Poverty, food insecurity, and poor nutrition and health are among the most pernicious problems eroding people’s quality of life and limiting their economic productivity. These are the problems that IFPRI’s Poverty, Health, and Nutrition Division (PHND) aims to understand and overcome.

PHND research provides evidence on strategies to increase the incomes of poor people in developing countries, improve their livelihoods, and promote their ability to acquire skills and knowledge, access healthy diets, and live healthy and well-nourished lives. To accomplish this, the division’s researchers examine the causes of poverty, food insecurity, and malnutrition and identify effective policies and programs for addressing them, including programs in agriculture, health, education, and social protection. Issues of gender are central to this research, and several projects identify innovative ways of empowering women to maximize the impacts of such programs.

PHND’s work contributes to IFPRI’s 2018–2020 Strategy, particularly in the strategic research area on promoting healthy diets and nutrition for all and the cross-cutting theme on gender. The division’s activities focus on Africa and South Asia, with a continuing presence in Latin America.
NUTRITION

Good nutrition is essential to human well-being, yet malnutrition remains widespread. Malnutrition is a complex, multisectoral problem that exists across a continuum, from undernutrition to problems of overweight, obesity, and diet-related noncommunicable diseases. Undernutrition is due to deficiencies in energy, protein, and micronutrients, combined with high rates of infection; overweight, obesity, and related noncommunicable diseases result from poor-quality diets high in energy, saturated fats, sugars, and salt but poor in micronutrients, combined with low physical activity. Improving nutrition requires contributions not only from the health sector but also from sectors as diverse as agriculture, social protection, gender, education, and water and sanitation, which taken together can address the multiple underlying determinants of malnutrition. Improving nutrition at scale also requires an enabling policy environment that supports nutrition goals, capacity development, commitments, and investments.

PHND research aims to improve nutrition by understanding and addressing both the direct determinants of malnutrition (such as diets, caregiving and feeding practices, and health) and the underlying contributors (such as income, food security, education, gender equity, access to health, and hygiene and sanitation services). For these reasons, our work seeks to increase the nutrition sensitivity of programs and policies in a wide range of relevant sectors by ensuring that they incorporate specific nutrition goals and actions, such as behavior-change communications and interventions to improve access to micronutrient-rich foods and high-quality diets. Our research focuses on nutritionally vulnerable adolescent girls and on pregnant or infant-rearing women and their children during the first 1,000 days of life (from the onset of pregnancy to 24 months of age), when nutrition investments can have life-long beneficial effects on health, education, and economic productivity. PHND also works to enhance the gender sensitivity of development programs and policies, recognizing the unique role women can play in ensuring household food security and prioritizing the nutrition, health, and education of their children.

GENDER

Women play a critical and potentially transformative role in developing countries’ agricultural growth and in ensuring their families’ food and nutrition security, but they face persistent obstacles and social and economic constraints that limit their ability to play this role effectively. A better understanding of the relationships between women and men can illuminate the role of gender in achieving food and nutrition security in current and future generations.

Attention to gender cuts across PHND’s research programs in social protection, agriculture, nutrition, and health. PHND develops metrics for measuring gender inequality and women’s empowerment; collects data, tests models, and generates evidence on how gender relates to food and nutrition security; and investigates how power and resource allocation within households affect individuals’ health and nutrition outcomes. A strong component of our gender work consists of rigorous evaluation of the impact that complex gender-sensitive social protection and agricultural development programs have on women and men. Recently, the team has worked with implementation partners to develop and evaluate innovative approaches to empower women, both as a goal in itself and as a key to improving maternal and child nutrition outcomes.
SOCIAL PROTECTION
Social protection programs are a powerful tool for alleviating poverty. PHND has a rich body of research on social protection, which includes evaluations of a variety of program types and modalities. These include conditional and unconditional cash transfers, food vouchers, food rations, public works programs, school feeding programs (including homegrown school feeding programs), and insurance and transfer programs targeted to the elderly and disabled. By transferring resources to poor households, often linked with incentives to keep children in school and to use preventive health services, these programs seek to prevent the long-term effects of chronic deprivation and to reduce poverty traps. Several of these programs include explicit nutrition components, target female beneficiaries, or undertake measures to promote gender equality or women’s empowerment.

PHND researchers work closely with the IFPRI-led CGIAR Research Program on Policies, Institutions, and Markets (PIM), which leads action-oriented research on food and agricultural policies to better serve the needs of poor producers and consumers. PHND researchers provide evidence on the most cost-effective ways to design social protection programs to reduce poverty and improve the well-being of the poor. They use rigorous, state-of-the-art methods to evaluate the impacts of safety net programs—both large national programs, like PROGRESA/Oportunidades in Mexico, Bolsa Familia in Brazil, and the Productive Safety Net Program in Ethiopia, and small pilot programs across Africa and South Asia. These studies compare strategies for delivering social protection (for instance, cash transfers, food transfers, monthly grants, public works, or school meals) and examine linkages between social protection and complementary programs in nutrition, schooling, agriculture, and financial inclusion.

