

## Field Exchange Review Executive Summary

### Introduction

The Emergency Nutrition Network (ENN) has produced the tri-annual publication, *Field Exchange* since 1996. Between February and May 2009 *Field Exchange* (FEx) was evaluated through interviews and questionnaires administered to a sample of subscribers as well as analysis of citations in the published literature.

### Methodology

Subscribers on the *Field Exchange* mailing list were divided into two groups: those in academic and research institutions (Group A) and practitioners (UN agencies, NGOs, public and private sector organisations, individuals and independents) (Group B). The survey aimed for an even representation of respondents from group A and B, with the sample further stratified to ensure a wide geographic coverage of respondents.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out by telephone by 3 independent researchers, with a few respondents completing emailed questionnaires where telephone conversations were not feasible. In total 105 interviews were conducted: 47 from Group A and 58 from Group B.

A literature search of established databases commonly used in the health/sociological research setting was conducted using SCOPUS and Google Scholar.

### Key Findings

#### *Field Exchange* fulfils the needs of a diverse readership

Twenty-eight percent of respondents had been receiving FEx for more than 5 years, while 26% were new subscribers. This is indicative of the ongoing relevance of *Field Exchange* as it has a substantial established readership, while continuing to attract new subscribers.

**Table 1:** Length of time respondents have received *Field Exchange*

| <1 year  | 1-2 years | 2-5 years | >5 years |
|----------|-----------|-----------|----------|
| 27 (26%) | 13 (12%)  | 36 (34%)  | 29 (28%) |

Almost all respondents use *Field Exchange* for personal learning and updating their knowledge. Respondents from Group A found *Field Exchange* to be an excellent resource to provide them with an insight into what is currently happening on the ground, allowing them to situate their academic research or teaching and enhance it with information on field practice.

- “Being detached from the field, *Field Exchange* provides a vital link to real life, the real world”

Overall, it appears that *Field Exchange* is accessible to a variety of groups ranging from professors in academia to field workers; including undergraduates, postgraduates, nutritionists, anthropologists, medical students, humanitarian/development workers and specialists. Sharing of FEx is common between colleagues and it is evident that usage is more widespread than reflected in the ENN mailing list and has been particularly enhanced by the provision of online access. The publication permits people with different levels of

knowledge and understanding to dip in and take something away and is currently meeting the needs of a broad readership.

- *“It has a broad focus with some very clinical/technical articles too.”*
- *“Good level of language – not lay, but not complex”*

Several suggestions were made for the promotion of FEx beyond the nutrition and development community, noting its relevance for a broader audience including political science departments, as well as featuring articles in mainstream midwifery journals.

### **Good range of topics covered, with focus on Hot Topics**

Management of Severe Acute Malnutrition (SAM) and Infant Feeding in Emergencies (IFE) were mentioned most frequently by Group A as areas of interest and information sourced from *Field Exchange*; and articles on Community Management of Acute Malnutrition (CMAM) by Group B. Assessment of different nutritional situations, reporting on interventions, works in progress and summaries of research were types of articles that respondents from both groups found most useful.

Additionally, a plethora of covered topics were singled out as being of importance to those interviewed. These included WHO growth standards, livelihoods/food security/markets, quantitative information on nutrition in emergencies in different parts of Africa, IFE and HIV in conflict areas and programme implementation methodologies.

- *“My current interests are local foods and food security: sustainable food baskets, nutrition education and agricultural security, ensuring women and children have access to adequate food basket. This is well covered in Field Exchange”.*
- *“Although the Field exchange or ENN is called ‘nutrition’ it’s far broader than that – it’s about ways of doing things and communities.”*

### **At the cutting edge: reporting on new developments**

Respondents use *Field Exchange* as a resource to find out the latest developments in nutrition in emergencies and gain new insights into nutrition situations.

