Hakizimana lives in a small house with a beaten dirt floor high on a hillside in Rwanda’s district of Gisagara. Only crude narrow wooden benches adorn the front room. In earlier days, this was the scene of Hakizimana’s often brutal arguments with his wife, Beata Mukarushema. Many things were lost in the force of their disputes—love, trust, family income, and the care and feeding of their three young children. Money that could have gone to a healthy supply of diverse foods ended up purchasing alcohol to numb the pain.

But today, the walls no longer echo with disagreement. When Hakizimana’s youngest daughter Jeannine, now just over two years old, was detected as malnourished in a community growth monitoring session, a chain of events was set in motion to change the family fortunes. Jeannine was restored to health through a community-based nutrition programme where volunteer community health workers educated her mother on how to feed her children a diverse diet. Mukarushema started a kitchen garden and joined a savings group that allowed her to buy a pig, a source of fertilizer to improve crop yields for income and family consumption.

In this process, Hakizimana was encouraged with his wife to join a group of other couples identified as suffering from protracted family conflict. The idea was simple: most nutrition interventions focus on women and children, yet men often make all major decisions in households in Rwanda. When family conflict is present, children are at a much higher risk of neglect and malnutrition.

It was time to change approaches and get men involved. The couples—along with a smaller set of couples who were not in conflict and could model respectful behaviour—took part in 13 weekly sessions where they had frank discussion about gender roles, power, decision-making, the use of money, community perceptions, and whether or not current patterns really supported the welfare of the family, including children.

Hakizimana was among the men who concluded that there is a better, more peaceful way to live. When Jeannine approaches, shy in the presence of the strangers who have arrived in her home, he cuddles and plays with her, unusual for a man in a rural family. He speaks supportively of Mukarushema’s decision to buy a pig with her

Ntwukuriyayo and his wife, Tuyisenge, who is holding their daughter, 23-month-old Delphine, attend a Nutrition Counselling Care Group meeting, in Uwabumenyi Village in Nyamagabe District. “I have always done exclusive breastfeeding to Delphine. I started to add semi-solid food to her diet after she was six months old. Now she eats like an adult, and continues to breastfeed.” © UNICEF/UN016861/Noorani
savings group funds, and describes how when he shops in the market, he purchases avocados and mangoes eagerly requested by his children, not liquor as in earlier days.

“Knowledge is bigger than any other gift,” he says, reflecting on his experience in the training, and how he began to feel ashamed of his past behaviour towards his wife and children.

“Before, we were living in ignorance. We didn’t know the role that men could play in the growth of a child, especially in the first 1,000 days of life. We didn’t know that we should care for the mother during pregnancy—we thought that was just the role of the government. And we always considered ourselves poor, because we did not think that maybe we were just mismanaging what we had, and part of that was because of conflict in the family.”

In his village, Hakizimana has become a kind of ambassador of new gender norms, sweeping the area outside his house to show that men can do this kind of work, and speaking to other men in his village about how they can solve problems in their own families. He and his wife recently decided together that they would buy a cow, a dream of his wife for some time. Before the training, he ignored her advice and invested in a crop of potatoes instead, all of which failed in a drought. “The government may be right that ladies develop the country,” he muses, having learned from experience. “They definitely give important advice.”

“Before, we were living in ignorance. We didn’t know the role that men could play in the growth of a child, especially in the first 1,000 days of life. “

—HAKIZIMANA

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**A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE NUTRITION SITUATION IN RWANDA:**

- 18% of children 6-23 months receive a minimum acceptable diet (up from 1% since 2010)
- 80% of households are food secure
- 54% have improved sanitation facilities (58% in 2010)
- 38% of children younger than five are stunted (down from 44% since 2010)
- 4% of handwashing facilities with soap and water is available in 4% of households (2% in 2010)
- 37% of children younger than five are suffering from anemia (down from 38% in 2010)
- 87% of children 0-6 months are exclusively breastfed
- 73% of households have access to an improved waterer source (75% in 2010)
- 2% of children younger than five are wasted (down from 3% since 2010)

**WHAT IS BEING DONE BY UNICEF**

With support from the Dutch Government, SDC, the IKEA Foundation and USAID, UNICEF is implementing a multisectoral package of nutrition-specific as well as nutrition-sensitive interventions focusing on 19 out of 30 districts in the country. These interventions include:

- **Support** to monthly community growth monitoring and promotion sessions, including cooking demonstrations, to teach caregivers on how to prepare a diversified diet from locally available ingredients
- **Distribution** of micronutrient powders, Vitamin A and deworming to improve the micronutrient status of children and reduce anemia
- **Support** to the management of severe acute malnutrition in children, including screening, referral and treatment
- **Training** of caregivers of young children in establishing kitchen gardens and small livestock rearing to supplement the family’s diet
- **Establishment** of community saving and lending groups for caregivers of young children to increase access to financing and income generating activities
- **Support** to coordination, monitoring and evaluation, learning and knowledge management at district and national levels through training in DevInfo to track district plans to eliminate malnutrition, support to learning visits between districts and training in and support to operational research to capture lessons learned and best practices and identify drivers and barriers for effective nutrition interventions.

**BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT**

Gisagara is one of 18 districts where UNICEF and its six partners, under the aegis of the Government of Rwanda’s national nutrition programme, and through funding from the Government of the Netherlands, have backed a multisectoral approach to nutrition. Concern Worldwide Rwanda is the partner in Gisagara.

The multisectoral approach links the multiple issues critical to achieving sound nutrition among children, such as child feeding and care, hygiene, access to sufficient income and agricultural practices that make a diverse diet readily available. Districts selected for assistance include those with the highest rates of under-five stunting, poverty and food insecurity.

Rwanda’s problem with malnutrition is still large, business as usual will not be enough. Innovation is a thread running through many aspects of the UNICEF-supported programme, seen as a way of amplifying and extending its impacts. The programme design and budget, flexibly oriented around expected results rather than set activities, encouraged partners to experiment and innovate more than is typically the case, based on needs in the districts they supported.

Although innovation is often closely associated with the introduction of new technology, for the purposes of this brief, innovation encompassed any changes in programme approach such as the introduction of a new concept, service, process, system, or policy to improve the quality and effectiveness of an intervention to reduce stunting and other forms of malnutrition.

Innovative strategies included a number widely used in gender equality, economic development and other programmes, but less so for nutrition. They included savings groups with an emphasis on increased financial literacy and income-generating activities, initiatives to stem family violence, farmer field schools, and the provision of energy efficient cooking stoves and solar lamps in communities with limited access to renewable energy.

*The programme design and budget, flexibly oriented around expected results rather than set activities, encouraged partners to experiment and innovate more than is typically the case, based on needs in the districts they supported.*
LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Innovation arises from different sources

These have included district committees to eliminate malnutrition, communities and partners, in addition to UNICEF, which helped introduce the multisectoral approach and bring in technological innovations such as DevInfo and Rapid SMS, two systems for monitoring progress.

Some innovations arose from the ingenuity of communities empowered by new knowledge, such as the choice in one area to begin raising guinea pigs—which previously ran wild in the nearby forest—for protein and income. Others grew from partners learning as interventions progressed, such as through the introduction of solar dryers for reducing postharvest losses and food preservation, and simple rainwater harvesting systems to improve water supplies for kitchen gardens.

The experience suggests that innovation carries a fluid definition, linked to context, and should not be viewed only as something provided from the top down. In one situation, a mobile phone app may be an innovation; in another, it might be communities deciding that their children should drink goat milk for nourishment, even though that has never been done before.

Community engagement can be key to introducing innovations and ensuring they take off

Some innovative practices arose with a strong link to community needs, so were embraced and carried forward from the beginning, including through supportive local leaders. This was the case with the development of fish farming to supplement diets and provide income for households with malnourished children in Gicumbi, and a child-care centre in the same district that was combined with activities to improve nutrition.

According to one partner, once a process of understanding and behaviour change begins in local communities, innovations tend to flourish from local people learning to solve their own problems.
Partners appreciated the flexible scope for innovation

This applied to the selection of different models for savings groups, kitchen gardens and so on. Regular meetings of the partners in Kigali encouraged the exchange and uptake of innovative practices. The process might have been better informed, however, by providing more information on existing best practices that partners could consider applying, based on local needs.

Some interventions selected by individual partners have been well documented in past experiences. The CRS savings model, for example, with its accompanying private sector service providers, was in wide use before the nutrition programme began, including outside of Rwanda. It was strongly appreciated in communities that applied it for its clear management guidelines; they expressed a preference for it over other models tried before the UNICEF-supported programme began. Concern built its work with men and family violence on the Promundo model, which originated in Brazil and is considered a kind of gold standard.

