



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

**Learning from experience:** transforming the shock  
of the pandemic into lessons to improve resilience

Case Study from IGNITE | July 2021



tanager  
an ACDI/VOCA affiliate

laterite  
DATA | RESEARCH | ADVISORY

60\_decibels

---

# Introduction

COVID-19 impacted farming households and the way agricultural institutions conduct their work. Numerous studies exist (including from IGNITE partners Laterite and 60 decibels) that show the impact of COVID-19 on household-level socioeconomic, gender, and nutrition outcomes. The pandemic revealed the vulnerability of agricultural households and the marginalized groups within them, highlighting the need for agricultural institutions to adapt their strategies during crises. While COVID-19 is unprecedented, other crises like political conflicts, droughts, infestations, and others related to climate change, are increasing. Agricultural institutions implementing gender and nutrition-sensitive agriculture interventions must be able to adapt. The lessons within this case study focus specifically on the

intersection of gender and nutrition for agricultural institutions during a crisis in sub-Saharan Africa. The recommendations and insights presented here are meant to supplement any emergency response protocols for crisis situations.

This case study has three sections<sup>1</sup>:

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

**About IGNITE:** The Impacting Gender and Nutrition through Innovative Technical Exchange in Agriculture (IGNITE) mechanism is a five-year investment to strengthen African institutions' ability to integrate nutrition and gender into their way of doing business and their agriculture interventions. IGNITE works with African agricultural institutions in Ethiopia, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, and Tanzania.

## Impact of COVID-19

### Impacts on Agricultural Households

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to unfold, emerging research is capturing the impact of the crisis on smallholder farmers. According to IGNITE clients, and complementing existing research, the most consequential impacts on agricultural households from the pandemic were:

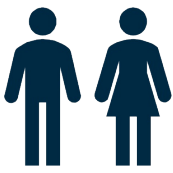
- 1. Decreased market access** (both for buying and selling)
- 2. Declining nutritional quality**
- 3. Strained household dynamics** between men and women
- 4. Lack of income opportunities**

**5. Reduced farm-level productivity,** primarily through the impacts of government shutdowns and diminished access to high-quality inputs.

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

---

## Impacts on Gender



COVID-19 had a direct impact on women from agricultural households primarily due to: 1) a disproportionate increase in labor burden<sup>3,4</sup>, 2) increased risk of violence, and 3) compounded economic exclusion.

Often, social expectations dictate that care and domestic responsibilities fall to women and girls. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many communities saw an increased need for sanitation, and therefore, water collection, school closures, and more family members falling sick, which added to the risk of increased exposure. Moreover, *“crises exacerbate... gender... inequalities and place women, girls... at increased risk of gender-based violence and intimate partner violence.”*<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the pandemic affected women’s incomes and women-owned businesses, primarily through reduced market access and decreased time for income generating activities.

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

## Impacts on Nutrition



Research shows that, *“the crisis is undermining the ability of farms and agri-enterprises to ensure consistent supplies of food to markets due to closures, labor shortages resulting from illness, and slowdowns in operations caused by physical distancing and lockdowns.”*<sup>6</sup> In particular, rural markets have been hit with unemployment and reduced incomes, along with increased food prices,<sup>7</sup> impacting the households themselves, and the mechanisms that produce and supply food for urban and peri-urban populations. Research is underway to understand the short- and long-term impacts of undernutrition and stunting during the COVID-19 response.<sup>7</sup> IGNITE clients noted an increase in awareness around nutrition and health, spread through government messages. Households took the limited steps they could, like restricting alcohol consumption and incorporating exercise, to build immunity.

Rapid assessments from ACIDI/VOCA clients showed that most participating households reduced consumption to two meals per day. Additionally, clients in Burkina Faso reported households facing reductions in on-farm subsistence and milk production, as well as consumption reductions (specifically around animal proteins) related to market-level stressors like market closures, disrupted trade, unavailability of products, lack of diversity, and increased prices. Because of market disruptions, some families resorted to eating spoiled or infested crops, increasing consumption of aflatoxins and poor-quality food and exacerbating nutritional problems.

---

## Impacts on Gender & Nutrition



During the pandemic, agricultural households were not subject to the singular influence of ‘gender’ or ‘nutrition;’ instead, these factors often work in combination, increasing the amount and severity of impact. For example, some cultural norms dictate women and children eat meals after men have finished. In times of scarcity the limited nutrition and food security available for the household is further diverted away from women. Without sufficient healthy food, women are more susceptible to illness, putting their health at risk, along with

their ability to maintain income-generating activities and empowerment progress.

