitor or ensure the gender mainstreaming, we hire a part-time gender expert as a consultant.' —Management staff

Resource availability: The perceived investment and resources necessary to employ a full-time technical expert may also influence the push towards a focal point model with a greater focus on integration at the programming level, where individual proposals can provide project-specific funding for gender/nutrition.

'We've not had the proposal that is fully funding that position to be able to get a full-time [gender] employee. I know there have been components in the programs, in the proposals for that, but accumulatively it does not give us an amount to be able to recruit but just to implement the gender part of the proposal' — Management staff

Trust: Private sector actors may trust their own employees more than outside experts to understand their work culture and activities, causing them to pursue the internal focal point route for integration activities. Conversely, private sector actors may trust a consultant or outside expert more with mainstreaming-focused tasks, like training employees or developing policies, given their higher levels of expertise. This finding was not the case for NGOs.

Donor requirements: While not explicitly stated, many respondents identified donor requirements as a key reason for shifting institutional support towards gender and nutrition, to remain competitive for funding. For institutions without full buy-in or a culture that supports gender/nutrition, a local focal point model could satisfy donor requirements as it was perceived to require less institutional investment.

'It's a trend which is coming up and as we expand our operations, you know, quite a number of donors are requesting to see a gender strategy and whether we are doing enough to ensure that women and youth are integrated into the entire agriculture value chain' —Management staff.

Factors that influence the performance of focal point models

Performance of the model within agriculture institutions, in this case, was measured by a focal point person's ability to achieve goals set by themselves or their organisation in integration or mainstreaming. A focal point's ability to set effective and appropriate goals, or to influence leadership's understanding of what appropriate and effective goals might be, is important. **Table 2** summarises the factors raised by respondents in more than one type of institution (NGO, private sector, LSP). They fall under the overarching themes of (1) resourcing and management, (2) organisational attributes, (3) organisational networks, and (4) individual attributes. The influence/strength of a factor is based on how many participants mentioned it - either as an element necessary for success or as a challenge experienced by focal points - and are ranked by most mentioned to least mentioned. Factors highlighted in orange represent the strongest trends and are discussed more in the following sections (discussions of the remaining factors can be found in Annex 2). We also explore ways in which these factors merge and interact to promote or hinder focal point performance and highlight some factors that are unique to private sector and NGO institutions.

Resources and management

Funding and Resources: Adequate funding and resources, including both the level of funding and how it is allocated, emerged as the most influential factor in focal point model performance. Few focal points reported that they had meaningful input into

decision-making regarding the level or utilisation of gender and/or nutrition funds, which in turn influenced the scope and type of impact they can have on gender and nutrition outcomes.

The amount of funding available to focal point persons is important in determining the reach and number of activities they can carry out in their assigned technical area. Respondents reported that having adequate funding, or enough funding to carry out proposed integration activities, allowed focal points to reach wider audiences with their messaging, conduct project-level trainings, run sensitisation sessions in communities, or perform formative research studies on gender and/or nutrition.

'...you need funds or a budget to carry out activities because nutrition integration has quite a number of activities, most of which involve trainings for either staff or your stakeholders or whoever, but you need a budget or funds to be able to carry out these activities. Funds are super important.' — Nutrition focal person

The findings showed that focal point persons who are bound by project-allocated funds may experience challenges in accomplishing integration activities, such as performing independent gender or nutrition data collection if a gender and/or nutrition lens had not been applied during the project proposal or budgeting stages. Additionally, if a donor organisation does not consider gender and nutrition as priority areas, there may not be any resources available for integration or mainstreaming within the programmes or interventions. When funding is not available, focal point persons are sometimes forced to cover gender and/or nutrition trainings under other programmatic outreach activities:

'It's very hard for me, now, to focus on gender and nutrition outside the normal - people have to sell, people have to support farmers technically and all these other things, so gender and nutrition just become sort of a passenger on the train of selling chickens...So, if we had a form of separate budget, true to gender and nutrition-specific, then we could have more gender and nutrition outreaches...so the funding is not really there, but yeah, we squeeze what we can.' — Gender and nutrition focal point

Resources / Management	Organizational Attributes	Organizational Networks	Individual Attributes
• **Funding and resources** • **Supportive leadership** • Training opportunities • Time	• **Organizational culture** • Organizational policies and strategies • Focal point structure • authority, TOR, placement	• **Internal networks** • **External networks**	• **Technical capacity** • Interest and passion

Allocation of funds for mainstreaming efforts in both gender and nutrition is also critical to guarantee the continuity of activities and to support organisations in moving towards more mainstreaming-focused tasks, such as institutional trainings or gender analyses. Providing a separate budget for each technical area also allows focal point persons to pursue entry points for gender and nutrition when they arise, and where they make the most sense - an important consideration when integrating both technical areas in the same institution. Additionally, creating separate budgets for gender and nutrition ensures that focal points are not forced to weigh integration or mainstreaming activities against other programmatic priorities that are financed by the same pool of funding.

'If I was told to go and integrate gender within the nutrition programmes, the nutrition focal person has their budget, [but] they do not have a budget for gender integration. So how do you integrate your gender issues? So as much as we say it is integrated, specific budget allocations still need to be done, still need to be put in place and then we look for those integration opportunities. Because sometimes the integration opportunities are not so open. So, as you continue programming is when you realize you have an opportunity to integrate gender in such places. So, without budget allocations filled in place, it can be difficult. Opportunities can be there, but there's very little one can do.' – Gender focal point

> **Recommendations:** Applying a gender and nutrition lens during project proposal and budgeting phases is important for ensuring that funds are allocated for integration activities throughout all projects and programming. Creating clear organizational policies and strategies that allocate funds specifically for gender or nutrition can also give focal points the flexibility to plan activities outside of specific projects or fill gaps in project-level funding when necessary.

Supportive Leadership: Supportive leadership and management also emerged as an important factor for success, based on their key role in championing for a focal point person's role and their assigned technical area. Respondents described supportive leadership as having full buy-in for gender or nutrition, prioritising integration or mainstreaming within institutions, and being available to focal point persons for input and collaboration. According to respondents, supportive leadership can help create an enabling environment by:

- Championing institutional changes that align with gender or nutrition goals
- Influencing budget decisions to increase gender or nutrition funding

- Communicating with staff to create a supportive organisational culture
- Pushing forward agendas on policy and strategy creation or implementation
- Cascading information or initiatives across different institutional components

Supportive leadership can also play a role in empowering focal points to implement some of these changes themselves in the form of:

- Granting decision-making authority to focal points
- Helping to balance roles and priorities to ensure focal points have enough time to dedicate to gender and/or nutrition activities

A lack of supportive leadership, however, can stymie efforts by focal points to make meaningful strides in integration or mainstreaming of gender and/or nutrition. Respondents attributed stalled progress in strategy implementation, low resource investment, poor institutional visibility, and even focal point turnover, which were attributed in part, to unsupportive management. Additionally, donor requirements for gender or nutrition integration without leadership buy-in can lead to low prioritisation and poor resource allocation for focal points, as observed by one management respondent:

'I would say it frankly, most of the time we managers put gender mainstreaming as a way of satisfying the donors. They will see that I have gender, so it is a very good thing. But the reality is when the manager has understood what can be achieved when gender is mainstreamed, then it is no longer something you put [just] for resource mobilisation. Because [now] we still have the idea that, 'yeah, you put it just to have it' but we don't put the budget. And when there is no budget, the person is constrained. He or she can have very good ideas, and initiatives, but no implementation at the end of the day.' – Management staff

> **Recommendations:** Including leadership in institutional sensitization and training sessions can increase buy-in and overall understanding of the beneficial impact that mainstreaming gender and nutrition can have within their organisation.

