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TOPS
Promoting excellence in
food security programming

TOPS

2010–2017



.....

Creating Pathways from
Learning to Practice in
the Food Security and
Nutrition Community





Disclaimer

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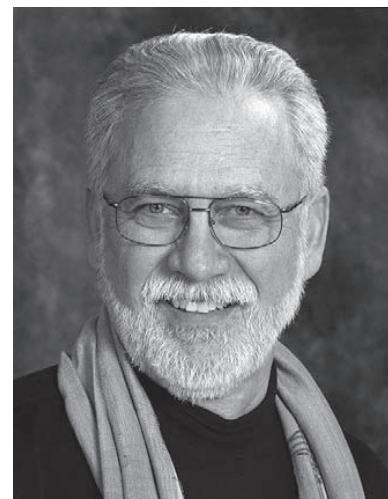
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Dear Colleagues,

During one of our regional knowledge sharing meetings, the Director of a Food for Peace-funded project in a nearby country told me, “I’ve come to a lot of these in my 30-year career. This is the first conference where I learned something I can take back and apply immediately in my program.”

This was spontaneous and gratifying proof that what we in TOPS, and our sponsors, the USAID’s Office of Food for Peace (FFP), had set out to do in late 2010 was taking root. It confirmed that The TOPS Program—designed to strengthen U.S. Government-funded food security and nutrition programs through a combination of collaborative learning, technical skills training, and knowledge sharing—could succeed.



TOPS has operated on a simple, perhaps obvious, idea—that peer-to-peer learning and sharing will strengthen implementer skills to build better food security and nutrition programs to combat poverty and hunger in the world. Obvious, but not often applied successfully. The community of practice—the donors, implementing organizations, academic and research institutions, field-based practitioners—have always generated knowledge, practices, and tools as they design and conduct these programs. The learning, however, often did not travel well. Either there were few effective ways to disseminate it, or originators held their knowledge close for future competitive advantage.

To overcome this, TOPS created a suite of collaborative learning and sharing mechanisms, established an atmosphere of full inclusion, and welcomed the entire community of practice to join in. We thought it might be difficult to overcome proprietary habits among perennial competitors. Quite the opposite. It was as if the community had been waiting for the right channels to open up.

In regular consultation with the community, TOPS put together a broad range of learning spaces and processes, such as technical task forces and needs-based capacity strengthening. To create signature TOPS events, such as our large Knowledge Sharing Meetings here and in the field, we reached out globally, asking practitioners and other stakeholders what they would like to learn or what they could share. Then we built events to bring it together. We ran a small grants program to support innovation, gather evidence, or design a tool. And we created the interactive Food Security and Nutrition (FSN) Network website to stimulate dialogue and collect and disseminate the rich store of knowledge, experience, and tools generated by the community.

I have been with TOPS from the start and I am proud of what we all have accomplished together. I believe one of the greatest TOPS accomplishments, however, is the increasingly open atmosphere and lively peer-to-peer dialogue among donor and partners. These new habits of consultation have contributed greatly to the new FFP Food Assistance and Food Security Strategy, the evolving resilience dialogue, stronger theories of change, improved gender integration, and so much more. It has been an adventure!

This document tells a little of that story. Enjoy!

Mark Fritzler, Director
The TOPS Program

Dear Colleagues,

For over 64 years, the USAID Food for Peace program has served more than 3 billion hungry people, bringing hope and support to areas of the world that have needed it the most.

For a long time, we have known that our implementing partners are key to the success of tackling food insecurity. The creation of a mechanism for sharing collaboratively with their colleagues from different organizations has been crucial. That's where The TOPS Program has come in. Since 2010, TOPS has provided the space for Food for Peace's partners and other food security experts to share, learn, and connect across organizations to the benefit of all of our food assistance programs and the families they reach.

I am excited by what our partners have brought to the table in the last seven years, and I want to challenge our partners to continue to innovate so we can have a real, positive and sustained impact on families' lives.