When women make their own money, they tend to have greater decision-making power over that income; when women control the decisions around household food, nutrition outcomes are generally stronger. IGNITE clients agree that women who are supported in their economic and social-empowerment endeavours are better able to access information, markets, and a variety of foods that improve the nutrition outcomes of the overall household. Positively, as pandemic-era gender norms dictated that women would spend more time at home, they had more time and visibility to monitor household health and think about nutritional needs.

## IGNITE Client Reaction

Through qualitative interviews, IGNITE clients described their responses to the pandemic, with some reacting in more gender or nutrition-sensitive manner than others. While the strategies employed differed, the main finding is that a strategic mindset and operational strategy with respect to gender and nutrition before the crisis dramatically influenced how an organization responded *during* the crisis.

The pandemic forced IGNITE clients to adjust not only *how* they did their work (e.g., less in-person contact, new lines of communication, physical distancing), but also *what* actual work was being done on the ground (programmatic adaptations). IGNITE’s clients shared how they pivoted to respond to new priorities during the crisis:

- **Doing rapid assessments** to collect information while expanding traditional data collection methods to gather gender and nutrition insights.

- **Engaging in Social and Behavior Change messaging** around household nutrition goals.
- **Reducing farmer group sizes** to promote social distancing.
- **Adjusting the location of programs and services** when transportation and trade were limited (e.g., one project added milk collection points to reduce travel).
- **Adding digital elements to the programmatic strategy**, including e-extension platforms, mobile phone distribution, WhatsApp groups, or crop-specific apps for advice.
- **Promoting ‘women as the solution’** to issues such as caretaking, convening, mobilizing, and information-sharing.
- **Building on women-led community-based solutions.** One program supported women-managed kitchen gardens to supplement nutritional intake, after women themselves started the initiative.

# Lessons Learned

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



## Before a Crisis: *Deliberate preparation*

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



## During a Crisis: *Thoughtful reaction*

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



## After a Crisis: *Continued care*

How an agricultural institution can optimize the recovery process.



## Before a Crisis: Deliberate Preparation

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

### Lesson 1: Integrate critical gender and nutrition concepts into daily habits and organizational rhetoric

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

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

*One IGNITE client engaged a tech-nology service provider to jointly develop a mobile extension platform for remote agricultural advice. Others shared field data with the country’s Agriculture Ministry to inform response policy.*

### Lesson 2: Build key relationships to leverage in crises

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

---

## Lesson 3: Build capacity of program staff around gender and nutrition

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

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

## Lesson 4: Develop robust data systems for ongoing use

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

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

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

## Lesson 5: Develop a Crisis Action Plan

The Crisis Action Plan should act as the organization-level general emergency plan and should be applicable in any situation. Beyond providing overall safety guidance and establishing communication channels, action plans should consider:

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

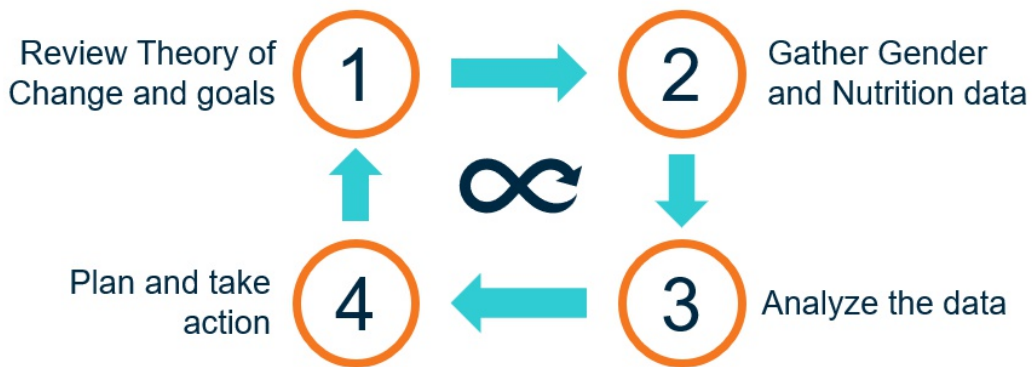


## During a Crisis: Thoughtful Reaction

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

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

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



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

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

#### Adjusting Scope

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



## 2

### Second:

#### **Gather data on relevant gender and nutrition indicators and crisis-specific indicators.**

Consider all potential sources. Use resources wisely, and start with what is available (e.g., government reports, WHO data, surveys run by other trusted organizations). Then leverage and adapt tools, rather than starting from scratch. Finally, reassess the validity of the gender analyses, and collect sex-disaggregated data to establish a new baseline.