Organisational attributes

Organisational culture: An organisational culture that supports, values, and embraces gender and/or nutrition can strongly influence the success of focal points' role and focal point models. Organisational culture encapsulates the commitment and buy-in of employees, management, and leadership and speaks to the ways in which individuals view the alignment of their organisations with the goals of gender and nutrition mainstreaming.

In general, respondents felt that a supportive organisational culture creates an enabling environment for focal points to implement activities, where both leadership and implementers appreciate and understand how gender and/or nutrition relate to their work.

'I think that's the key support you need within the organization. If it is institutionalised, you know, and embraced within the organisation then it is easier to implement nutrition activities, whereas if it's not then you have an uphill task in terms of really integrating and seeing the fruits of the integration. So, the institution really has to embrace it and work within the organisation to have the necessary environment where nutrition will be able to flourish.' — Nutrition expert

A supportive organisational culture also creates a shared understanding between departments that fosters internal collaboration, a necessary component for effective M&E work in gender and nutrition:

'…having the understanding and attaching the importance that nutrition and gender have in our work, this is very important across the organisation. You see department management, the technical implementation team as well as the M&E team having a good understanding of nutrition and gender is a big determinant factor for that.' — M&E focal point

When organisational culture is not supportive of a technical area, focal points can face barriers to carrying out their responsibilities and seeing results. In more extreme cases, if organisations see gender and nutrition objectives as conflicting with their vision or goals, this can drastically slow down integration and mainstreaming processes.

'And I think another reason both gender and nutrition objectives and expertise might be devalued within an organisation, or a project, is because they can be perceived as potentially in conflict with other goals — like productivity growth or economic growth overall — that they slow it down, that they're a distraction, that maybe they're a nice thing to do. Whereas I think we all firmly see and believe, and I think the evidence supports, that they're mutually reinforcing, that you're going to get a lot further in your economic or yield or agricultural goals if you pay attention to women's empowerment and improve nutrition. That there is a drag, if you don't, there is a drag on your other goals'. — Donor

This is especially true for focal points working in the private sector, where gender and nutrition were described as secondary priorities to the primary goal of selling a service or a product.

Networks

Internal networks: Internal networks within institutions are key to the success of many different integration and mainstreaming related activities, including harmonizing activities across actors and departments, securing funds for focal point activities, ensuring accountability in gender-sensitive hiring practices, administering or coordinating trainings, and translating organisational policies into action. It is especially important for focal points to develop relationships with M&E departments, Human Resources (HR), as well as programming and technical teams and leadership to better facilitate these processes.

According to the respondents, various factors influence focal points' internal networks, such as where they are located within the organisational structure, the type of institution, and the institution's integration or mainstreaming goals. In bigger international organisations, for example, focal points have found success in creating a gender focal point network across country offices to share best practices and cascade information to country-level staff or programme participants. The cascading focal point model used by one organisation in this sample was described as successful model in implementing the organisation's nutrition strategy. Even in national or local level institutions, internal networks can help disseminate information across divisions and departments, such as through HR departments in private sector companies.

In the absence of internal networks, integration, and mainstreaming efforts can be inconsistent and disjointed, leading to gaps in implementation. One technical implementer who had a network of in-country nutrition focal points but lacked a parallel gender network described the challenges in applying a gender lens to all programming in the same way:

'But now we didn't plan for gender activities or for gender trainings. I think that is one of our weakest… maybe because we don't have gender focal persons, that is why we didn't. Now I think if [gender focal points] brings that issue, we can go for that now'.— Technical implementer

The implementer felt that if they had gender focal points at the country level, the organisation would

make progress in implementing gender activities and gender indicators in the same way that nutrition has been integrated.

External networks: External networks and collaborations also impact focal point model success for two primary reasons:

1) capacity building through technical assistance partnerships and

2) creating partnerships for delivering programming in target countries and communities.

External networks can be important sources of support for individuals newer to a technical area and looking to build their capacity or seeking mentors. Technical assistance partnerships are key sources of support for focal point persons, who often have low capacity and skills in their assigned technical area. For focal points who perform largely administrative/ coordination roles, or those still new to the field, these partnerships can help fill technical gaps in assignments when additional expertise is needed. They can also help deliver specialized trainings to organisations, and assist focal points when they are unclear on how to develop or implement an activity.

These partnerships can take different forms, such as short-term consultancies. Several respondents highlighted the partnership with IGNITE:

'You need, I would say, support from like-minded organizations, like Tanager. Their support helps a lot because it gives you guidance on what needs to be done so it's very important for one to be successful

in implementing nutrition.' — Nutrition focal point

Respondents noted that because of the simultaneous capacity building of focal points that occurs alongside completing integration and/or mainstreaming activities, the partnership builds institutional capacity in gender and/or nutrition which continues to exist even after the partnership ends.

For focal points tasked with programming and implementation, establishing community, organisational, and/or government partnerships is also an important step for increasing their reach and more easily delivering messaging on gender and/or nutrition because they increase community receptiveness. For example, one focal point explained how they partnered with schools in rural areas to build community trust and buy-in for their product making it easier to deliver messaging around gender and nutrition. Another focal point described how they leveraged partnerships with a government ministry to improve their message delivery through national extension services:

'Partnership is very important. We have to identify in the Ministry of Health coordination units to talk with them — that nutrition is not only for children. Nutrition is also for adults. Whichever activity you're going to put in place, partnership is very important. So, by doing this one, by doing partnership in-country, we talk to them to convince and gradually we make what we call, uh, a partnership on nutrition in the country.' — Nutrition focal point

For external networks, organisations should invest in participating in or supporting the establishment of strategic technical partnerships and networks. Engaging in these external networks can

    (1) provide access to capacity building and technical resources for focal points,

    (2) increase organisational motivation and learning for gender and nutrition mainstreaming, and

    (3) elevate gender and nutrition as a priority area to donors.

By developing partnerships that focus on capacity building alongside technical assistance, organisations are able to benefit from increased institutional capacity, via focal points, that allow integration and mainstreaming efforts to continue after the partnership comes to a close.

Individual characteristics

While many of the factors influencing focal point performance exist at the institutional level, the individual characteristics of focal points also impact their ability to achieve integration or mainstreaming goals.