Innovations may sometime spring from having to achieving ambitious goals with limited resources

This was the case for Concern who found themselves having to come up with a model to scale up distribution of small livestock to vulnerable households. Concern had found it very challenging and costly to manage this program component, including procuring and transporting livestock, guaranteeing for its quality and reaching the beneficiaries. Instead, they came up with an idea to open up accounts in local microfinancing banks (SACCO). Each group of beneficiaries would select three co-signatories who would be allowed to take out the money transferred from Concern for the purpose of procuring small livestock. Concern, together with the district Agronomist, would support setting up local livestock fairs where farmers from the community would bring their livestock to sell to the beneficiaries, who with cash in hand would have the freedom to select the animals they wanted and to bargain for a good price. All remaining funds would go back into the bank account and the group would decide on how to spend the money on nutrition related activities. This approach supported local markets by sourcing small livestock locally, empowered the beneficiaries and removed much of the administration burden from Concern.

Perspectives diverged on which innovative practices should be pursued

This issue came up under the district plans to eliminate malnutrition, where multiple stakeholders came with a variety of priorities. Partners stressed that discussions in these cases needed to focus on careful analysis of what will benefit the population most in terms of cutting malnutrition rates, rather than what might be the most interesting idea.

The process could be hard to manage. One district was convinced of the importance of setting up mushroom-growing at health centres as a source of nutrition and income for parents with malnourished children as the mushrooms are rich in proteins. Local communities in that area do not normally eat mushrooms, however, and there are differing notions of their nutritional value. A large Chinese-supported research station on mushroom growing was taking place in parallel. The partner nonetheless felt obligated to introduce the concept in 16 health centres, providing initial equipment and advice.

Issues soon arose around determining responsibility for caring for the crop, and who was entitled to eat it and/or earn income from it. On the positive side, mushroom growing is a relatively low-cost operation, and 10 of the 16 health centres were still growing mushrooms with the engagement of community members in early 2016.

Potential risks of new practices need to be carefully assessed in advance

Activities in one district involved setting up greenhouses run by parents’ groups, with the thinking that these would boost production of crops such as tomatoes, providing a ready source

“We had seen that all nutrition-related activities were being delivered to mothers. Yet in households, decisions are made by men. We did research and choose a model for engaging men around how they can change in positive ways to support better nutrition for their children, including in cases of family conflict.”

—THEOPHILE ZIGINMUGABE, RWANDA MEN’S RESOURCE CENTRE, PARTNER OF CONCERN
of income and diverse vegetables for cooking demonstrations and individual families. But the greenhouses proved expensive to set up and operate; recouping the costs would require five years, at which point the structures would need to be replaced. There were problems as well with insufficient technical skills, leading to low production and damage by diseases. A decision was made not to continue with this particular initiative, but only after the investment of some amount of time and resources.

In future projects, it may make sense to provide partners with tools to map potential obstacles, test viability and the possibilities for scaling up, and put in place a more systematic approach to oversight and approval before a new activity is initiated.

**CONCLUSION**

The UNICEF multisectoral nutrition programme in Rwanda embraced innovation on many levels. It encouraged its six partners to experiment with different strategies, based on needs and possibilities in different districts. This resulted in some impressive models for savings and loans groups, engagement with men and food processing, among others. In general, there might have been some benefit in having a more well-defined strategy around the role of innovation, however, since activities were relatively ad hoc. More might have been done to anticipate and manage risks, and exploit the full potential of innovations that proved successful.

**KEY RECOMMENDATIONS**

At the start of the programme, particularly in fields such as agriculture and income generation that are not common for UNICEF, but are part of the multisectoral approach, explore and share existing innovations that have proven value.

Beyond an emphasis on innovation, have in place a strategy to guide the process of selecting innovative practices, managing risks and scaling up the ones that work best.

Apply and encourage a broad understanding of the many sources and kinds of innovation, particularly at the community level, where ideas may be most closely aligned to immediate local needs and capabilities. Partners, for instance, could encourage this in community sessions on nutrition, including by asking people to flag issues and solutions that may not be obvious to outsiders. Backing a few good ideas might ground the value of innovation in communities, and motivate them to routinely devise and explore new practices based on their own resources.

Consider links between behaviour change strategies and innovation, since new understanding can encourage people to accept practices that might previously have been unfamiliar.

Ensure a process is in place to systematically document and share innovations, and call on partners to think of this as a core activity, not an add on.
SOME QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER FOR FUTURE WORK

1. What resources are already available that can be applied ‘innovatively’ in a new context?
2. What are the sources of innovations? Are any being overlooked, particularly within communities?
3. How can innovations be assessed and shared?
4. What are the risks of innovation, and how can these be managed?

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3. Bridging Many Sectors to Accelerate Nutrition Results
4. Decentralized Planning Mobilizes Local Government to Act on Reducing Malnutrition
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