- *“Lots on RUTF in Field Exchange: this is a new field where academic publications are scarce; field reports are informative”*
- *“Very useful to read reviews of key papers – often I had not found them yet in print despite being well connected to literature resources”.*

Sixty-eight percent of respondents said that FEx had informed them of topics or areas that they were not aware of, while others noted that they had learnt things that substantiated their existing knowledge. Community Therapeutic Care (CTC) and Ready to Use Therapeutic Foods (RUTFs) were key areas where respondents learned of new developments through the publication, including expanded use of RUTF to adults with HIV, production of RUTF in Africa, and exposure to how F75, F100 and RUTFs are being used. Programme experiences in different countries and operational research provide new information on approaches.

- *“no other publications bring together that range of information in one place. It’s a first port of call for emergency nutrition. It’s also very up to date and useful for the practitioner which is unique to Field Exchange.”*

- Without *Field Exchange*, “it would be a huge problem to keep up to date with developments in the field.”

### Unique: filling a vital role between academic research and field practice

Those working in academic and research settings could not overstate the value of *Field Exchange* in providing them with essential information from the field, while practitioners working on the ground indicated that it helped fill gaps in knowledge and pointed to best practice by pulling together and sharing operational and academic research as well as examples of field practice from multiple regions and agencies.

- “The value of *Field Exchange* is that where the regular scientific literature (*Lancet*, *JAMA*) publishes specific research studies, *Field Exchange* adds something else. It is interesting to see something on the border between pure research and field activity; it bridges the gap between field and research”.

The gap that FEx fills often relates to *how* to implement programmes and put policy or guidelines into practice while highlighting associated challenges. *Field Exchange* provides new ideas for both programme implementers and researchers as well as substantiating and challenging theory, exposing policy-makers and theorists to the complex realities on the ground, while supplementing research agendas with information from the field.

- “in nutrition, there would only be academic journals, and in food security there would be virtually nothing without trawling through agency reports. So without FEx we wouldn’t have a clue in terms of the field.”
- “good refreshing publication in the field of nutrition which is unique as other fields don’t seem to have similar publications. Great publication that picks up the sector.”
- “You don’t get this angle anywhere else”

Nine respondents said that *Field Exchange* had guided the direction of their research, illuminating where research needs existed and providing a broad perspective on what had already been done. This included Masters and PhD students and researchers focusing on adult malnutrition, child health, management of SAM, HIV, IFE and food security.

- “helps with research agenda especially in identifying ‘how research was done’ in those settings e.g. refugee populations, research in communities in Somalia.”

### Connecting people and practices

For those working in academic and research settings, FEx provides insight into the work of NGOs and field practitioners, illuminating how people are thinking and what issues they are attempting to tackle.

*Field Exchange* further provides information on who is active where, facilitating networking and exchange of information as well as partnerships between academic institutions and NGOs: “We found a partner NGO to work with in updating a database of local foods in Mozambique through *Field Exchange*”. It also links field practitioners with each other to share and build on experience and lessons learned.

- “Valuable tool; great opportunity to be able to share”
- “If ENN wasn’t around “lessons and experiences learned would not be communicated. The scientific basis for practice would be harder to establish, and more time would be spent in adopting/developing new approaches”

## Influencing teaching; guiding agency programming

The majority of respondents who were engaged in teaching used *Field Exchange* as a resource for their courses, with more than a third of those confirming that it had influenced what they taught and 21% using it on a regular basis.

- *“Teaching management of SAM, Field Exchange is the best source of what’s happening out there, what’s going on, how people are solving problems”*

Methods of use included sourcing information for lecture notes and discussions; use of case-studies or scenarios to situate students, encourage them to read further or use the data; and as reference or resource material. Online access has enhanced use of *Field Exchange* as a resource for both teaching and research, facilitating the sharing of articles.

- *“It is a good resource for teaching as it covers a lot of ground and also gives a good flavour of what is happening in the real world.”*

In Group B, 29% of respondents had used *Field Exchange* for training staff or community volunteers, 50% had used it to guide programming, while 57% stated that FEx had influenced their agency programming or policy.