Technical Capacity: Given that integration or mainstreaming focal point persons are assigned roles in a specific technical area, their capacity emerged as an important factor in ensuring that they can perform their responsibilities. Respondents felt that focal points with higher technical capacities can:

- Perform responsibilities with less investment in additional technical assistance
- Tackle larger, more complex projects
- Easily contextualise technical information for a non-technical audience
- More easily transition from integration-focused tasks to mainstreaming activities and efforts

However, if their technical capacity is low, this can negatively impact integration and mainstreaming, primarily by:

- slowing down integration or mainstreaming processes
- integrating gender/nutrition work into basic programming without a strategic vision for institutional change

One respondent described how the technical capacity of a focal point can also create problems in the context of programme cycles and time-restraints:

'Currently you'll discover that most of these donors will give you only three to five years to do whatever you need to do. Measure impact. Come up with lessons learned. So, if you really come in and you're totally green, you'll discover that it takes time for you to really map out what really needs to be done. So, there's also that need to more or less have some experience, if not the training in gender.' — Gender focal point, NGO

This suggests that organisations should be strategic in their recruitment of focal points, relying not just on their current institutional position but also on previous experience and skills in either gender or nutrition, which can be assessed during the recruitment phase. In lieu of previous experience, choosing focal points who express an interest in gender or nutrition as a minimum requirement can at least ensure their commitment to the capacity building process.

From a donor's perspective, low technical capacity in gender or nutrition in an organisation can be a significant risk for investment. Without a strong grasp of the technical area being integrated or mainstreamed, there is no guarantee that the gender or nutrition work will be carried out intentionally or with skill to be impactful. Because of this, donors may shy away from working with organisations that do not have the in-house capacity in the required field, unless they invest in a consulting expert or develop partnerships with organisations with technical capacity in the area. This may, in turn, influence the level of organisational funding available for gender/nutrition.

> **Things to consider:** Investing in continuous capacity building for focal points is important to ensure that they can carry out required tasks in the absence of other institutional expertise. Institutions should consider supporting and funding technical assistance partnerships, university courses, reading and learning material, joining communities of practice, and/or conference attendance for focal points, which can all play an important role in their capacity building journey. Prior to this investment, however, it's important for organisations to conduct a capacity assessment to determine what capacity building is needed, based on the focal points specific set of skills and context-specific performance expectations.

Trends in influencing factors by sector

Some differences were noted when comparing factors influencing the performance of focal points

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6 The Minimum Standards for Mainstreaming Gender are a set of 8 standards that enable international development and humanitarian response organizations to adopt a minimum level of gender equality mainstreaming within their organization and programming. Additional information available here: https://genderstandards.org/standards/

listed by private sector companies versus NGOs. Responses unique to NGOs include:

- Technical capacity in staff or management
- Robust M&E system

The technical capacity of staff at an organisation is important for making sure all gender and/or nutrition responsibilities do not fall solely on focal persons - who often experience competing time commitments with their regular roles (**Annex 2**) - but can be tackled by many different institutional actors. It also helps to create a supportive culture by making sure all staff have at least some levels of understanding and competency in the technical area. A robust M&E system is important for collecting data on key nutrition and/or gender indicators, an important step in an institution's mainstreaming journey.

Given the relationship of each of these two factors to mainstreaming processes (organisational culture, institutional policies, and measuring accountability) as outlined in the Minimum Standards for Mainstreaming Gender[6], the findings suggest that NGOs conceptualize focal points as being more integral to institutional mainstreaming than private sector actors. It could also suggest, by extension, that NGOs are more intentional about mainstreaming overall, whether the catalyst is to satisfy donor requirements, keep up with industry trends, and/or create better community impact and outcomes.

Only one response was unique to private-sector institutions, which was the need to establish a business case for integrating gender or nutrition. As illustrated in the following two quotes, the primary focus of a business is to sell a service or product which means that, ultimately, gender and nutrition might only be mainstreamed if they translate into increased sales for the company or other, less visible benefits.

'[Organisation] is a commercial company, it's not an NGO that is geared to making sure that gender issues and nutrition issues are addressed fully.' — Gender/Nutrition focal point

'Private sector is a bit sensitive on how they work because if it doesn't make a business case for them they will not do it. But for NGOs, it's a bit open in terms of integrating, whether it makes business sense or not, so long as it makes implementation or outcome or impact sense, they will do it more easily. For the private sector, it might have an impact - let's say integrate women into their programming - but if it does not translate to sales, and if it does not translate to profit, they will be more hesitant to implementing it.' — Nutrition expert

This approach may also explain why focal points at private sector businesses are more focused on integrating gender and nutrition rather than institutional mainstreaming. If the focus is primarily on how gender and nutrition increase sales, it may seem more strategic to focus on integrating both at ground level operations where institutions meet clients, compared to changing internal culture, policies, and processes. Additionally, the types of data collected, or not collected, by private-sector actors may exclude the perceived benefits of gender and nutrition to only product or services sales instead of the potential higher-level gains.

Recommendations: Private-sector institutions and NGOs likely have different motivations and incentives for incorporating gender and nutrition into their practices. Being mindful of these motivations and assisting focal points to tailor their messaging and initiatives to each may help them to better align activities and communicate the benefits of mainstreaming to decision-makers within the institution. Encouraging private sector and NGO partnerships, too, can create mutually beneficial learning opportunities for focal points. Whereas private sector actors can expand their understanding of what data to collect to better measure the long-term return on investment in gender and nutrition. NGOs and CSOs can learn from the private sector how to better deliver gender and nutrition messaging to incentivize the uptake of gender and nutrition behavior changes.

Changes in Focal Point Models

We also asked respondents about what changes they had experienced over time in focal point structures, to gain a better understanding of how focal point models might evolve at an institution. A description of the current models utilised by the organisations sampled can be found in **Annex 1.**

Two main themes emerged on how focal point structures can change over the course of the technical assistance journey:

(1) focal point turnover and

(2) focal point transition to full-time experts or advisors.

Interviews uncovered three primary pathways for how focal point turnover or transition may occur within an institution, which are summarized in the following scenarios:

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[6] The Minimum Standards for Mainstreaming Gender are a set of 8 standards that enable international developments and humanitarian response organizations to adopt a minimum level of gender equality mainstreaming within their organization and programming. Additional information available here: https://genderstandards.org/standards/

6. Focal point turnover

Scenario 1: A focal point is appointed to integrate gender or nutrition in a project to fulfil donor requirements and is provided some capacity building opportunities, but lacks the support of management and staff, adequate funds, or clear objectives for their role. In this situation, the focal point leaves the role discouraged, and the institution is left with no technical capacity. (**Figure 3**)
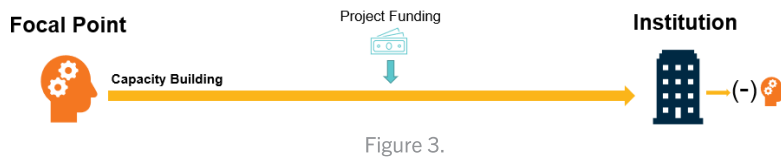
Figure 3.

