Seqota Declaration Process Evaluation
Community Labs

1. OVERVIEW

Community labs are multi-sectoral platforms at the woreda and kebele level that provide community stakeholders with a forum to understand drivers of stunting in their community and collectively brainstorm, innovate, and test interventions to address these issues. As a hallmark innovation of the Seqota Declaration, community labs are expected to play a key role in promoting multi-sectoral coordination and community engagement on the goal of ending stunting in children under two by 2030. Following the launch of a community lab, community stakeholders together with sector implementers are meant to test innovative approaches ("prototypes") within the labs to assess their performance and determine suitability for scale up in the woreda. Known solutions to stunting are also meant to be implemented as per plans outlined by the community lab.

Since November 2017, nine community labs have been launched across Tigray and Amhara, for the most part under the guidance of the PDU, and in some cases with the support of a technical partner - Synergos or ThinkPlace. To assess the implementation in community labs to date, IDinsight conducted a light touch[1] process evaluation to answer the following research questions.

Research Question 1	What activities have been implemented for community labs relative to the model originally envisioned?
Research Question 2	Have multi-sectoral coordination and community engagement improved at the woreda and kebele level?

[2]We referenced all available implementation guides to understand the scope of activities planned for community labs.

Section 2 outlines our methodology for this process evaluation and highlights the limitations of our approach, while Section 3 outlines our findings under each research questions. In Section 4, we conclude with some recommendations.

2. Methodology and Limitations

Given the light-touch scope intended for this evaluation, we followed a different research methodology than that followed for the other four innovations that are part of this evaluation. Semi-structured interviews with seven key informants were the primary source of information for our analysis. We complemented these interviews with a targeted desk review of documents[2] from a sample of three community labs.

Semi-structured interviews

We conducted semi-structured interviews with the following respondents, mostly over the phone. The respondents were selected in collaboration with the PDU; these key informants were judged to have

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[1] This process evaluation was particularly light touch due to a combination of factors - the limited amount of information available on the community labs, the expected change in scope of the community lab model in the future, and the limited amount of time provided during IDinsight's Phase one engagement for support on this evaluation. A more in-depth evaluation can be conducted at a later date, which will benefit from clarity on the final implementation model for community labs and the most pertinent research questions at the time.

[2] IDinsight did an initial check of availability to see what documentation and data is available for this exercise and the time implications of extracting this information. Based on this initial scoping, we decided to do a targeted review of the available documents to answer specific research questions; a checklist for the review is in Annex A.

the most comprehensive knowledge about community labs' history and implementation, for the sample of community labs we were looking at (more on this below).

1. FPDU Program Manager for Agriculture
2. Amhara PDU Program Manager for Agriculture[3]
3. Tigray PDU Program Manager for Agriculture
4. Debark woreda Deputy Administrator
5. Seqota woreda Administrator
6. Debre Birhan kebele Chairperson (Seqota woreda)
7. Nadre Adet kebele Chairperson (Nadre Adet woreda)

For data collection and analysis, we used the same research methodology as outlined in the main Process Evaluation protocol and report. We have included the questionnaire in Annex A for reference.

Document reviews

Based on what was received from the Regional PDUs and the time we allotted for the desk review (2 days) we included the following list of documents in our review for three community labs in Seqota, Debark, and Ebinat. [4]

1. Ebinat Gelamat Baya Kebele Plan July 2018
    a. Seqota Debre Birhan Kebele Plan 2018
    b. Debark Kinu Kebele Plan 2019
2. Reports prepared by community lab members
    a. Ebinat Gelamat Baya Kebele Report March 2019
    b. Seqota Debre Birhan Kebele Report October 2018
    c. Debark Kinu Kebele Report 2019
3. Field reports prepared by the PDU
    a. PDU Field Report for Ebinat Gelamatebya Kebele_May 18
    b. PDU Field Report for Seqota Debre Birhan Kebele_Jun18
4. Templates, such as registration forms and reporting templates

We also reviewed a summary report from the Tigray region that covered 6 community labs.

The above documents were in Amharic; in order to keep our review targeted and efficient, we developed a checklist outlining the key questions we were looking to answer from the document review. This was used by an external Amharic speaking consultant to guide the document translation and review. This checklist is included in Annex A for reference.

