



# From Learning to Action

*Practical Reflections from Viet Nam for Strengthening Nutrition Programmes in Namibia.*

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# Lessons from Viet Nam: Reflections on Nutrition, Community Systems and Climate-Smart Food Systems

In April 2026, I had the opportunity to participate in a learning visit to Viet Nam focused on **Closing the Gender Nutrition Gap and Fostering Climate-Smart Food Systems Transformation**. The visit, convened under the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Civil Society Network and coordinated by Alive & Thrive in Viet Nam, brought together participants from nearly 15 countries to learn from community-based and systems-level approaches to nutrition, livelihoods, gender, and climate resilience.

Rather than providing a day-by-day account of the visit, this publication shares the key lessons that stood out to me and the reflections they sparked for my work in Namibia. This publication is also intended to spark learning and discussion among NAFSAN members.

What struck me most throughout the week was that successful nutrition interventions were rarely implemented in isolation. Nutrition was intentionally connected to livelihoods, agriculture, community systems, gender, and long-term sustainability. Whether we were engaging with policy makers, community leaders, farmers, or mothers, the message was consistent: **improving nutrition outcomes requires more than information. It requires systems that support people in their everyday lives.**

# 1. Behaviour Change Requires Structure, Not Just Information

One of the most impactful experiences during the visit was learning about community nutrition clubs implemented at village level.

Before the intervention, communities faced several challenges, including limited knowledge on infant and young child feeding, poor hygiene practices, and high levels of stunting. Some traditional feeding practices, such as pre-chewing food before feeding babies, were still common. Mothers often lacked access to practical information and support on how to improve child feeding practices.

What stood out was that the response was not a once-off awareness campaign. Instead, communities established nutrition clubs where mothers met regularly to learn, share experiences, and participate in practical activities such as cooking demonstrations using locally available foods.

The clubs created a space where learning became continuous rather than occasional. Mothers were able to ask questions, observe demonstrations, and support one another as they adopted new practices.

Within a relatively short period, communities reported improvements in exclusive breastfeeding, reductions in illness among children, and declining stunting rates.

**The experience reinforced an important lesson for me: information alone does not necessarily change behaviour. Behaviour change requires structure, repetition, practical application, and community support.**

## Reflection for Namibia

This lesson resonated strongly with me because many organisations already invest considerable effort in awareness activities. The nutrition clubs demonstrated the value of creating structured and consistent platforms where communities can learn together over time.

The approach also aligns with current thinking around strengthening community-based support systems and creating environments where healthy practices can be sustained beyond individual projects.



## Ideas for Discussion

- **Could community nutrition clubs strengthen behaviour change programmes within our own communities?**
- **How can organisations move beyond once-off awareness campaigns towards more structured and continuous engagement?**
- **What existing community platforms could already be used for peer learning and practical demonstrations?**

## 2. Nutrition and Livelihoods Cannot Be Separated

Another lesson that stayed with me throughout the visit was the strong connection between nutrition and household livelihoods.

In several communities, nutrition interventions were not implemented as stand-alone activities. Instead, they were intentionally linked to savings groups, agricultural production, and income-generating activities.

Women participated in savings groups where members contributed money regularly, accessed loans, and invested in livelihood opportunities. These groups provided more than financial support; they created networks of trust, accountability, and mutual assistance within communities.

.One particularly interesting example was a duck farming initiative. Community members coordinated production and supported one another when supply was low. Income generated from the activity was used for household needs, school expenses, and food purchases.

What struck me most was that nutrition knowledge was not expected to work on its own. Communities were being supported to improve both their knowledge and their economic resilience.

**The experience highlighted an important reality: households may understand what constitutes a healthy diet, but knowledge alone does not guarantee access to nutritious food. Families must also have the resources and opportunities to act on that knowledge.**



### Reflection for Namibia

This lesson reinforced the importance of looking beyond nutrition-specific interventions and considering the broader economic realities that shape household food choices.

It raises important questions about how nutrition programmes can work more intentionally with livelihood initiatives, savings groups, and food production activities to strengthen household resilience and improve nutrition outcomes.

### Ideas for Discussion

- How can nutrition programmes better integrate livelihoods and household economic resilience?
- Are there existing savings groups that could be strengthened with nutrition education?
- How can organisations support households to not only know what healthy diets look like, but also improve their ability to access nutritious foods?