7. Focal point transition

Scenario 2: An organisation establishes a gender and nutrition focal point role, invests in technical training, and provides supportive leadership and guidance for their work (**Figure 4**). However, the specific technical area that the focal point person works in does not enjoy high priority within the institution, and the institution does not offer additional resources and opportunities to grow in the role. In this case, the focal point grows their capacity to a certain level and leaves the institution to pursue
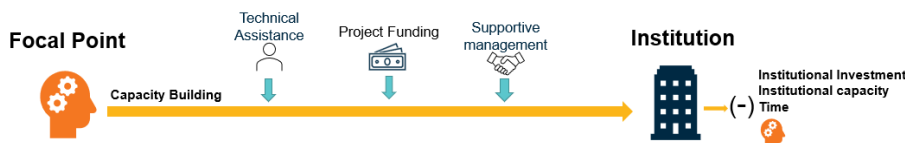

Figure 4

a full-time technical position elsewhere. In this case, the institution loses their investment, institutional capacity, time, and any continuity/momentum in their integration/mainstreaming processes as they work to fill the role again.

Scenario 3: An organisation appoints a focal point to help support integration at the programme level (**Figure 5**). It also invests in continuous technical training, providing supportive leadership, and creating an organisational culture that values the technical area. Throughout this process, the institution may employ part-time consultants or experts to fill in technical gaps. At the end of the focal points' capacity building journey, the management creates an institutionally funded role for the focal point to become a full-time technical advisor or expert. In this case, technical capacity is
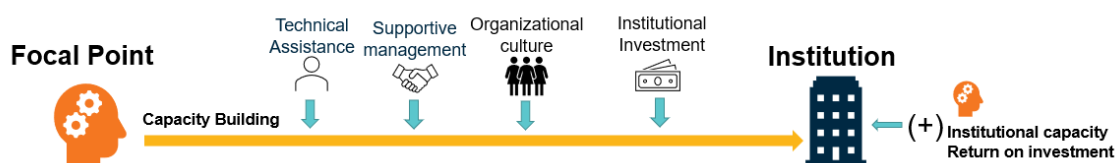
retained, the institution receives a return on their investment, and the processes of mainstreaming and integration continue within the institution.

All three scenarios depict situations that occurred within IGNITE partners or were experienced by the case study respondents, highlighting the need for institutions to seriously consider the sustainability of focal point models from the outset, to avoid significant losses in investment, time, and mainstreaming progress in the long run. The scenarios also demonstrate that focal point models are not, on their own, a long-term solution for gender and nutrition mainstreaming, but can be a critical stop gap in an institution's journey while it works to develop a full-time role or long-term support structures.

'I always say training is costly. It's not cheap. So, if you can get the energy to train a person to learn something within an institution, it would be better if you can look at the right mechanisms to help that person stick. But then if now that person goes, it means that you'll have to go through the hiring process, and…another round of the same [training] process, which is quite costly if you look at it from a long-term point of view. And it also brings the intermittentness where there is no continuity and there is no sustainability' — Gender expert

Things to consider: Building institutional capacity in gender and/or nutrition is an investment, regardless of whether it is accomplished through focal point models, employing full technical expertise, or hiring technical consultants. Institutions choosing the focal point model should seriously consider how to build in sustainability mechanisms into the model so they can continue benefitting from these investments and maintain continuity in their integration and mainstreaming activities.

Synergies in gender and nutrition

Integrating gender and nutrition simultaneously is expected to create better outcomes for agriculture institutions than if they are integrated separately. Indeed, all organisations sampled in this study

Figure 5.

have some measure of both gender and nutrition integration, although in differing ways. Some utilise separate gender and nutrition focal points, some employ one focal point to implement both technical areas, and others use a mix of focal points and experts (**Annex 1**). Promisingly, nearly all institutions interviewed show a high level of buy-in regarding the benefits that integrating gender and nutrition technical areas can have on outcomes. Creating convergence opportunities for focal points and other technical experts to share information or implement activities together can help institutions benefit from the synergies that exist when gender and nutrition are mainstreamed together.

Areas of overlap: The findings indicate that gender and nutrition focal points working in the same organisation found areas of overlap when designing and implementing their activities, whether through developing concept notes and proposals together. Other areas of overlap include delivering synchronised sensitisation to the same project participants, creating tools that deliver both gender and nutrition messaging, each including the other in work plan development, or participating in each other's working groups and meetings. Some of these collaborative activities were prompted by resource constraints — such as delivering simultaneous trainings when one technical area was underfunded — while others were outlined in the focal points' terms of reference, or prompted by programmatic needs, like when a programme had both gender and nutrition components. IGNITE technical experts also facilitated conversations and partnerships between gender and nutrition focal persons to help look for points of convergence within their specific contexts.

For some focal points tasked with both gender and nutrition responsibilities, interweaving technical areas felt organic and inherent to their work:

'I can't really draw a line and say 'this is where I stop doing gender related things 'cause whenever I'm doing my other things it's so that we can bring nutrition, we can breach the local gap in terms of protein, and we can make sure women are involved. So, they kind of work for each other, these roles, so yes, they're intertwined' — Gender and nutrition focal point

Other focal points, especially those new to gender/nutrition, found it more difficult to find points of convergence but still found it helpful to engage in information sharing with focal points or experts in the other technical areas to build their understanding of the topic.

Synergies: The perceived benefits of integrating gender and nutrition are many, both for the institutions and project participants. Institutional improvements include better design of programmes and interventions, overcoming funding challenges,

and developing social behaviour change campaigns to better address target audiences. Outcomes for project participants include increased income-generating activities for women, improved household nutrition and dietary diversity through more equitable household decision-making and women's empowerment. Combining technical areas also helps to identify key entry points for gender in nutrition programming and vice-versa.

'It really gives us a comprehensive overlook at exactly what's happening and what are the gaps that need to be addressed. And to me, I feel that's more comprehensive because even when you get to the field, in the areas that you partner, you can now say 'these are the findings, and this is what you're going to address.' And we are also looking at having a social behaviour change campaign that came out of some of this interaction. So, I'll say that when you do it together, we are able to really take these results even further — away from gender now also to nutrition, which is more or less ensuring food security, which is our main focus'. Gender focal point

'We are out there selling poultry, chickens, which are going to produce meat and eggs, and we are saying the women in the households are best positioned to understand the nutritional requirements of the kids, and the males kind of accept that because they don't feel challenged — they feel complemented and helped to achieve nutrition, to achieve better health for their kids, to achieve better development. So, yeah, at the moment I think it's working well. It blends well with what the government is doing as well'. — Gender and nutrition focal point

For private-sector actors, some view activities that combine gender and nutrition as having an amplifying effect on the demand for their products and services — a primary selling point for integration. As one nutrition expert explains:

'Being in the private sector, I think both [gender and nutrition] augment the business case or the demand, the social norms that we are gearing at changing for better gender and nutrition outcomes. Like for instance, when we sensitise or have messages geared towards women's empowerment, men supporting women in poultry business, (1) it creates demand. The man will go home and give the woman money to go and buy the chicks, eggs, and chicken. That has created a demand for [organization]. Hence, the business case for integrating or for women's empowerment. Then, if it's nutrition where they are seeing 'yeah children are healthier when they eat this'. So, that also creates demand, meaning (1) health outcomes get better and (2) it also creates demands for the bird which now also makes the business case for [Organisation E] supporting the integration of gender and nutrition'. — Nutrition expert

However, there may be a ceiling for some companies on how much they are willing to support gender and nutrition mainstreaming, until a stronger business case can be demonstrated.