## 3

### Third:

#### **Analyze the data.**

Take a careful but rapid approach to data analysis and use both a household nutrition lens and a gender-responsive lens to evaluate lessons. Remember, the crisis has a human component, so consider who is affected within the data. Be aware of complicated relationship dynamics (e.g., not every household is monogamous), meaning resource distribution and individual vulnerability can often go uncaptured and unseen. Understand on-the-ground changes for households about i) income, ii) productive assets, iii) time-use (especially for women), iv) market access (physical access as well as ability to purchase or sell). Recognize and account for increased burdens on women, including time use, domestic and care workload, access to resources and income, nutrition, and safety.

#### **Data Collection Check List**

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





# 4

## Fourth: Plan and take thoughtful action.

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

- Assessing if the organization has the gender and social inclusion **capacity** for the new reality. If not, ask for help and seek out training for staff.
- Making **feasible suggestions** that reflect the new on-the-ground realities.
- Remembering the **bigger goals** and preparing to adjust the project scope.
- Considering **out of the box solutions** like cash transfers, working with the government to distribute social safety nets, or supporting the organic solutions women and communities are already doing to cope with the crisis.
- Integrating gender- and nutrition-sensitive **expertise and data** throughout all steps as they may need adjusting based on the new program goals.
- Assessing **equity** to ensure everyone (particularly women) can participate in the current version of the program. If not, pinpoint why and fix it.



## Finally: Repeat.

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

### Reaction Fundamentals

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

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



## After a Crisis: Continued Care

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

### Lesson 7: Remember that recovery takes time

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

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

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

*One IGNITE client trained poultry farmers to produce their own 'hatch-able eggs,' rather than rely on halted imports.*

### Lesson 9: Learn from the crisis

Agricultural institutions can use 'pause and reflect' sessions to understand what worked, what did not work, and why. They can use these learnings to update crisis plans, collect data that would be useful for other crises, and plan resilience into the work that they do (among other deliberate preparation lessons detailed above).

*IGNITE experts note that community-level markets, with products that do not cross borders or generate tax, are the primary spaces where women buy and sell.*

### Lesson 10: Advocate and raise awareness

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

## Conclusion

For agricultural institutions, including IGNITE clients, the global COVID-19 pandemic required quick decisions and pioneering adaptations. Reflection and learning from client experience and from the advice of experts can help organizations prepare to respond to future crises with a gender and nutrition-sensitive lens. In sharing these lessons, the hope is that other organizations and projects can apply best practices that safeguard beneficiaries in times of emergency, while preserving progress toward big-picture development goals.

## Notes and references

- <sup>1</sup> IGNITE used both primary and secondary data sources for this case study. Data was primarily qualitative in nature, except for some data from secondary research on the household impact of COVID-19, which was collected through a literature review.
- <sup>2</sup> IGNITE uses the term 'clients' for the institutions with which it works. These include African NGOs, private sectors organizations, and governments.
- <sup>3</sup> IFPRI. (2020). Gender-sensitive social protection: A critical component of the COVID-19 response in low- and middle-income countries. IFPRI Issue Brief April 2020. Washington, DC: International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI). <https://doi.org/10.2499/9780896293793>
- <sup>4</sup> ACDI/VOCA. (2020). Gender & Social Inclusion and COVID-19: Impacts and Recommendations for Agriculture and Market Systems Project Implementation. <https://www.acdivoca.org/2020/04/gender-social-inclusion-and-covid-19-report/>
- <sup>5</sup> CARE. (2020). Gender implications of COVID-19 outbreaks in development and humanitarian settings.
- <sup>6</sup> FAO. (2020). Adjusting business models to sustain agri-food enterprises during COVID-19. Rome. <https://doi.org/10.4060/ca8996en>
- <sup>7</sup> Akseer, Kandru, Keats, & Bhutta. (2020). COVID-19 pandemic and mitigation strategies: implications for maternal and child health and nutrition. *The American journal of clinical nutrition*, 112(2), 251–256. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ajcn/nqaa171>

## IGNITE Partners

**Tanager**, an ACDI/VOCA affiliate, is an international non-profit that brings people together at the table, on the ground, and across supply chains to co-create economic and social opportunities that change lives. Working closely with our partners, we align interests to expand market access and unlock the full potential of shared market opportunities that result in reliable supply chains, stable incomes, healthy families, and resilient communities.

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

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