### 3. Community Ownership Drives Sustainability

One of the strongest themes throughout the visit was community ownership.

Whether we were discussing nutrition clubs, agricultural interventions, water systems, or livelihood activities, communities were not simply beneficiaries of programmes. They played an active role in managing, maintaining, and sustaining them.

This was particularly evident during the visit to the Farmer Managed Natural Regeneration (FMNR) project.

To address water access challenges in mountainous areas, solar-powered pumping systems had been introduced to move water from streams to rice fields. The intervention contributed to increased agricultural production and improved food security within the community.

What stood out, however, was not only the technology itself.

Local committees had been established to oversee the operation and maintenance of the system. Community members were responsible for managing the infrastructure, organising repairs when necessary, and ensuring the system continued functioning.

This created a sense of ownership and responsibility that extended beyond the lifespan of any individual project.

The same principle could be seen across many of the initiatives we visited. Communities were involved in decision-making, implementation, and ongoing management.

#### Reflection for Namibia

This lesson prompted me to think about the difference between community participation and community ownership.

Participation is important, but ownership is what often determines whether an intervention continues after external support ends.

As practitioners, we are often challenged to think beyond implementation and ask how communities can be empowered to lead, maintain, and sustain interventions in the long term.



#### Ideas for Discussion

- **How do we move from community participation to genuine community ownership?**
- **What strategies help communities sustain interventions after project funding ends?**
- **Could community committees play a greater role in managing nutrition and food security initiatives?**

## 4. Nutrition Outcomes Depend on Systems

While many of the community-level interventions were inspiring, the visit also highlighted the importance of strong systems in supporting nutrition outcomes.

Vietnam has made significant progress in reducing stunting over time. National stunting rates have declined substantially, although disparities remain in mountainous and ethnic minority communities. Several factors appeared to contribute to this progress.

Government investment in nutrition has increased, demonstrating a strong commitment to addressing malnutrition. Nutrition data is collected every six months, allowing programmes and policies to be informed by relatively current information. The country has also introduced policy measures such as taxes on sugar-sweetened beverages to respond to emerging nutrition challenges, including obesity.

### Reflection for Namibia

The visit reinforced the importance of viewing nutrition through a systems lens.

Nutrition outcomes are shaped by policies, financing, social norms, data systems, livelihoods, agriculture, and healthcare services. Progress requires alignment across these different areas rather than reliance on a single intervention.

One idea that particularly interested me was the routine collection of nutrition data. It sparked reflections on how partnerships with academic institutions and students might contribute to strengthening local nutrition data systems and evidence generation.

### Ideas for Discussion

- How can stronger collaboration between health, agriculture, education and community development improve nutrition outcomes?
- What opportunities exist to strengthen routine nutrition data collection in Namibia?
- How can men be more intentionally engaged in nutrition and caregiving programmes?

At the same time, discussions during the visit highlighted that even strong systems face challenges.

One particularly interesting observation was that nutrition data collected by the Ministry of Health was not necessarily the same data used by the Ministry of Agriculture. Agricultural stakeholders noted that livelihood information and other indicators were also important for understanding food systems outcomes.

**This served as a reminder that nutrition is influenced by multiple sectors and that coordination remains essential.**

Another important lesson was the intentional engagement of men.

**Rather than treating nutrition as solely a women's issue, many initiatives encouraged men to participate in caregiving, household nutrition, and livelihood activities. This approach recognised that sustainable change requires support from all members of the household.**



## 5. Climate-Smart Food Systems Can Support Nutrition

The visit to the Farmer Managed Natural Regeneration (FMNR) project demonstrated how climate resilience, food production, and nutrition can be addressed simultaneously.

Communities had introduced solar-powered irrigation systems that enabled water to be pumped from streams to rice fields. This significantly increased agricultural production, with cultivated land reportedly expanding from approximately 9 hectares to 19 hectares.

The project also promoted environmentally sustainable agricultural practices.

Organic fertiliser was produced using locally available materials, helping to improve soil health and reduce erosion. Community members explained that these practices supported both agricultural productivity and environmental sustainability.