> **Things to consider:** For institutions and/or focal points new to the field of gender and nutrition, areas of convergence for both technical areas may not be immediately apparent. Creating opportunities for focal points and other technical experts, to share information and attend each other's meetings or activities, while also utilising technical assistance partnerships to guide ways to support focal points in working together, can help institutions benefit from the synergies that exist when both technical areas are mainstreamed together. Continuing to build the business case for mainstreaming gender and nutrition is also important for bringing more private sector institutions on board, which will help in strengthening the agriculture sector overall.

Impacts of different focal point models: emerging trends

Given the diversity of focal point structures, small sample size, and the type of data collected, it is difficult for this study to conclusively identify how different models impact integration and mainstreaming outcomes. The study however proposes the following hypotheses of how focal point models may be connected to outcomes, based on participant responses on their perceived biggest successes:

1. **Organisations that provide the highest levels of support to focal point models may have more success in mainstreaming gender and nutrition.** Focal point persons that have access to dedicated institutional budgets, gender and/or nutrition working groups, and direct lines of reporting to leadership described their biggest successes as being more mainstreaming focused per the Minimum Standards for Mainstreaming Gender Equality. They reported being able to execute gender and nutrition-related formative research, data collection on key indicators and finalise institution-wide strategies. Management staff from these organisations reported major successes in creating institutional awareness and respect for gender and nutrition considerations. This suggests that focal point models that are well resourced through independent funding and supported through institutional networks and management may be more able to focus on creating institutional changes than those that are not.

2. **A cascading model of focal points may be an optimal structure for larger, international, or geographically dispersed institutions.** Institutions with multiple offices or departments in different geographical locations are likely to benefit from having multiple focal points throughout the organisation, to provide support and guidance in implementing institutional policies and strategies to local employees. Indeed, respondents in one organisation that utilise a cascading model for nutrition in each operating country and a single focal point for gender at a regional office described very different outcomes in mainstreaming for the two technical areas. While there have been reported successes in expanding access to and awareness of nutritionally rich crops, the gender focal point did not report any successes. In addition, technical implementers reported gaps in gender-sensitive programming and were not aware of the existence of a gender focal point in their organisation. Appointing additional focal points in different offices can help reduce the amount of coordinating a focal point in a regional or head office handles, which can sometimes slow down mainstreaming processes and implementation.

3. **Appointing focal points from programming or marketing departments may provide the best opportunity for success in gender and nutrition integration.** Many focal points with full-time roles in programmes or marketing ascribe successes in nutrition or gender integration to their experience with and access to programmes that directly impact clients and participants. This can be through training other programme implementers/marketers, participating in proposal development/review, or other programme related activities.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this case study, the following recommendations can be adopted by institutions, donors and technical assistance providers in deciding if institutions should implement a focal point model and how they can optimise their performance and outcomes:

For institutions:

Take time to develop a clear vision and goal for gender and/or nutrition before deciding to implement a focal point model to deliver integration and/or mainstreaming. It is important to have a clear understanding of the difference between integration and mainstreaming and which level(s) (project or institutional) the institution's vision will be focused on. Creating a clear vision, based on the current stage of integration and/or mainstreaming, will help guide decision-making around resourcing, partnerships, and structures of support – including whether a focal point model is best suited to accomplish these goals. If a focal point model is identified as the best option, ensuring that

leadership is supportive then the focal point is key in providing them access to decision-making authority and the resources necessary to be successful in their role.

Incorporate gender and nutrition considerations in resource mobilisation planning. Adequately resourcing focal point models is one of the most important steps towards ensuring their success in integrating and/or mainstreaming gender/nutrition. Institutions should be intentional about applying a gender and nutrition lens to policy development, strategy creation, and/or project proposal stages - depending on their established vision and goals. This ensures sufficient and flexible funding will be available to focal points to accomplish their assigned responsibilities. Taking time to reflect on organisational goals regarding gender and nutrition will also help to inform whether funding them as separate or combined areas makes the most sense. Where applicable, institutions should also pay particular attention to dedicating funds for mainstreaming efforts, as these are not often funded through project-level budgets.

Always look ahead. The sustainability of a focal point model hinges, in part, on the ability of an institution to support their professional growth and create space for them to grow within the institution. Organisations should commit to investing in continuous capacity building opportunities, building the necessary time allotments into job descriptions, and creating a demand for focal point services, or risk losing out on time, personnel, and institutional capacity if focal points leave and/or pursue other opportunities. It is important to note that as gender or nutrition become more institutionalised, workloads may exceed focal point capacity, in which case graduating them to full-time advisor roles or hiring full-time experts may be the more appropriate option.

For donors:

Consider funding gender and nutrition activities beyond project integration. Institutional buy-in, technical capacity, and continuity of activities are all important determinants of whether a focal point will be able to successfully facilitate gender and nutrition mainstreaming within an institution. These can be encouraged through organisation-wide training and sensitisation sessions, as well as non-project specific research and activities. Consider including additional funds for these institutional trainings and activities to help build a more robust agriculture sector in gender and nutrition overall.

Provide support for both gender and nutrition. Donors can play an important role in setting priorities and driving necessary changes in the agriculture sector. Given the synergies of intertwining both gender and nutrition, donors should support the integration and/or mainstreaming of both technical areas to ensure participants, institutions and the sector overall can benefit from their combined integration.

Require reporting on integration and mainstreaming activities. In addition to measuring gender and nutrition outcomes at the programme level, donors should advise institutions on how to measure and report progress in mainstreaming at the institutional level as well. This includes providing guidance on data collection and reporting, which is important for ensuring accountability from organisations and determining whether current approaches are creating their intended outcomes.

Support the establishment of networks to help build focal point persons and institutional capacity. In addition to providing funds, donors can also support institutions and focal point persons in growing their networks in the gender and/or nutrition space to increase opportunities for robust learning, sharing, and partnership development that can further grow the technical capacity of each.

For technical assistance providers:

Tailor approaches depending on the type of institution you are assisting. Different institutions have different entry points for mainstreaming gender and nutrition depending on their goals and priorities. Establish these early in the relationship to help ensure that the focal points' responsibilities align with the vision and mission of the institution. This will help drive institutional buy-in and reduce potential tensions in conflicting priorities and responsibilities.