AGRICULTURE, DIETS, AND NUTRITION
Decades of research have shown that agricultural growth and poverty reduction do not automatically lead to improved nutrition, especially in the short term. To achieve optimal nutrition and health, people need more than income and calories from staple foods; they also need diverse, micronutrient-rich diets and a healthy and hygienic environment. Gender equity is also critically important. Policies and programs must be designed to be sensitive to empowering women—who are more prone than men to invest in their children’s health, education, and nutrition—and to enhancing their decision-making power regarding family diet, child-feeding practices, and use of health services. Understanding and improving poor people’s health and nutrition demands a broad approach that looks at food systems—that is, all the elements encompassing the production, distribution, and consumption of food—and considers synergies with health, education, gender, and social protection programs and policies.

The problem of an agriculture-nutrition disconnect, which occurs when persistent undernutrition coincides with a rapidly growing agricultural sector and high rates of economic growth, demonstrates that there is a major knowledge gap in understanding whether and how agricultural interventions can lead to significant and sustainable nutritional improvements. PHND researchers are among the first to use rigorous, innovative research approaches to fill these evidence gaps and inform smarter programs and investments that improve nutrition and health, especially for women and young children.

PHND has developed a large portfolio of research on innovative approaches to make agricultural programs more sensi-
tive to nutrition and gender. This has been done in close collaboration with the IFPRI-led CGIAR Research Program on Agriculture for Nutrition and Health (A4NH), which aims to maximize the nutritional and health benefits of agricultural development for the poor, while also minimizing the associated risks. Programs range from homestead food production and kitchen gardens, to value chains for nutrient-rich foods such as dairy, poultry, and fruits and vegetables, to home-grown school feeding programs and control of aflatoxin contamination in staple crops. Most of the programs incorporate specific measures to empower women, including sensitizing husbands and community members on gender roles and training women in areas such as negotiation skills and business development. This research will generate a rich body of evidence on how agriculture can be better leveraged to improve nutrition, what works and what does not work, and which approaches and modalities lead to the most successful, cost-effective, and scalable nutrition- and gender-sensitive programs.

HOW WE WORK

PHND helps meet the demand from stakeholders—including investors, governments, and program implementers—for evidence and guidance on designing, implementing, and scaling up programs that can improve people’s quality of life, productivity, nutrition, and health. It meets this demand both by evaluating interventions in different sectors to improve their nutrition and gender sensitivity and by helping strengthen policy environments to enhance leaders’ capacity to make evidence-informed decisions.

Theory-based Evaluation of Complex Multisectoral Programs

To reduce poverty, food insecurity, and malnutrition, it is vital to choose programs and policies that provide the largest impacts for a given level of expenditure. PHND researchers design and implement program evaluations using state-of-the-art empirical methods, including experimental designs, to rigorously measure the causal impact of interventions. Many evaluations include a qualitative component to identify the causes, or pathways, underlying program impact, and they may also include operations research to find ways of delivering programs more effectively. IFPRI researchers work closely with partners to design the evaluations in order to understand the contextual and behavioral determinants of poverty, food insecurity, and malnutrition and to learn which approaches to interventions are most effective. Gender considerations feature in nearly all evaluations, and, where relevant, their impact on women’s status and empowerment is assessed. PHND designs program evaluations as learning exercises, but the evaluations can also improve transparency, making government and implementing partners more accountable.

Policy Engagement, Analysis, and Capacity Strengthening

At the policy level, PHND works with governments and other stakeholders to study the drivers and pathways of change in nutrition and to answer the questions being voiced by many national governments that are seeking to scale up nutrition actions. What does it take to cultivate and sustain an enabling environment for nutrition? What is the role of leadership? How can we improve and monitor governments’ political commitment to improving nutrition and make them more accountable?

PHND enables agriculture and other sectors to better contribute to nutrition and health outcomes by helping to create and strengthen policy environments that can support nutrition and health goals, and by developing capacity and leadership to use evidence-informed decision making that can improve nutrition and health. This is done both by filling evidence gaps concerning the pathways through which various sectors can influence nutrition and by supporting nutrition-sensitive policy environments.

PHND also works as part of several multi-partner research consortia with recognized leadership in nutrition-relevant policy analysis and engagement, both regionally and globally. One such consortium has launched an initiative, Stories of Change, that is collecting case studies exploring the actions, stakeholders, and policy and organizational contexts that have contributed to changes in nutritional status at national, subnational, and community levels.