Limitations

Given the light-touch methodology, the study is characterized by a number of limitations.

1. **A limited sample of key informants**: Our sample was restricted to 7 key informants. We did not speak to any community members or stakeholders who were not direct members of the community labs. Since we only interviewed lab members who may have an incentive to paint a more positive picture, our findings may overstate the achievements made by community labs.

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[3] In our protocol, we had originally included two more respondents
[4] We originally planned to review documents from two labs each in Tigray and Amhara, but did not receive detailed plans or reports from community labs in Tigray, and therefore decided to incorporate one additional lab from Amhara in our document review.

2. **Documents did not contain all the details we were seeking:** We received filled-out plans and reports largely from the Amhara region, while the Tigray documents were, for the most part, templates that had not been filled out. The documents themselves often did not have all the information we were seeking in the check-list we developed for the review, especially on process-related information such as when the lab was established, how many learning journeys/open days have been conducted, how often meetings happen, etc. as well as specifically on innovations identified, tested, and scaled.

   Further, most of these documents were in Amharic, and IDinsight team needed to hire an external consultant to review these using a targeted document review checklist. To mitigate data quality issues, we had an Amharic-speaking teammate spot check the work of this external consultant and provide feedback. However, in general, our capacity to verify the reliability of the translations was limited.

3. **Remote interviews**: It was infeasible for the IDinsight team to visit the community lab sites and we were therefore unable to verify whether the activities described in the documents and interviews were actually taking place and were unable to investigate community perception of the community labs.

4. **Lack of clarity around implementation guidelines:** In some cases, it was difficult for participants to tie the progress of the labs back to the implementation guidelines, since a few different implementation guides have been shared since the labs were originally launched in 2017. This led to some inconsistencies in the responses – for examples, gaps were stated relative to an outdated implementation plan.
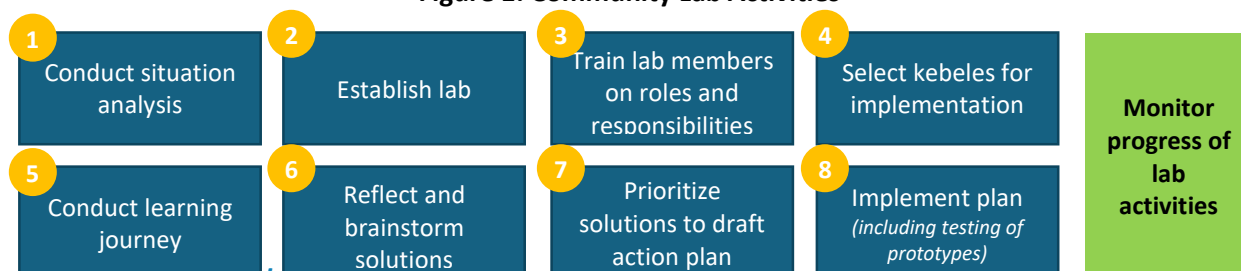
A future, more in-depth evaluation can address more thoroughly the questions around implementation, multi-sectoral coordination, and community engagement more thoroughly. Below, we map our findings to the research questions highlighted above.

3. Findings

Research Question 1: What activities have been implemented for community labs relative to the model originally envisioned?

To date, a total of nine labs have been established in Tigray and Amhara. A few of these, particularly the ones established recently, have been launched by woredas without the direct support of the Federal Program Delivery Unit (FPDU), which indicates both enthusiasm and momentum around the idea of a community lab. Drawing on the implementation guide, we depict the eight main activities of the community lab in Figure 1. Steps 1-7 correspond to what is known as the "launch". We outline our findings relative to these intended activities in the sections below.

Figure 1: Community Lab Activities[1]

| 1 Conduct situation analysis | 2 Establish lab | 3 Train lab members on roles and responsibilities | 4 Select kebeles for implementation | **Monitor progress of lab activities** |
| 5 Conduct learning journey | 6 Reflect and brainstorm solutions | 7 Prioritize solutions to draft action plan | 8 Implement plan *(including testing of prototypes)* | |

[1] Summarized from the available implementation guides.

Community lab activities have by and large taken place in line with the guidance provided by Synergos, the PDU, and ThinkPlace. Table 2 details what was reported in terms of labs established.