It has been a pleasure for me to oversee this program and impressive to see how it has developed over time. As we move towards the future, I look forward to continuing this important work with our community of practice.

Matt Nims, Acting Director, Office of Food for Peace
U.S. Agency for International Development



TOPS PROGRAM IMPROVES NUTRITION & FOOD SECURITY



The Technical and Operational Performance Support (TOPS) Program is a learning mechanism that generates, captures, disseminates, and applies the highest quality information, knowledge, and promising practices in development food assistance programming.



Technical Capacity Strengthening



We deliver customized technical capacity trainings based on context and needs.

Food Security and Nutrition (FSN) Network



Join an interactive online community of practice that houses discussions, news, 780+ resources, and a calendar of events.

Knowledge Sharing Meetings



Learn new skills, discuss and explore emerging issues and recent tools, and network in a setting that prioritizes discussion and engagement.

Small Grants Program



More than 32 organizations received over 70 small grants to design, test, and share promising new practices and tools to improve program results.

Technical Task Forces



Join colleagues to engage in peer learning, and develop, adapt, and recommend crucial tools.

THESE APPROACHES STRENGTHEN

FOOD SECURITY IMPLEMENTERS

Which Results In:

BETTER FOOD SECURITY & NUTRITION WORLDWIDE



The TOPS Program Consortium Partners:



An Overview of TOPS

The Technical and Operational Performance Support (TOPS) Program was launched in 2010 with a mission to strengthen the U.S. Government's efforts to end global hunger by facilitating knowledge sharing and learning among USAID's development food assistance partners.

For seven years, The TOPS Program has worked to generate, capture, disseminate, and apply the highest-quality information and tools to strengthen capacity and establish best practices among practitioners in the multifaceted food security and nutrition community. By improving performance of these programs, TOPS has been helping improve food security and nutrition at the community and household levels around the world.

USAID's Office of Food for Peace (FFP) funds a large portfolio of programs to tackle food insecurity and help build resilience in communities facing chronic

poverty and recurring crises like drought and civil disorder. Looking well beyond direct food aid, areas of work include agriculture, livelihoods, malnutrition prevention, and disaster risk reduction, among others. Employing a multi-sectoral approach, The TOPS Program has focused its collaborative knowledge sharing and learning activities in both technical and cross-cutting areas, including agriculture and natural resource management, commodity management, nutrition and food technology, gender, knowledge management, social and behavioral change, and monitoring and evaluation.

In implementing TOPS, Save the Children has led a strong consortium of experienced food security organizations, including CORE Group, Food for the Hungry, Mercy Corps, and TANGO International, each of which has brought specialized expertise to the program.



Photo Credit: Abby Love, Mercy Corps

TOPS Technical Areas

Agriculture and Natural Resource Management

Improved agriculture and natural resource management (ANRM) strategies, technologies and practices can strengthen food security and make agriculture more productive and resilient to shocks. The TOPS ANRM team, led by consortium partner Mercy Corps, has focused on improving agriculture methodologies and disseminating the knowledge and tools. Improved methods can include irrigation, farm site design, fertilization, farmer financial management skills, and strategies for community management of their soil, water, and natural resources. The ANRM team has produced and disseminated technical guides and organized training events. One of the most attended TOPS workshops is the five-day training of trainers in the permagarden method, providing trainers with materials and skills they can use directly with farmers to produce highly productive gardens.



Members of the CM Task Force joined together to provide input and review to a *Warehouse Staff Safety Guide* developed by Project Concern International, filling a critical resource gap identified by the task force.



Permagarden Toolkit

The TOPS publication, *The Permagarden Technical Manual* (2015), is one of the most downloaded items from the FSN Network resource library. The permagarden method improves soil fertility and water management in home gardens that produce nutritious crops year-round. It teaches gardeners to use local resources effectively to strengthen household resilience.