Help develop strategies for working across technical areas. Synergies exist when gender and nutrition are integrated together, whether that is accomplished through one focal point person or multiple focal points working together. Technical assistance providers can provide guidance to focal points by recognising these synergies and identifying potential entry points for intertwining technical areas, especially those new to their technical area. For those working in the private sector, technical assistance providers can also assist in developing strategies for building the business case for integrating both gender and nutrition, an important step in creating buy-in within the sector.

Focus on ways to help build a supportive ecosystem around focal point persons to assist them after technical assistance services end. A focal points' network inside and outside of organisations can help or hinder their success, depending on the reach and diversity of support available. Technical assistance providers can help build these networks by introducing focal points

to other professionals in the field and encouraging organisations to create formal internal networks - such as working groups or technical champions in leadership roles - to help align organisational decision-making and activities and cascade messaging throughout the organisation to those working on the ground.

Walk the journey with focal point persons. Many individuals learn by doing, which is also the case with focal point persons learning a new technical area. Technical assistance providers should consider not only administering trainings, but also allowing focal points to take the lead on some responsibilities while providing feedback and mentorship throughout the process. This helps build the technical capacity of focal points to repeat activities after the technical assistance partnership has ended.

Be flexible. Focal points are often juggling their new tasks with regular working responsibilities while also learning a (potentially) brand-new set of skills. Technical assistance providers should remain flexible and patient with focal points as processes can move slower based on their level of knowledge and decision-making authority within their institution. In some cases, this may require adjustments to technical assistance deliverables and timelines, which also has implications for how the technical assistance is funded and supported by donors.

Study Limitations

There are some limitations to this case study. The first limitation was the relatively small sample size (7 institutions), which restricted the conclusions that can be made about trends among different types of

agriculture institutions. Another limitation was the type of data collected, which was not sufficient to conclude how focal point model structures directly impact nutrition and mainstreaming outcomes. This is due, in part, to challenges faced when conducting interviews virtually - including the timing of interviews and internet connection for participants. Additional quantitative or survey data on mainstreaming and integration outcomes at each institution could strengthen the findings to better support primary research question 2.

Conclusion

Focal point models are one route that agriculture institutions can take when deciding to integrate gender and nutrition or mainstream gender. The way organisations conceptualise, implement, and resource these models can greatly influence how effective they are in accomplishing their intended purpose. This study examined how seven agriculture institutions that worked with the IGNITE mechanism utilised focal point models, factors that impacted focal point persons' performances, and how the organisation and structure may impact gender and nutrition mainstreaming outcomes. This study builds on previous research looking at larger, international NGOs and public institutions to include how private-sector institutions may conceptualise, resource, and benefit from focal point models to reach their gender and nutrition goals and desired outcomes. Findings and recommendations from this study contribute to the overall landscape of gender and nutrition in the agriculture sector and can help institutions make more informed decisions on how best to institutionalise both technical areas, while also providing guidance to donors and other technical assistance providers in supporting their efforts.

Annex 1: Descriptive Overview of Focal Point Models

This section provides a descriptive overview of all focal point models that currently exist at sampled institutions from Tanager's IGNITE portfolio, including where focal points are placed, how their activities are funded, their roles and responsibilities, and current sources of support in integrating or mainstreaming gender and/or nutrition.

Focal point model structures: A range of focal point structures were identified in the seven institutions sampled **(Figure 6).** Two of the organisations (A and B) appointed one focal person to integrate both gender and nutrition while five appointed focal points to focus on one technical area only – gender, nutrition, or M&E. Two organisations (D and E) each had two focal points working with IGNITE (one gender and one nutrition), while the other organisations only had one focal point working with IGNITE but may have had experts in another technical field (not included). Two organizations described utilising multiple focal points in one technical area within their institution, either as a cascading network of focal points (E) or per project (G). Note: only one primary focal point was interviewed from each E and G for this case study

Institution type: Two of the institutions sampled were private companies working on a national level, while three were international NGOs receiving IGNITE technical services. Another two were local services providers (LSPs) - one internationally and one nationally focused - receiving IGNITE technical services as well as providing technical assistance to other organisations.

Focal point formal roles: Seven of the ten focal points interviewed had a formal role working directly in programming or marketing either as a programme officer, programme manager, or marketing manager/advisor (Figure 6). All of them worked in programming or marketing except one who sat at the regional office overseeing four country-level focal points (E). The remaining focal points worked as a head of administration, thematic director of M&E (while holding the focal point role), and a seed specialist/technical advisor. The former two sat in the regional office of strategic partnerships.

Reporting Structure: Over half of the focal points had a direct reporting line to high-level leadership within their organization. Two focal gender points, whose day-to-day supervisors were in separate departments, had additional reporting established with higher-up leadership regarding their focal point roles, either as a direct connection or through the established gender working group (D). One focal point also described having direct reporting responsibilities to their donor organisation

regarding some gender and nutrition-related targets.

A few focal points also reported having regular, direct coordination responsibilities of additional staff within their organisations in gender, nutrition, or M&E. Both focal points in private-sector institutions were responsible for coordinating marketers and on-the-ground staff in gender and nutrition integration. One nutrition focal point at an international NGO was responsible for coordinating and overseeing the activities of four country-level nutrition focal points to cascade information regarding their nutrition strategy from the regional office to extension agents and farmers.

Funding source: Most focal points reported having at least some funding available for gender or nutrition activities, the majority of which was acquired through project funds (n=8). Of those who reported having access to funding, half had received it solely from project funds while the rest reported having access to dedicated institutional funds, alongside additional project level funds. Two focal points reported having no available funds for focal point activities. Both were in the process of developing their institutions' gender or nutrition strategies, which may explain why budgets had not yet been allocated.

Most focal points considered funding for gender and nutrition to be low across the board, except for two focal points with institutionally allocated funds.

Allocation decision-making: The interviews revealed that most focal points did not have the authority to make important decisions around the allocation or level of funding for gender and/or nutrition activities. Funding decisions were often made by donor organisations, finance departments, or individuals in higher-up leadership roles within their institutions. One focal point described the impact of not being involved in budgeting discussions:

'When we are, people are doing the budgeting you find its sometimes the CEO, the finance people, they go and do the budget and you find because you are not involved, there is an effect because sometimes you need to do a certain training or, sending some message on something but you fail to do it, eh? – Nutrition focal point'

