

Food Security: ACDI/VOCA's New Practice Area

By Sandra Blanchard

This fall we celebrated the life and accomplishments of Norman Borlaug and looked back at the success of the Green Revolution, which is said to have saved a billion people from starvation. Yet today, more than 1 billion people are chronically undernourished and food insecure and another 2 billion are intermittently food insecure.

These people not only live with hunger on a daily basis, but they also suffer from the myriad long-term consequences of poor nutrition. Undernourishment debilitates immune systems, leading to higher levels of disease, lower life expectancies and reduced productive capacities. Many of the world's hungry are children whose mental and physical development is irreparably damaged by a lack of food in their formative years. Their compromised physical and mental capacities tend to mire them in poverty that continues the cycle of undernourishment.

How do we turn this appalling situation around, helping communities become food secure with well-nourished and productive populations? How do we ensure that they will continue to be well-nourished and healthy?

Our commonsense notion is that people are food secure when they have enough nutritious food to eat all the time. USAID has expanded that notion and identified three components of food security: availability, access and utilization. Food availability means that there is sufficient food produced domestically or imported. Access refers to the ability of people to purchase or otherwise obtain food to meet their nutritional needs. And utilization refers to proper food preparation, nutrition and hygiene practices. The food security of individuals and communities is jeopardized when any of these components is weak or missing.

The triad of availability, access and utilization provides a framework for analyzing food security while also pointing the way to addressing the problem. Food availability can be constrained by many factors at both the local and national levels, including poor production practices, lack of agricultural inputs, changing weather patterns and inappropriate national economic policies. Access is affected by low income, lack of employment opportunities and low returns to small farmers for their production. The problem of improper food utilization, particularly poor nutrition and sanitation, is widespread



Michelle Stern

and can be found even among higher-income groups.

Twenty Years of Food Security Experience

ACDI/VOCA has used the availability, access and utilization framework to develop an integrated approach to increasing food security for both individual households and communities. Since 1989 when we first began Title II programming in Uganda, ACDI/VOCA has been implementing food security programs and activities. Our worldwide programs now draw on our long-standing experience in agriculture, rural finance and enterprise development and are complemented by our growing expertise in nutrition and health. We focus on rural communities and small farmer households that typically have only a few acres to cultivate. By employing an integrated approach, we help meet the pressing food and nutrition needs of malnourished people while building the foundation for food-secure and resilient households and rural communities. This year, to enhance our focus and better coordinate our approach to food security, ACDI/VOCA established a Food Security practice area to complement the

existing practice areas of Agribusiness, Financial Services, Community Development and Enterprise Development.

Meeting Immediate Food Needs

In a food-insecure community, it is frequently necessary to improve the nutritional well-being of the most vulnerable members of the community as quickly as possible. Typically, these may be young children, pregnant or lactating mothers, the elderly, the chronically ill or displaced people. Responding to their needs efficiently and effectively requires knowledge in some arcane fields—including international shipping, local transport and warehouse management—as donated food is moved from suppliers to households in remote rural communities. ACDI/VOCA has an outstanding reputation for moving food commodities efficiently, a skill that is necessary as long as natural and man-made crises threaten the food security of vulnerable populations. As proud as we are of that reputation, however, distributing food rations is only a stop-

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gap measure toward sustainable food security for households and communities.

Building a Strong Foundation

Our approach to building sustainable food security starts with a community and household assessment of access, availability and utilization to identify the factors that contribute to food insecurity and then to design appropriate activities. The overarching goal is to build a solid foundation at both the household and community levels to ensure food security, build resilience and expand people's economic opportunities. How? We introduce better agricultural production and post-harvest practices, increase access to savings and credit, train households and farmer groups in basic business skills, and link them to markets. We also improve nutrition, health and hygiene practices within communities.