Commodity Management

USAID provides about 2 billion dollars in food assistance around the world to meet both chronic and acute food needs in vulnerable populations. Food distribution is an important component of many development



Photo Credit: Caine Correllino, Save the Children

programs, supporting efforts to enhance nutrition, agriculture, and health. Managing food commodities is a complex and risky activity that must adhere to strict regulations. Led by Save the Children, The TOPS Program has strengthened the commodity management (CM) community with workshops and tools to improve efficiency, decrease losses, tighten reporting, and ensure that food reaches the intended families and households. Examples include the intensive three-day food assistance CM workshop and the industry standard CM Handbook and CM Toolkit.

Maternal, Infant, and Child Nutrition

Poor nutrition is an underlying and direct cause of poor child growth from conception to two years of age. The TOPS Program, through Save the Children, has supported practitioners in the maternal, infant, and child nutrition community through specialized workshops and tools for successful program design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation. Examples of topics covered include optimal infant and young child

Photo Credit: Food for the Hungry



feeding, improved maternal diet, and how to calculate the minimum acceptable diet or the minimum dietary diversity for women, among other nutrition indicators.

Gender

Gender equality is closely connected to food security. Research shows that as women become more educated and empowered, the nutrition status of the whole household improves. Gender norms are often deeply rooted in societies and cultures, but they can change. TOPS has worked to integrate the cross-cutting area of gender into technical workshops, such as commodity management and agriculture and natural resource management. Save the Children has led the gender area of TOPS.

Knowledge Management

Led by CORE Group, knowledge management (KM) has been a fundamental component of TOPS. Using KM techniques and practices, TOPS has facilitated peer-to-peer and cross-organizational learning and collaboration through the Food Security and Nutrition (FSN) Network. TOPS has provided workshops on a wide range of KM-related activities. Examples include the comprehensive three-day workshop on how to develop an effective knowledge management strategy for food

security programs and the popular video storytelling workshop.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) has been a crucial cross-cutting part of TOPS. The TOPS Program has assisted both implementers and donors to improve the effectiveness of M&E of food security and nutrition programs through identifying and disseminating successful methods, tools, and practices; improving M&E skills of implementing agencies at headquarters and in the field; and ensuring that the priorities of implementing agencies are reflected in donor guidance. M&E has been led by TANGO International.

Social and Behavioral Change

Closely connected to all technical areas is the cross-cutting field of social and behavioral change (SBC), led by Food for the Hungry. SBC is a crucial component of all food security and nutrition programs. Simply increasing knowledge or awareness of a new way of doing things rarely leads people to actually change their actions. SBC looks at how knowledge and awareness of good practices or new technologies can be translated into sustained behavioral change that improves food security and nutrition. The TOPS Program has helped implementers design their programs to achieve beneficial and sustainable behavioral change.

The TOPS M&E team collaborated with USAID/FFP West Africa team to plan and deliver an Emergency Food Security Program (EFSP) learning event (March 2016, Burkina Faso) for Francophone teams. At the end of the event, a working group was formed to provide input into the development of EFSP M&E policy guidance. The group's first session (June 2016) featured a discussion of indicators, including justification and frequency of measurement.

A TOPS survey found that participants of nutrition capacity strengthening workshops are replicating many of the training sessions, using the materials provided to fill gaps in their field staff's knowledge and skills.

Knowledge Sharing Meetings

A Forum for Knowledge Exchange and Networking

The TOPS/Food Security and Nutrition (FSN) Network Knowledge Sharing Meetings have brought together implementers, donors, and researchers from around the world for peer-based knowledge sharing and networking about food security and nutrition programs. Since 2011, The TOPS Program has produced these biannual events in North America, Africa, and Asia.

The Knowledge Sharing Meetings arose from a need to provide opportunities for meaningful face-to-face interactions at both the field and headquarters level to maximize the flow of information between staff of food security projects. The meetings have also created and fostered important relationships that enable knowledge exchange to continue beyond the event.

