International Initiative for Impact Evaluation

Learning brief

Health

MAPPING THE EVIDENCE ON FOOD SYSTEMS AND NUTRITION: INSIGHTS FROM A LIVING EVIDENCE AND GAP MAP

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Conflict, climate change, and economic shocks have drastically affected the global food systems and present rapidly evolving threats to rising hunger levels. As the global community has realigned its priorities by emphasizing food systems' transformation, it has become essential to prioritise research efforts in the countries and regions these challenges affect the most. In this dynamic landscape, the call for better data, evaluative research, and evidence has a prominent role. This living Evidence and Gap Map (E&GM) allows us to map evidence on emerging challenges faster and marks a significant milestone as the first living E&GM that 3ie launched. Commissioned in 2020 by GIZ, it systematically presents current, timely, broad, and useful evidence on three intervention domains in low- and middle-income countries: (1) the food supply chain, (2) the food environment, and (3) consumer behaviour.

Highlights

- **The evidence base has increased by 40 percent** over the last 4 years of the living E&GM.
- **Countries with "alarming rates of hunger"** have only 12.2 percent of impact evaluations on average, which is less than half the average of impact evaluations found in the other hunger severity categories the Global Hunger Index (GHI) measures.
- **Previously identified** priority areas, such as food subsidies, food loss, and the environmental impacts of the food system, have more than 100-percent growth in the update period, but in absolute numbers, the amount of evidence is still small.
- **Sixteen (16) percent of studies** target women, but only 6 percent of them measure women's empowerment and gender-transformative outcomes. The other 10 percent measure more generic outcomes, such as diet quality and adequacy, and anthropometric outcomes.
- **Large-scale evaluations** have a strong evidence base, with 556 evaluations of national and transnational programs; however, the variation in contexts makes it difficult to generalize results.



Implications for future research

The living nature of this E&GM can facilitate better evidence use because decision-makers have access to the most recent evidence. It allows us to identify up-to-date research gaps and synthesis opportunities, and provide updates when emerging evidence fills those gaps.

For policymakers: We have added *cash transfers, food vouchers, social insurance programs, women's empowerment interventions*, and *gender-transformative approaches* to provide policymakers with a broader range of interventions. Although the evidence base has increased by 40 percent, help is needed to effectively understand this information and then, transform it into readily actionable outputs. Evidence synthesis and translation are both great options for solving this issue.

For funders: The most reported funding institutions (USAID, FCDO, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the World Bank) have significant power to drive the path toward food transformation. Funding is essential in priority areas with crucial importance in the field and somewhat limited evidence base, such as women's empowerment, gender-transformative outcomes, and countries facing "alarming" rates of hunger.

For researchers: Climate change and conflict are the main drivers of hunger. There is a significant opportunity for effecting meaningful change by focusing research efforts in regions where climate change and conflict pose a major threat to food security. Findings from less critical contexts are fundamental; however, they will be insufficient in the context of the most extreme cases, which in turn, have the highest potential to lead to fundamental changes.



What is a *living* 3ie E&GM?

3ie evidence gap maps are collections of evidence from impact evaluations and systematic reviews for a given sector or policy issue, organised according to the types of programmes evaluated and the outcomes measured. This E&GM was developed into a living evidence product with updates published approximately every four months. It highlights where there are sufficient impact evaluations to support systematic reviews and where more studies are needed. The regular updates allow to identify how the evidence base evolves, which gaps are being filled, and where more opportunities arise. These maps help decision-makers target their resources to fill these important evidence gaps and avoid duplication. They also facilitate evidence-informed decision-making by allowing better access to existing research.

About this brief

This brief is based on the report *The evidence on food systems and nutrition: insights from a living evidence and gap map*, 3ie Evidence Gap Map Report by Ingunn Storhaug, Mark Engelbert, Diana Córdova-Aráuz, Charlotte Lane, Veronika Tree, Heike Rolker, Nick Moore and Birte Snilstveit. The report summarises 2,979 impact evaluations and 239 systematic reviews on a framework of 10 intervention groups and 20 outcomes, spanning across 113 low- and middle-income countries. It is designed and produced by Akarsh Gupta, Mallika Rao and Tanvi Lal.

International Initiative for Impact Evaluation

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The International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie) develops evidence on how to effectively transform the lives of the poor in low- and middle-income countries. Established in 2008, we offer comprehensive support and a diversity of approaches to achieve development goals by producing, synthesizing and promoting the uptake of impact evaluation evidence. We work closely with governments, foundations, NGOs, development institutions and research organizations to address their decision-making needs. With offices in Washington DC, New Delhi and London and a global network of leading researchers, we offer deep expertise across our extensive menu of evaluation services.

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