Table 1: Community Labs established to date

Woreda	Launched (approximate date)	Technical Support
Amhara		
Seqota	November 2017	Synergos & PDU
Ebinat	May 2018	PDU
Debark	December 2018	ThinkPlace
Meket	February 2019	Launched independently by woreda
Tigray		
Tanqua Abergele	November 2017	Synergos & PDU
Kola Temben	November 2017	Synergos & PDU
Nadre Adet	October 2018	PDU
Saharti Samre	Unknown	PDU
Tselemti	Unknown	Launched independently by woreda

Every lab in the sample went through the launch process, in which representatives from the implementing sectors, religious leaders, community elders, and in some cases NGOs all participated, as per the guide. The launch was followed by a process of reflection, solution-identification, and planning. All the labs in our sample were guided in their implementation (step 8) by a woreda-level, multi-sectoral annual plan. Overall, the process evaluation found that for most community labs in our sample, steps 1-7 (from conducting a situation analysis to drafting an action plan) had been carried out in line with the guidelines. Some labs are monitoring their progress against targets, and members report that regular monitoring has helped keep labs on track toward their goals.

Learning journeys, in particular, are seen by respondents as a valuable way to strengthen decision-makers' contextual understanding and create a sense of ownership over nutrition outcomes in the kebele. Respondents valued the learning journey process and said it helped lab members build a common understanding of the issues in the woreda/kebele and prompted a sense of belonging and ownership.

> *"[The] learning journey creates a sense of ownership and belonging. Taking [lab members] to individual households, they see the issues and promise to act on the issues. It creates good insight. [The] participatory planning process created a senses of belonging among community lab members" – PDU member*

Labs identify nutrition related issues in their community, but a few common themes emerged were, the lack of awareness in the community around nutrition best practices, water shortages and consequent sanitation issues, low delivery of health services and low social security, poor coordination among sectors, and a lack of commitment towards addressing nutrition. The priority activities often align with these high-level issues, but also include a number of routine activities such as seed distribution, social security support, and the extension of health services.

Gaps in implementation
Although activities have kicked off, there is some confusion around the exact roles and responsibilities of lab members, and the activities that are supposed to be conducted by them, as guidance on this has gone through a few different iterations with different technical partners. At present, there is no unified guide on which activities the community lab should conduct, at what frequency, and towards what end. As a result, each lab has a slightly different composition, and conducts regular activities — such as meetings and learning journeys — at varying frequencies relative

to the original plan. In particular, community lab members are not meeting at the expected monthly frequency, often due to the competing priorities of lab members, many of whom have other government jobs.

Many planned activities are not implemented due to lack of budget and capacity. Since community lab activities are primarily implemented and funded by sectors or development partners, activities that do not meet implementer priorities remain unfunded. This may be a risk for community labs' abilities to test and implement innovations.

There is a lack of guidance and support around the meaning of "innovations." Most community labs are implementing "known" solutions such as building latrines, distributing Vitamin A supplements, and distributing seeds — but lack clarity on whether this is the "right" thing for them to be doing. These solutions may improve nutrition outcomes. However, to the extent that the vision was also for community labs to generate and test new innovations for nutrition, progress has been limited by a lack of guidance, particularly in community labs launched prior to Debark[5]. Some innovative practices were reported from the community lab in Debark. Overall, if the goal is for community labs to generate and test innovations that could be scaled in the woreda, both existing and future community labs would benefit from more guidance around what an innovation is, how to come up with innovations and what processes should be used to test, monitor, and decide to scale.

The monitoring system for prototypes will need to be strengthened to allow the labs to rapidly test and scale prototypes, as envisioned. Reporting templates that encourage community lab members to provide qualitative information on the activities being implemented exist, but we did not receive any filled out reports that leverage these templates, which suggests that they are not being used. It was also unclear from the documentation whether labs were being monitored against outcome indicators at the household level that go beyond activity-based targets. Updates to the monitoring system should be made once the implementation guidelines for the community labs have been finalized, and lab members should be adequately trained on the tools and processes.

Finally, the desk review suggests that the regular activities and discussions of community labs are not well documented using the templates provided and even in the reporting formats that the labs are currently using, which limits the support that woredas and the regional PDU can provide as all the required information is not always readily available. Although various reporting and documentation templates are available, they do not appear to be in regular use.