Meeting content has been developed through direct engagement among practitioners through the FSN Network. TOPS has consulted with stakeholders from the Office of Food for Peace, academic institutions, and the private voluntary organization community to ascertain knowledge gaps and emerging topics in food security and nutrition programming. Additional topics of interest have been solicited from the wider food security and nutrition community of practice through online and in-person meetings through the FSN Network Task Forces. Information gathered



Photo Credit: Emmanuel Museruka

from the FSN Network has been incorporated into session design to ensure that Knowledge Sharing Meetings were relevant and timely to food security and nutrition implementers.

These events have differed from TOPS' technical capacity strengthening workshops by incorporating a broad range of adult learning techniques and participatory methods into sessions to encourage cross-organizational collaboration, learning, and participant engagement. TOPS has collected feedback and evaluation input from participants at every Knowledge Sharing Meeting for continuous improvement of all subsequent meetings.

Over the past seven years, TOPS/FSN Network Knowledge Sharing Meetings have proven to be a TOPS signature event. They have become one of the most vital opportunities for community learning and sharing among food security and nutrition stakeholders.



“I know many of us are competing for business, but in this meeting I was pleasantly surprised to find colleagues from all sectors more than happy to share their tools, resources, and knowledge. And what a wealth of knowledge we had in the room – people who have been responding to crises in various continents for years! I loved the energy and the attitude that ‘we can do anything.’ I loved connecting with people who I’ve heard of and greatly respect.”

– Participant at the Knowledge Sharing Meeting “Changing Landscapes of Food Security” in Kampala, 2016



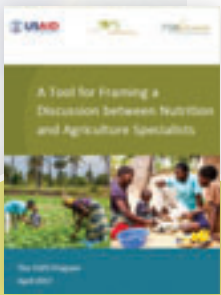
Photo Credit: The TOPS Program



Photo Credit: The TOPS Program

Technical Capacity Strengthening Addressing Knowledge Gaps

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One of the latest tools produced by TOPS, *Framing a Discussion between Agriculture and Nutrition Specialists*, helps agriculture and nutrition specialists draw upon their combined analytical skills to jointly select appropriate crops that improve nutrition for vulnerable women and children under age two.

Technical capacity strengthening has been at the heart of The TOPS Program's role as a convener for the food security and nutrition community. The strategy began with defining the core competencies for each technical or cross-cutting specialty area for field staff of food security programs. The goal has been to ensure that all implementing partner staff possess the necessary skills to improve the quality and effectiveness of development food aid programming.

Technical capacity strengthening has been undertaken in two primary ways: by developing relevant technical tools to fill gaps in available support and by creating and

facilitating workshops and learning events to fill identified capacity gaps.

Tools to Support Effective Program Design and Implementation

Among The TOPS Program's key tasks have been to identify gaps in knowledge, learning, and technical capacity and develop tools to address these gaps. The TOPS team, in collaboration with the FSN Network Task Forces, has used the following strategies to identify and address these gaps: evaluating existing tools, modifying existing tools to better meet needs, and creating new tools where none existed. Since the program's inception, TOPS has identified outstanding needs and then modified, created,



Photo Credit: The TOPS Program

Photo Credit: The TOPS Program



Photo Credit: Andrea Moltan, Mercy Corps



and disseminated over 40 tools for food security practitioners.

Technical tools are reviewed by the relevant FSN Network Task Forces to ensure that they fulfill the established recommendation criteria: 1) easy to use/field-friendly; 2) useful and effective; 3) successfully applied in an appropriate context; and 4) address a need in the practitioner community.

TOPS has then disseminated tools through numerous channels, including capacity strengthening workshops and non-traditional training events such as webinars, knowledge sharing events, the FSN Network website and e-newsletter, and other information channels where food security implementers seek information.

Technical Capacity Strengthening Workshops

As part of its mission to bring the highest quality information to the food security and nutrition community, The TOPS Program has organized workshops for implementing staff in Food for Peace countries and at the field and headquarters level. All events have been developed in response to stakeholder interest in topics covered by TOPS.