We have found that understanding intrahousehold resource dynamics as well as a community's cultural beliefs and practices is essential to designing activities that improve food security for all members of a household, including women and children. Increasingly, NGOs and donors provide women training, technical assistance and other resources related to agriculture and nutrition. However, women sometimes are constrained in their ability to use new knowledge and resources to improve household nutrition and food security because they lack control over key household resources. In many communities, sex and age determine who has access to food in a household. Cultural beliefs and practices also may shape how food is

accessed and used in a household, such as restricting the consumption of certain foods to men and boys. In many countries in which we work, we also have found that households rarely pool income and, thus, money earned by men is not necessarily available to meet the needs of other household members. In such circumstances, increasing men's income, for example, may not lead to nutritional and health improvements for women or children.

Two of our most successful strategies for addressing asymmetric intrahousehold dynamics and building a strong food security foundation are to (1) train men in nutrition, health and hygiene; and (2) train both husbands and wives together in improved agricultural production technology. NGOs and health clinics often target women for training in nutrition, yet improvements in terms of overall household nutrition and food security status are not impressive. In Uganda, we began with some trepidation to direct health and nutrition training to men as a requirement for receiving training in improved agriculture production. To our surprise, the men became enthusiastic supporters of improved nutrition, health and hygiene practices, not only within their own households, but also within the community. They helped ensure that increases in production and income resulted in better family nutrition and health outcomes. Furthermore, training both husband and wife resulted in positive changes in patterns of interaction between women and men, decision making and resource use within households.

A strong food security foundation for households also requires resilient community institutions. We work with farmers' groups so that they become centers for savings mobilization, access to credit,

input purchase for members, bulk grain storage and marketing. They also serve as a locus for training that builds the technical, management and business skills of their members. In conflict-affected communities where trust is low, farmers' groups can help build trust through their face-to-face interactions, which can help defuse future conflicts. Through farmer groups, households also are linked to networks beyond their immediate communities (e.g., input suppliers, financial institutions, local and national markets), and this sets the stage for economic growth.

Food Security and Economic Growth

Once a solid foundation is in place, rural households and communities are ready to move beyond basic food security and self-sufficiency to economic growth through more market-oriented, small-scale commercial farming and enterprise development. Our programs' focus turns to agribusiness development, increased market integration, and increased access to more diverse financial services and products. Because of the training and technical assistance provided at earlier stages, we are confident that the nutritional needs of all household members continue to be a priority even as subsistence farmers become more market oriented and, eventually, small-scale commercial farmers themselves.

Sandra Blanchard served as chief of party on ACDI/VOCA's USAID PL 480 Title II program in Uganda and is a consultant on food security issues.

Enhanced Health and Nutrition Strengthens Food Security Programs

By Ryan Larrance

As conflict, climate change, food shortages and volatile global markets continue to take their toll on the populations ACDI/VOCA serves, we are strengthening our capacity to address the needs of acutely vulnerable populations. A key element of our multipronged approach to reducing food insecurity is ensuring the health and nutritional well-being of individuals, households and, ultimately, communities. Securing health and nutrition is especially important to vulnerable populations, which often need short- and medium-term humanitarian assistance before they are able to participate in longer-term development programs.

Health and nutrition programming has been a crucial component of our food security efforts for many years. We established floating clinics and worked with religious leaders to increase family planning in the Philippines, for example. In Haiti we responded to the devastating 2008 hurricane season by providing emergency food rations and medical care, and by improving production of nutritious crops that can grow in hurricane-prone environments. In rural Uganda, we provided crucial nutritional supplementation to people living with HIV and

increased HIV-testing rates of men, while conducting household- and community-level training on good nutrition and hygiene, and improved agricultural practices. We also created agricultural associations in Rwanda to foster greater economic opportunities for people living with HIV and AIDS.

ACDI/VOCA is committed to expanding its technical expertise and innovation in food security, including health and nutrition. And by applying techniques learned from years of community action and mobilization in agribusiness and community development, we are bringing a new perspective to the health and nutrition landscape. Through strategic partnerships, programming, and applied health and nutrition research in multiyear food-security programs, ACDI/VOCA continues to address the most pressing health and nutrition needs of food-insecure populations to improve household- and community-level self-sufficiency and resiliency to shocks.

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