Research Question 2: Have multi-sectoral coordination and community engagement improved at the woreda and kebele level?

The vision is for community labs is to bring together sectors and community leaders to build a collective understanding of the causes of stunting in their area, and work together to come up with solutions that are locally relevant, effective, and innovative. Understanding the extent to which this has happened to date was the motivation driving this research question. Our findings are outlined below.

What has been implemented
In line with the vision, community labs are diverse in their composition and bring together actors from each Seqota Declaration sector, as well as **development partners, community elders, religious leaders, women's groups.** Most sector representatives are active participants at both the woreda and kebele level. At the kebele level, the participation of the Education, Women, and Labour and Social Affairs sectors is sometimes limited.

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[5] At present, we are unable to determine whether this guidance has resulted in more innovations being generated in the lab launched with the support of ThinkPlace.

Multiple respondents stated that the launch process has highlighted to sectors and development partners the need for a multi-sectoral response to nutrition and has helped alleviate the misconception that nutrition is the sole responsibility of the health sector. This was reported to be effective in building the ownership of sectors beyond the health sector. When it comes to the coordination function of the lab, respondents mentioned a few examples of inter-sectoral collaboration, such as between the Water and Agriculture sector on irrigation, and between the water and health sectors on safe drinking water.

> *"Previously nutrition activities were done only done by the health sector or was considered as the responsibility of the health sector only. There was no integration of sectors in implementing nutrition activities. However, in the last two years, different sectors come together and have developed one common plan."*
> *- Woreda administrator*

Gaps in implementation

Although sectors tend to participate regularly in community lab activities, the participation of implementing partners was relatively low in all but one lab in our sample. Since implementing partners often lead the implementation of nutrition-related activities in the woreda and kebele, their absence could limit the ability of the lab to coordinate nutrition activities effectively. Even for the sectors that are a regular part of the lab, the process evaluation suggests that **external incentives to collaborate on implementation remain limited**. Sectors tend to remain focused on their sectoral priorities since their performance is still measured against their sector priorities.

> *"Most sectors are focused on their own sector activities because that is what they are measured against against; they lack incentives to act in a multisectoral way"*
> *– PDU member*

4. Recommendations

Recommendations	RQ	Priority	Effort
Short term recommendations (0 -3 months)			
Finalize the implementation guide and provide adequate training to community labs on updates to their roles and responsibilities if any. This guidance should include a clear definition on prototyping, innovations, and solutions.	RQ 1	High	Medium
Ensure that learning journeys are carried out bi-annually, so that community labs remain motivated and informed of progress at the household level		High	Medium
Encourage community labs to use the available templates to document their activities more rigorously, by emphasizing the value of such documentation for supportive supervision processes and identifying learnings and best practices.		Medium	Low
Map out all relevant stakeholders in the woreda and kebele and ensure that they are invited and incentivized to be a part of community lab learning journeys and regular planning meetings.		Medium	Medium
Continue to emphasize the value of multi-sectoral collaboration, and provide clear guidance on the types of outcomes that are associated with greater coordination (such as less frequent	RQ 2	High	Low

duplication of activities, greater optimization in spending, more frequent sharing of lessons learnt, etc.) and why it is in the sectors' interests to coordination. • Complement the emphasis on collaboration with outlining clear steps for each sector stakeholder involved and holding the group accountable during monthly community lab meetings.			
Include a segment on reviewing the progress of community labs in quarterly review meetings to emphasize the importance of collaboration and provide concrete examples for success.		**Medium**	**Low**
Long term recommendations (3 + months)			
Give community labs more guidance and technical support on how to innovate, including by supporting them with materials such as an evidence synthesis at the launch process, and bringing in external expertise for trainings where relevant.	**RQ 1**	**High**	**High**
Provide clear guidance on how to monitor both known solutions and prototypes. • Include indicators on multi-sectoral coordination outcomes as part of routine monitoring for the labs.		**High**	**Medium**
Integrate community labs monitoring into regular woreda monitoring processes by developing clear indicators of success and making sure woreda-level data on activities and outcomes feeds back into community lab planning.		**Medium**	**Medium**