Some focal points who had substantial decision-making input into the use of funds described difficulties around deciding whether to fund gender and nutrition activities or other programmatic activities when funding for both came from the same pot. Notably, focal points who described having the highest level of input in decision-making were also those who had institutionally earmarked budgets for gender or nutrition. This suggests that funding not dictated by individual project budgets
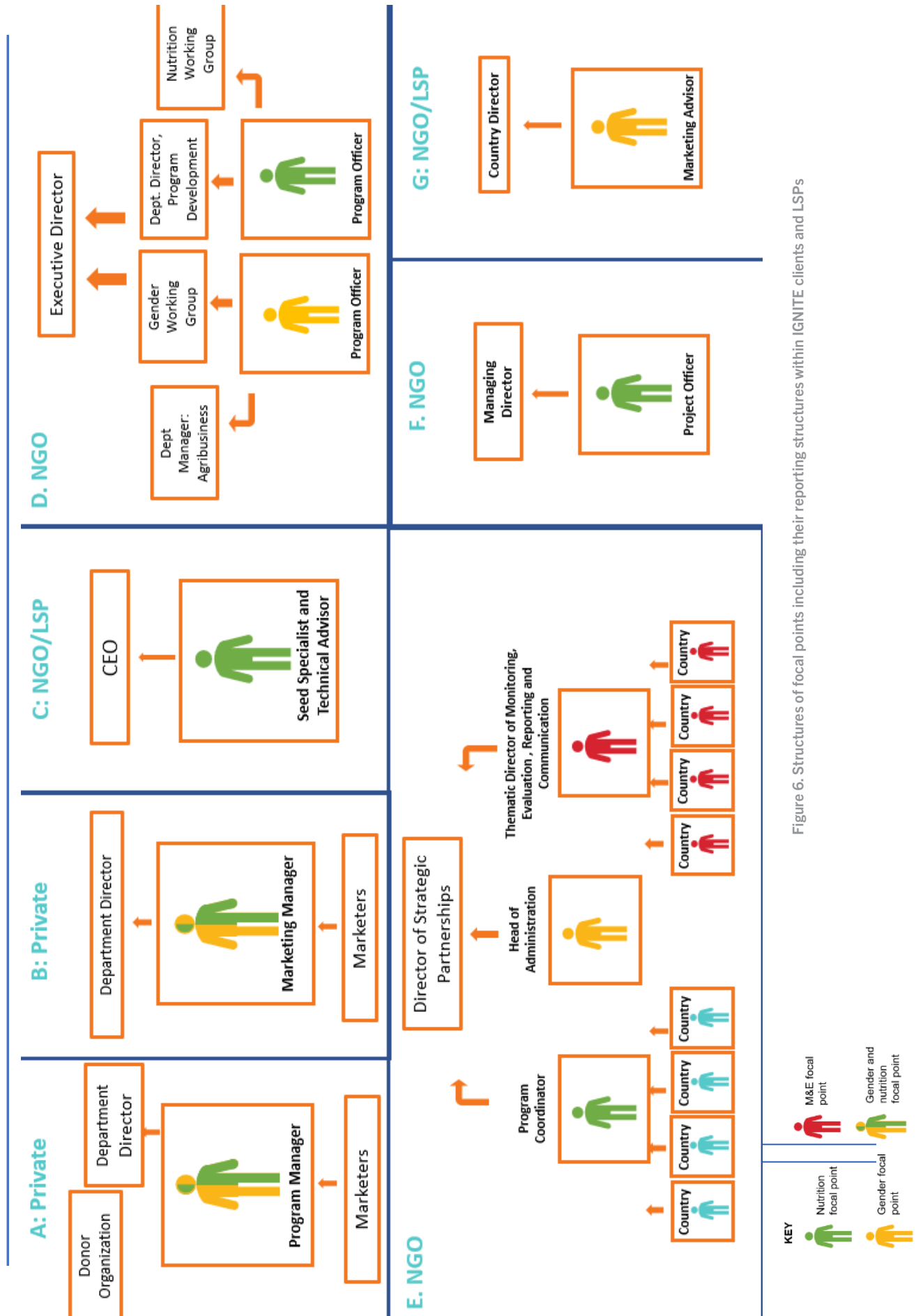
Figure 6. Structures of focal points including their reporting structures within IGNITE clients and LSPs

A: Private

Donor Organization → Department Director → Program Manager → Marketers

B: Private

Department Director → Marketing Manager → Marketers

C: NGO/LSP

CEO → Seed Specialist and Technical Advisor

D. NGO

Executive Director ← Dept Manager: Agribusiness

Executive Director ← Gender Working Group → Program Officer

Executive Director ← Dept. Director, Program Development → Program Officer → Nutrition Working Group

E. NGO

Director of Strategic Partnerships → Program Coordinator → Country / Country / Country / Country

Director of Strategic Partnerships → Head of Administration → Thematic Director of Monitoring, Evaluation, Reporting and Communication → Country / Country / Country / Country

F. NGO

Managing Director → Project Officer

G: NGO/LSP

Country Director → Marketing Advisor

KEY

Nutrition focal point

M&E focal point

Gender focal point

Gender and nutrition focal point

may provide more autonomy over how funds can be used, which allows for flexibility and innovation in activity implementation and potentially more focus on institutional mainstreaming and sensitisation.

Sources of support

Institutional support: The sources of support for focal points mentioned by respondents include

- Institutionally sponsored trainings and education (non-IGNITE)
- Short-term consultancies
- Training manuals, documents, and/or tools
- Funding or resources
- Other organisational expertise (M&E
- Internal networks

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Box 2: Bringing everyone to the table

A technical working group is one tool that can be used to harmonise integration and mainstreaming efforts across an organisation. Organisation (D) uses a gender working group (GWG) to implement collective decision-making around their gender activities and funding and ensure a gender lens is applied across the organisational programming. The group maintains a 50/50 gender representation and is comprised of ten stakeholders across operations and departments. The GWG is chaired by the Executive Director and includes a gender-champion from the board as one of its members to ensure leadership buy-in at all levels. The group was implemented, primarily, to share the workload of the gender focal point, which can be overwhelming for one person on a part-time basis. As one respondent notes, "the group really helps in looking into all the programs and all the departments and ensuring all departments are aware of putting that gender lens into our operations, even the operations that are not majorly programming."

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IGNITE was identified as the single most common source of support for focal points across organisations, which is probably because the study covered institutions from IGNITE clients. In two cases, however, IGNITE was the only source of support for focal persons.

Two NGOs, both internationally focused, described implementing technical networks to support gender or nutrition work – one in the form of formal working groups **(Box 2)** and the other as a network of trained nutrition champions within the organisations' country-level operations, which also received training from IGNITE.

External networks: The majority focal points reported small or non-existent professional networks in gender or nutrition outside of their relationship with IGNITE. Some focal points reported retaining informal relationships with short-term consultants from past trainings who were available, at times, to answer questions. Other focal points described having external networks that involved membership in communities of practice – recommended by IGNITE experts – or working alongside advisors who were hired by organisations for part-time consultancies to support focal points in programming or administer staff capacity trainings. A few focal points also reported having partnerships with different government ministries within implementation countries to help facilitate programming and increase community receptivity.

Overall, it seems that IGNITE played a key role in serving as or creating professional touch points when focal points had small or non-existent networks in their technical area, especially those new to the field. It also highlights the need for both organisations and technical assistance providers to consider the sustainability of focal point models and their continued training after technical assistance is provided.