TOPS has facilitated capacity strengthening workshops that are structured for easy replication and application. Participants have been provided with slides, handouts, and manuals or guides in hard or soft copy. Many of the program's most popular workshops have also been adapted for a variety of cultures or translated into different languages.



The TOPS Program has used rigorously defined core competencies as a backbone for technical capacity strengthening efforts.

In its sixth year, The TOPS Program delivered 21 technical capacity strengthening events reaching 500 food security practitioners on three continents. The mean participant satisfaction rating was 89%, exceeding the annual target.

Photo Credit: Abby Love, Mercy Corps

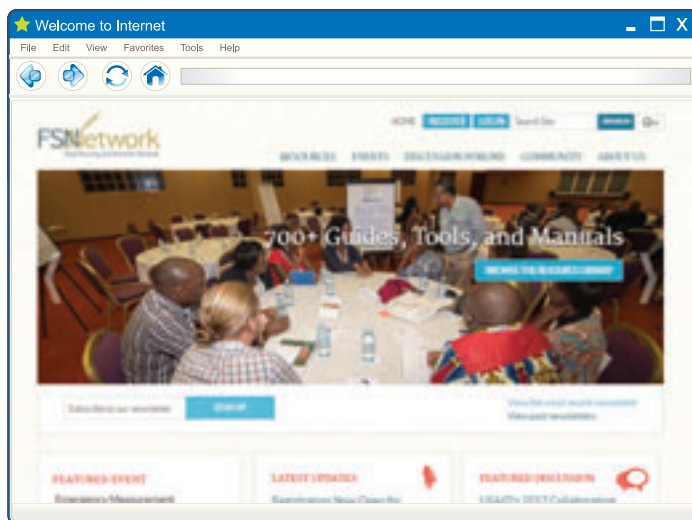


The FSN Network

A Go-To Knowledge Hub

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The Food Security and Nutrition (FSN) Network is an open community of practice for food security and nutrition implementers, researchers, and donors. The FSN Network provides a venue for its members to exchange knowledge, collaborate, and learn while shaping agendas, influencing donor priorities, building consensus on promising practices, and sharing technical knowledge to strengthen programming.



The FSN Network website is the online home of the FSN Network community of practice. Highlights of the knowledge hub include an extensive resource library containing over 700 publications, 14 discussion forums, materials from TOPS capacity strengthening and knowledge sharing events, and daily updated news and upcoming events.

Additionally, The TOPS Program's task forces, interest groups, and discussion groups are hosted on the FSN Network website. These online communities allow participants to dialogue with each other on a range of timely topics such as project level early warning, designing for behavior change, resilience, and much more.

The FSN Network has...

- ...over 29,000 annual visitors
- ...received over 85,000 downloads since its inception
- ...registered over 4,900 users

The electronic FSN Network newsletter provides bi-weekly updates from The TOPS Program and USAID Office of Food for Peace, noting upcoming trainings and events, new job openings, and recent resources and articles. Currently, over 3,500 subscribers around the world receive the newsletter.

The FSN Network has become the touchstone for the food security and nutrition community to connect and engage with their peers, find new technical resources, learn about upcoming events, and stay up-to-date on emerging topics and current happenings.



FSN Network Task Forces

Collaborating to Advance Food Security

The TOPS Program has led eight global task forces, seven representing the technical and cross-cutting topic areas covered by TOPS, plus one on resilience. Each task force has served as a convening mechanism for experts and practitioners from an array of implementing organizations, global projects, and academic and research institutions. The task forces have worked to identify and address knowledge gaps in their areas of focus by creating or improving technical tools, facilitating and hosting webinars, and providing and adapting information according to the needs of the FSN Network. While

each task force has operated somewhat differently, they have all been dedicated to increasing the effectiveness and impact of the technical areas covered in support of food security and nutrition programs. They have helped to define the core competencies and core competency resource lists for their respective areas, and identified, refined, and disseminated state-of-the-art information, methodologies, and tools. Below are examples of resources that have been developed or added thanks to the work of the FSN Network.



