Editorial

Behaviour change communication in programmes to enhance infant and young child feeding: lessons from the field

The two articles published by Pelto *et al* in this issue of *Maternal & Child Nutrition* make important contributions to our understanding of the ways in which programming to address infant and young child feeding (IYCF) effectively succeeds, and ways in which the programs could be modified to improve the positive impact and increase the efficacy (Pelto *et al.* 2015a; Pelto *et al.* 2015b). The team of authors engaged in an innovative strategy – instead of conducting a meta-analysis of published and gray literature accounts of IYCF programs – they collected data directly from professionals in this field. The research team, led by Dr. Gretel Pelto, and including Stephanie Martin, Marti van Liere, and Cecilia Fabrizio, sent surveys to practitioners in dozens of large and small humanitarian organizations that work in the field of Behavior Change Communication (BCC) programming. They assessed their respondents' perceptions of the strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for improvement in the delivery of BCC programs that address IYCF.

From the analysis of data compiled in this process several themes emerge. First, the respondents note the need to empirically validate current BCC approaches. Practitioners in this field sincerely want to engage in the best practices, and the international donor community expects critical evaluations to be conducted, to provide evidence of program impact. But there is often a gap that results in ineffective use of formative data collected, failure to connect formative research to later program activities, and there is a dearth of research on operationalizing BCC programs. Examples of formative research and impact or end-line evaluative research are common, but little research has focused on the strategies for successfully operationalizing these programs. This

paradox is important as donors increasingly expect research that validates the effectiveness of programming.

Second, there was a positive consensus about the value of participatory approaches in program design and implementation. This type of bottom-up, participatory, or grassroots contribution to program design and management has been advocated for many years, especially by Scandinavian donor agencies, but the actual adherence to these principles has been inconsistent. The value of the indigenous perspectives was highlighted by all respondents.

Third, the respondents tell us that there is insufficient consensus as to whether BCC programs should be components of stand-alone nutrition programs, embedded within broader programs that address health disparities, or whether they should be part of integrated development designs that address other issues (agriculture, education, gender equity for example). The success of various approaches should be examined.

The positive take-away from this research is that respondents are very open to the possibility of sharing best practices, fostering collaborations and sharing of data and results, and greater emphasis on research and validation of approaches. Greater sharing of the internal documents and gray literature will be a step toward addressing these needs. The challenge remains the funding and time to realize these plans.

Both articles conclude with concrete and realistic suggestions for the way forward, and the importance of addressing deficits that are widely recognized as we scale up BCC programs. We can only hope those in positions of allocating funding to formative, operational, and end-line research, and the management

entities that oversee the work of these dedicated BCC practitioners will heed this call to action.

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