Overall, the most common duties assigned to focal point persons were related to gender/nutrition integration processes. The top two duties were 'programme implementation/ management' and 'internal or external coordination' (often referring to external partnership coordination and internal team coordination). When compared by institution type, private-sector institutions overwhelmingly reported focal point duties that were focused on the integration of gender/nutrition at the programming level while public institutions more commonly described having a mix of roles in both integration and mainstreaming. Some mainstreaming tasks, for example, were only reported by public organisations and not private-sector institutions, including 'performing organisational analyses' and 'policy strategy in development'.

Resource/management

Training opportunities: Given the importance of focal points' technical capacity in gender/nutrition, access to and investment in training opportunities is an important influence on their performance and overall success (a factor highly linked to external collaboration and technical assistance partnerships). Respondents highlighted the need for focal points to have regular and continuous trainings to build their capacity in a way that encourages sustainability of the role, allowing them to continue integrating nutrition or gender after their partnership or engagement with technical assistance (whether short or long-term) is finished.

Time: Having the time to adequately commit to focal point responsibilities is an important factor in determining whether focal points will successfully carry out integration or mainstreaming tasks. Focal point responsibilities are often added to formal job roles, usually without changes in job expectations or workloads. At the beginning of an institution's integration or mainstreaming journey, this might make sense if the focal point is primarily acting in a coordinating role or performing light-touch activities. However, depending on the level of technical training required for focal points, as well as the organisation's portfolio in gender/nutrition, tension can arise between formal and focal point responsibilities and the time needed to complete them.

'I think that has been the challenge because you will realize – we will have the focal point carry on these activities, you know, voluntarily, basically, I would say. And you find that where I sit, this person is swamped with work. And so, I would think we're not providing them the opportunity to even, you know, take a break because they still have their day-to-day full-time job. But then they're required to do these other institutional mandates of gender mainstreaming. So that to me is what has been a failure. But of course, again, it's based - not justifying - but again it's because of the budget availability' – Management staff

To illustrate this point, we compared the percentage of time committed to focal point activities reported by four focal points to the time that management estimated those focal points spent on activities (**Table 2**). As shown, focal points spend a significantly higher amount of time on their responsibilities than is estimated by management, suggesting that for some, the time needed for integration/mainstreaming is higher than generally understood.

While a closer alignment of formal roles and focal point roles or a clear term of reference can help ameliorate this disparity, it's likely that the heavier the workload and more input required to institutionalise gender and/or nutrition, the more an institution will need to consider creating a dedicated gender and/or nutrition position, to ensure responsibilities are being carried out and not overburdening focal points.

Organisational culture

Focal point structures did not emerge as one of the strongest influencing factors in focal point performance. However, it did emerge as an influencing factor, nonetheless. Structure, in this instance, involves

(1) the placement of the focal point within the organisation

(2) their decision-making authority, and

(3) the formality of their roles and responsibilities.

1. Institutional placement: The ways in which placement influenced focal point success were often dependent on the outcomes they were trying to achieve. For those focused on integration activities, proximity to programming or programme participants was described as positively influencing their success, since they were more easily able to identify potential gaps in nutrition or gender integration and/or deliver important messaging and trainings to their target audience. These focal points were often those working primarily at the program level and reporting to their department directors. In some cases when focal points were further 'up the chain' from programme implementation, integration was reported as inconsistent or incomplete.

In contrast, however, one respondent described how

Key management		Focal Point	
Time spent on FP Role	Time spent on formal role	Time spent on FP Role	Time spent on formal role
50%	50%	30%	70%
10%	90%	50%	50%
30%	70%	50%	50%
20%	80%	50%	50%
Avg: 27.5%	Avg: 72.5%	Avg: 45%	Avg: 55%

Table 2

the placement of a focal point at the regional level in an organisation required more communication and permission from higher-level individuals before implementing an activity, which often delayed processes.

2. Authority: Focal point structure was discussed by many through the lens of how organisational placement would grant the focal point authority to make decisions independently - especially regarding budgets - and influence programming and policies. The exact placement (i.e a prescriptive formal role) was found to be less important than the ability of focal points to coordinate and make programmatic decisions horizontally across departments, but also have enough authority, or access to authority, vertically to make independent decisions and gain leadership buy-in. For focal points focused on integration, some type of programme management role was commonly mentioned as being a good fit so that they could have influence across interventions and not just in one.

3. Clear terms of reference were identified as influencing a focal points' success in two ways: (1) defining the roles of the focal point in contributing to overall gender or nutrition goals and (2) ensuring adequate time is allocated for focal point activities in combination with their current institutional roles. Focal points can also use their terms of reference to develop an action play for gender and/or nutrition, which can in turn help negotiate resources and time for their activities.

'What I usually do is ask them to develop a work plan or an action plan. Because that is what you would use as a negotiation or negotiating document on the things that you plan. Because you identify, as a focal person you should be able to identify opportunities that will enable you to do gender integration successfully. So come up with an action plan and use that to negotiate for resources that you need and the support that you need' — Gender expert

Without clear expectations of their role or deliverables, focal points may not know what activities to perform or steps to take to fulfill their assignment, which may ultimately stall or prevents institutional progress.

'I don't know. As I told you, it was just dropped to me on my table that I'm supposed to do it. I don't know what is after that, because no, nothing has been mentioned so far' — Gender focal point

Institutional goals, policies, and strategies: Having clear organisational goals, policies and strategies was identified as a trend because of its ability to align both institutional and focal point activities and ensure the necessary resources are allocated. Setting clear goals was noted as being important for framing how success and progress

would be measured, and policies were identified as key for creating an organisational commitment and mandate that focal points could reference to ensure continuous integration of gender/nutrition concepts by staff into their regular work activities, instead of on an ad-hoc basic.

According to respondents working with or in public organisations, referencing country-level policies, strategies or frameworks can also help to increase the buy-in of organizations and provide a starting point for setting institutional goals. In private-sector institutions, aligning activities with national goals was also used to increase participant trust in showing that they were not pushing a purely institution driven agenda, given that they were not considered publicly as experts in nutrition or gender necessarily.

Individual attributes

Passion/Interest: The passion or interest of focal points was cited by respondents an important factor in motivation to accomplish mainstreaming or integration activities. Having a passion for the field is a necessity for 'going the extra mile' or juggling competing priorities, given that the position is often voluntary and requiring taking on additional workload. Being interested in the technical area is also a motivator for focal points to independently seek out opportunities to gain knowledge and pursue personal development, subsequently increasing their technical capacity and, in one case, increasing the resources allocated by institutions for training or capacity building.

'It goes back also to personal ambitions, individual motivations into why they want to follow nutrition. Because I've seen those that have personal motivation. They will even ask for opportunities, 'Where, what can I do? What courses do I need to attend? What webinars do I need to attend? Who are the organizations that I need to follow?' You know, with all this social media. So you can see that that becomes a little more around the personal vision' — Nutrition expert

This case study was written by **Mary Kate Cartmill, Associate Manager II, Nutrition and Food Systems, 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.

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.

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