The SBC Task Force collaborated on both the very popular *Make Me a Change Agent* manual and helped shape the *Care Groups: A Training Manual for Program Design and Implementation* guide.



Commodity Management Toolkit

In 2017, TOPS launched the interactive Commodity Management Toolkit, which has more than 147 tools for all phases of the commodity management process. The task force was actively engaged in all aspects of this one-stop-shop creation, including its initial conception.

Increased Focus on Resilience

The Resilience Task Force was created in 2016 in response to a growing demand within the food security and nutrition community for a platform to discuss and share information about the ability of communities and households to withstand shocks, like droughts and floods. TOPS, through partner TANGO International, has been an integral partner in the global

implementing community's development of resilience as an operating concept in food assistance program design, implementation, and measurement. TOPS has received several Associate Awards from USAID to promote resilience thinking, design, and practice.



In 2015, the M&E Task Force created the *Monitoring and Evaluation Facilitator's Guide* which provides facilitators with guidance and tips on leading an M&E knowledge and skills transfer course.

Special Topic Knowledge Sharing Events

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Through one-time knowledge sharing events, TOPS has offered opportunities to learn about a specific topic. Events have ranged from short online workshops to multi-day seminars. Topics have varied considerably and were all designed to fill a knowledge gap. Since 2010, more than 4,000 practitioners have participated in such events, with an 80% satisfaction rating. Below are examples of a few recent special topic events.

In January 2017, The TOPS Program produced a **Global Gender Summit** in Lusaka, Zambia. The need for this event was first identified through the Gender Task Force. The event brought together 22 gender advisors and advocates from ten countries in Africa and Latin America, representing Emergency and Development Food Assistance Programs.

The TOPS Program held a two-day **USAID Niger RISE Knowledge Sharing Meeting** in April 2016, attended by 54 people. The workshop was designed to identify common challenges, discuss solutions, and offer practical recommendations for improved outcomes for Food for Peace-funded programs in Niger.

In addition, TOPS staff have shared knowledge and materials at more than 80 events hosted by other organizations such as the **CORE Group's Global Health Practitioner Conferences and the Multi-Sectoral Nutrition Strategy-Global Learning and Evidence Exchange (MSN-GLEE)** events in Asia and North America.



Photo Credit: Anne-Sofie Helms, Save the Children

In May 2017, The TOPS Program hosted a two-and-a-half day **Breastfeeding Seminar**, where 42 participants and presenters reviewed actions at the global level to protect, promote, and support breastfeeding. Participants also

learned from innovative practices in the field and reflected upon breastfeeding practices in Food for Peace-targeted countries over the past two decades.

The TOPS Program, in collaboration with TANGO International, delivered a two-day **Resilience Concepts and Measurement Workshop** in January 2017. Attended by 46 participants, this workshop was designed to strengthen the capacity of implementing partner and USAID staff around resilience concepts, frameworks, and analyses.



Photo Credit: Sheila Jackson, CORE Group

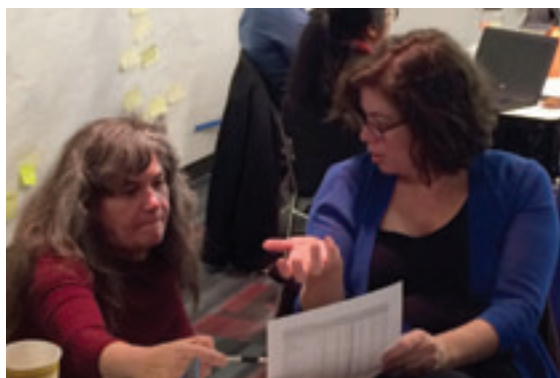
Stakeholder Consultations

Dialogue that Drives Solutions

Since 2012, The TOPS Program has facilitated more than a dozen half-day stakeholder consultations between the food security community and USAID's Office of Food for Peace (FFP). The consultations have allowed organizations to gain clarity from FFP on topics that affect their work and have enabled FFP to consult with organizations on how to improve processes related to FFP-funded programs.

