Flagship 1: Food Systems for Healthier Diets

Highlight 2: Empowering Stakeholders for Country-Level Action

From its inception, A4NH’s Food Systems for Healthier Diets (FSHD) flagship has focused on the importance of building capacity and empowering stakeholders at the national level to undertake critical work toward building food systems that support healthier diets. In 2019, the flagship’s third year, this investment in time and resources bore fruit in developments across the four focus countries where FSHD works: Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Viet Nam. This work ranged from engaging with country-level partners to conduct research that will foster a better understanding of the national food system, to providing financial and mentoring support to graduate students at local universities who are interested in food systems research.

Working with local students to support their educational pursuits in food systems fosters the next generation of researchers and gives them the tools they need to help ensure food systems in their countries transform toward providing healthier diets for all consumers. In Ethiopia in 2019, two rounds of MSc students supported by the program completed their work and moved into the next stages of their careers, which are already moving forward, as one student was invited to present at the International Symposium on Sustainable Food Systems at the University of Giessen in Germany. In reporting on their experiences, the first group of five students to complete the program reported through testimonials about how training workshops helped deepen their understanding of topics like the food environment; provided much-needed experience in data collection and analysis; and provided necessary funding to complete the programs. FSHD is now expanding the program to Bangladesh, in partnership with icddr, b, to offer support to five students in that country on research related to food preferences, dietary risks, and the food environment in Dhaka. In Nigeria, A4NH researchers from Wageningen University & Research (WUR) have trained staff from the University of Ibadan to lead a course on food systems, which will be conducted in 2020.

Building capacity through these trainings and supportive programs is one important component of A4NH’s strategy to ensure countries are able to guide their own food system transformations toward healthier diets. Another essential component is ensuring countries have the knowledge and tools they need to design and implement these strategies. FSHD continued its collaborative work with local partners to generate evidence and fill research gaps on food systems. A4NH researchers from the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) published an analysis of the Bangladesh food system, including questions and priorities to guide future research, in partnership with Bangladesh-based colleagues from UN agencies, NGOs, universities, and other CGIAR centers. A4NH researchers from Bioversity International, the International Center for Tropical Agriculture, IFPRI, and WUR, with colleagues from the National Institute of Nutrition, Vietnamese research organizations, and NGOs, published a report detailing key research areas for Viet Nam to pursue toward healthier and sustainable diets. FSHD’s country team there is working closely with ministries and agencies to support the government’s Zero Hunger initiative, as Viet Nam works to end hunger nationwide by 2025. In addition, through collaboration with Viet Nam’s National Institute of Nutrition, A4NH facilitated the addition of five questions to the General Nutrition Survey to capture the food systems linkage with nutrition.

Based on FSHD’s collaborative research and mentoring efforts, the program has created a capacity development approach that can be used in other countries. In 2020 and 2021, FSHD researchers plan to scale up these approaches to an additional four to six African countries, and will make food system tools and approaches available through the new online Food System Resource Center so that other countries will be able to make use of the knowledge and experiences from A4NH together with other available resources.

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