### Examples of use of Field Exchange to Guide Programming (Group B)

- *“the coverage of CTC in Malawi directly influenced the CTC programme we set up in Somaliland, which is now 6 months old. We borrowed ideas such as involving the community and local health system in order to assist this programme”*
- *“trying to use the protocol in the Michael Golden article to guide the supplementary feeding programme”*
- *“has influenced programming around nutrition assessments with pastoralists in Ethiopia which we are trying to set up at the moment”*

### Examples of FEx influencing agency programming or policy

- *“one issue had 2 or 3 articles related to small gardening projects, and that has influenced the setting-up of our own magazine and some activities of this type that we are about to begin.”*
- *“supplemental material such as targeting food aid and from food crisis to free market has influenced policies on these.”*
- *“Three years ago we switched from normal supplementary feeding model to CTC due to the influence of ENN and Valid international, and both these organisations continue to influence policies and programming”*
- *“our policies on the management of acute malnutrition have been influenced by material in Field Exchange from Niger”*
- *“when worked with the IPC technical committee the information on nutrition indicators informed policies that we were writing”*
- *“articles on plumpy’nut/plumpy’doz effectiveness in Niger started an internal discussion on what to base protocols”*

## Citations in journals, books & publications

On 29<sup>th</sup> April 2009, a Google search for ‘emergency nutrition’ resulted in the ENN being the first link from 271,000 listed. A search for ‘malnutrition’ listed ENN as the 201<sup>st</sup> hit, and for ‘malnutrition in developing countries’, approximately 350<sup>th</sup> from 43,200 hits.

Thirty-two peer-reviewed journals have published a total of 66 journal articles, each citing one or more articles from *Field Exchange* or ENN resources, including BMJ, JAMA, Lancet, Disasters, Food and Nutrition Bulletin and British Journal of Nutrition. In addition to peer-reviewed journals, work from the ENN has been utilised as reference material in a variety of books, focusing on political science, aid and development as well as nutrition. A Google Book search, combined with the results from Scopus and Google scholar, resulted in the discovery of 34 books all citing the work of the ENN.

183 documents on ReliefWeb were listed in a search for “Field Exchange”, including reports citing *Field Exchange* articles as well as ENN-produced guidelines.

### Future directions

Suggestions made for improving the content of FEx included increased coverage of the transition/development phase post-emergency, smaller, ‘forgotten’ emergencies, and inclusion of disadvantaged groups in developed countries. However, the majority of comments reflected respondents’ satisfaction with the publication and aversion to any changes: “*I like it just the way it is*”, “*Good focused magazine, which covers food security as well as nutrition, don’t broaden reach too much.*”

While the use of colour and photographs was appreciated, 19 respondents (18%) would welcome a more standard-sized publication to facilitate scanning and photocopying for sending articles abroad or sharing with students.

Thirty-four respondents (32%) suggested an increase to quarterly publication, while the majority were concerned that more frequent issues would be difficult to digest; five respondents proposed website updates between issues.

Ten respondents (17%) from Group B thought *Field Exchange* was too Africa-focused and requested more on Asia, however the majority shared the view that they were “*more interested in types of experiences rather than regions*” or that “*focusing on the most current and pressing issues is important as countries across the world can learn from these.*”

In conclusion, the majority of interviewees were highly enthusiastic about *Field Exchange*. It provides them with insight, information and exposure that they struggle to find elsewhere.

- “*FEX is one of the main tools to improve nutrition knowledge, learn about protocols, concepts, methodologies, and experiences from different contexts.*” The absence of *Field Exchange*, “*...would reduce the scope of our thinking about programming.*”

The publication stimulates creative thinking, new ideas and relationships, encouraging sharing and learning, while providing a platform for challenging existing practice or protocols and striving for improvement. Subscribers have confidence in ENN to continue to provide them with this pertinent, distinctive and valuable resource.