Before meetings, TOPS facilitators have worked with FFP staff and representatives from the food security and nutrition community to collect detailed information about the meeting topics. The facilitators have used this information to craft a consultation plan that promotes a solutions-oriented

Photo Credit: The TOPS Program



dialogue between the two parties. Some of the topics covered at these consultations include USAID's Multi-Sectoral Nutrition Strategy Indicators, the Refine and Implement Model, and Implementing Under the New 2016–2025 Food for Peace Strategy.

Theory of Change

A Roadmap for Results

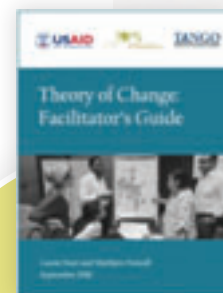
The Theory of Change workshops have been one of The TOPS Program's most popular technical trainings.

The five-day workshop is a hands-on, highly participatory course that takes participants through the process of developing a Theory of Change, and explores how to use the theory at each stage of the program cycle. TOPS has also provided two types of individualized one-day Theory of Change workshops for interested organizations. One helps groups plan for the Theory of Change annual review and the other explores theories of



Photo Credit: The TOPS Program

change for organizations that had unsuccessful proposals with the aim to strengthen future efforts. Since the start of the program, TOPS has facilitated 17 Theory of Change workshops in Bangladesh; Uganda; Baltimore; Washington, DC; and other locations around the world.



In 2016, an updated copy of the *Theory of Change Facilitator's Guide* was published on the FSN Network. This training of trainers manual helps facilitators design future meaningful Theory of Change trainings.

100% of the 25 participants who attended the four-day Theory of Change workshop in Kampala in 2016 'highly valued' the training. 100% said they would recommend the training to their colleagues.

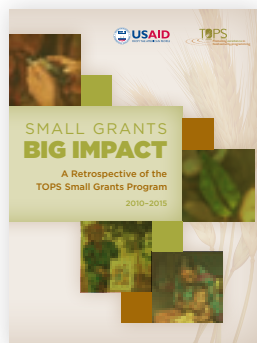
The Small Grants Program:

An Incubator for Great Ideas

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Resource constraints is often an obstacle to testing creative ideas that could improve program results. While medium and large grants can be effective, the arduous application process, lengthy turnaround times, and restrictions on the use of funds can discourage innovation. The lack of easily available unrestricted funds may also make it difficult to conduct a study, gather evidence, produce a knowledge product, or hold an important event. The TOPS Small Grants Program was created to fill these gaps.

TOPS' streamlined small grants program has created opportunities for food security organizations to pursue creative ideas, take risks, and share vital knowledge and skills. By investing in non-traditional initiatives, the small grants program has supported food security implementing partners to advance knowledge and practice in underexplored areas of food security and nutrition programming. After carrying out their activities, all grantee organizations shared the results of their small grant-funded programs with the community at large via webinars or in-person presentations. Tools, research, and other resources produced were then posted to the FSN Network website for continued distribution.



Small Grants, Big Impact

These booklets showcase the impact of seven years of the TOPS Small Grants Program, including brief descriptions of each award.