What I found particularly interesting was how food production systems contributed directly to dietary diversity. In addition to harvesting rice, community members collected fish and snails from the fields, providing additional sources of food and nutrition.

**The project illustrated how climate-smart approaches can strengthen resilience while also contributing to food security and improved diets.**

### Community Practice Spotlight: Organic Fertiliser Preparation

One practical example observed during the field visit was the preparation of organic fertiliser using locally available resources.

The process involved:

1. Placing fresh and dry leaves in a bucket.
2. Adding sugar and water and allowing the mixture to ferment for approximately four days.
3. Adding cooked rice water to the mixture.
4. Mixing the fermented liquid with rice bran and allowing it to stand for approximately seven days.
5. Combining the mixture with animal manure.
6. Drying the material before applying it as fertiliser.

Community members also described the use of certain bitter and spicy leaves as natural pesticide alternatives in some situations.

While agricultural contexts differ across countries, the example demonstrated how locally available materials can be used to support sustainable farming practices and reduce reliance on external inputs.



## Reflection for Namibia

This lesson highlighted the importance of viewing food systems through multiple lenses. Agriculture is not only about production. It is also connected to nutrition, environmental sustainability, resilience, livelihoods, and household food security. Climate-smart approaches that are practical, locally relevant, and community-owned may offer valuable opportunities for strengthening both food systems and nutrition outcomes.



## Ideas for Discussion

- Which climate-smart agricultural practices could realistically be adapted within Namibian communities?
- How can organisations encourage the use of locally available resources to improve soil health and food production?
- What opportunities exist to link climate resilience more intentionally with nutrition programming?

# Ideas Worth Exploring

**Community Nutrition Clubs**



**Structured platforms for sustained behaviour change.**

**Savings Groups**



**Linking livelihoods with improved nutrition outcomes.**

**Community Ownership**



**Strengthening sustainability beyond project funding.**

**Climate-Smart Agriculture**



**Building resilience while improving food security.**

**Engaging Men**



**Promoting shared responsibility for nutrition and caregiving.**



# Bringing the Lessons Home

As the learning visit came to an end, I found myself reflecting less on individual projects and more on the common thread that connected them.

Whether we were discussing nutrition clubs, savings groups, climate-smart agriculture, or national policies, the most successful approaches shared a similar characteristic: they were designed around the realities of people's lives.

**Nutrition was not treated as a stand-alone issue.**

It was connected to livelihoods, food production, caregiving practices, community support systems, and broader policy environments.

**This reinforced an important lesson for me: sustainable nutrition outcomes are rarely achieved through a single intervention. They require coordinated systems that support households over time.**

One area where this reflection particularly resonated with me was in relation to **Post-discharge Strategy** support for children treated for malnutrition.

While treatment within health facilities is essential, recovery does not end when a child leaves the hospital. The environment that child returns to remains critically important.

The learning visit reinforced the importance of strengthening systems around households and communities. This includes ensuring that families are connected to ongoing support structures, have access to food and livelihood opportunities, and receive continued guidance and follow-up where needed.

Another reflection relates to community ownership.

Across many of the initiatives visited, communities were not passive recipients of services. They were active participants in managing systems, maintaining infrastructure, supporting one another, and driving change within their own communities. This raises an important question for all of us working in nutrition, food security, health, and development:

**How can we continue creating programmes that communities are able to sustain long after external support has ended?**

While contexts differ and not every approach can be replicated directly, the visit provided valuable examples of what is possible when nutrition is integrated with livelihoods, climate resilience, gender-responsive programming, and community engagement.

**I hope these reflections spark discussion among NAFSAN members and partners.**

**Most importantly, I hope they encourage us to continue exploring how we can strengthen nutrition systems in ways that are practical, sustainable, and responsive to the realities faced by households and communities across Namibia.**

The learning visit may have taken place in Viet Nam, but the questions, lessons, and opportunities it raised are highly relevant to the work many of us continue to do every day.



# We'd Love to Hear From You

*This publication is intended to spark learning and discussion among NAFSAN members.*

*We would love to hear:*

*Which lesson resonated most with you?  
Are similar approaches already being implemented within your organisation?  
What opportunities do you see for adapting these ideas in the Namibian context?*

By sharing our experiences and learning from one another, we can continue strengthening nutrition programming across Namibia.



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