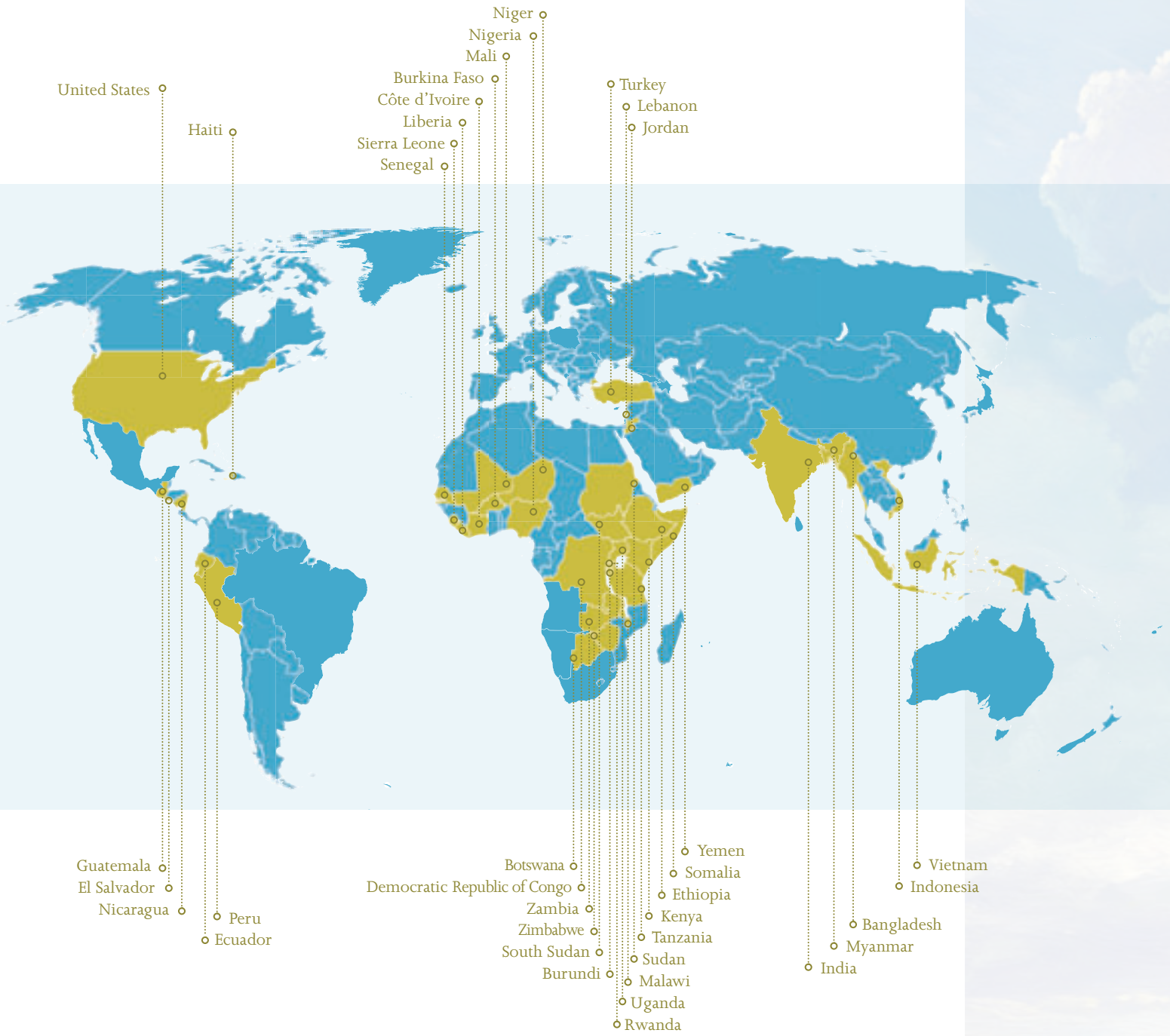
Photo Credit: Amadou Tangara, Farm Radio International

The program has continuously emphasized activities that produce evidence-based results and recommendations that support others to learn from promising new practices and strengthen technical capacity.

An example of results achieved through a small grant can be found in Farm Radio International (FRI)'s work in the Mopti region of Mali, where FRI developed an interactive rural

radio program in partnership with the national radio station. FRI's team found that listeners' understanding of improved agricultural practices more than tripled, from 17% to 60%, through participation in the program.

Countries Reached by the TOPS Small Grants Program



7
Years

38
Countries

165
Applications Received

71
Small Grants Awarded

32
Organizations Funded

4 MILLION*
USD Disbursed

* Amount is an approximation as final financial reports were still pending at the time of publication.



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