



25 years of Field Exchange: has it made a difference?

So, 25 years of Field Exchange. 25 years of field conversations, writing and editing. 25 years of negotiations, deadlines, print runs, online posts, mailing and reading. 25 years of sharing your stories, successes, challenges and, of course, the lessons learned. Celebrating this milestone, some of the ENN staff suggested that I look back and reflect upon what a difference I think Field Exchange has made. In short, 25 years of the lessons learned from the lessons learned. Here goes.

I first encountered Field Exchange in 1998 as a nutritionist with the non-governmental organisation, Merlin, whilst working in South Sudan. Deliberating with myself over what admission criteria to use in the supplementary feeding programme we were setting up, I happened upon an [article](#) in Field Exchange on selective feeding programmes by MSF in Kenya. They described the problems faced and what they did and this resonated with our situation so we promptly did the same. Suddenly, I did not feel so isolated and I felt more confident in my decision; I was no longer alone. A few years later, I wrote an [article](#) on the challenges of research in emergencies during the 1999 Kosovo crisis. I was impressed with the down to earth, grounded and agenda-free editorial team (Jeremy Shoham and Fiona O'Reilly) that helped me do this. So, for me personally, it made a huge difference – there were many other instances when leafing through the latest edition, I learned something and actually took action based on what I had read. Joining the editorial team in early 2002, I've had the privilege of working on Field Exchange ever since – it is fascinating to recall what was discussed all those years ago compared to now. So, looking back, I have identified the 'top eight' areas that stand out for me in terms of contribution to learning and influence through Field Exchange.

Community based management of acute malnutrition (CMAM): Since the early days of Field Exchange, community therapeutic care (CTC), and its subsequent evolution as CMAM, has been a significant feature, indeed the topic most extensively covered over the last 25 years. Early field trials of CTC, [key meetings](#), the ongoing documentation of programme experiences, periodically collated into special [supplements](#)/sections on [CTC](#), on [coverage](#) and [CMAM surge](#) have all helped to curate evidence on the 'how' of community-based care.

Continuity of care for wasting management: The [60th edition](#) of Field Exchange was dedicated to continuity of care for wasting treatment, capturing both innovations and trouble spots, synthesising the learning and pinpointing the areas

that we needed to collectively act on. This edition was used to directly inform the actions of many stakeholders engaged in wholesale United Nations (UN) reform including the multi-UN Global Action Plan (GAP) on Child Wasting.

Special issue on child wasting in South Asia: [This edition](#) stands out for me as it helped to amplify the regional voice on child wasting that had been under-represented in Field Exchange and more broadly in international discourse on child wasting. It is also a great example of our collaboration with partners to produce Field Exchange, in this instance with the UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia.

Infant and young child feeding in emergencies: The very first edition of Field Exchange spotlighted [gaps](#) in breastfeeding support and the huge barriers to meeting the needs of infants dependent on infant formula. Field articles, including a [special edition](#) and [special section of Field Exchange](#), written by committed and determined practitioners have been instrumental in bring attention to the issues, building knowledge and changing attitudes, policy and practice. This evidence has helped to catalyse the development and continues to inform updates of the [Operational Guidance on infant feeding in emergencies \(IFE\)](#), a "do's and don'ts" for programmers managed by the IFE Core Group that is now endorsed by the World Health Assembly, available in multiple languages and is the 'go to' international policy guidance.

Special edition on the Syria crisis: In 2013, we dived quick and deep into the response to the Syria crisis that had kicked off in 2011. As it unfolded, we sensed this would be a pivotal learning experience and we needed to capture learning in real time to do it justice. Interviews with more than 100 programmers and visits to Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon were compiled into an extensive [special edition](#) providing a perspective that evidenced how we need to do things differently. This helped to shape subsequent thinking and practice in the region and more broadly on the need for contextualised humanitarian response.

Government experiences of CMAM: In 2012, ENN collaborated with the Government of Ethiopia to host a conference in Addis Ababa showcasing government experiences of CMAM. Eighteen months of preparation involved visits to countries to sit with government colleagues to listen, learn and support writing. A special edition of [Field Exchange \(43\)](#) featured these articles, providing a unique and long overdue insight into national perspectives. This informed a commitment and shift within ENN to a more national-oriented lens across all our work, sparking new developments and initiatives, such as a five-year programme to

support the knowledge management of the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement and the evolution of our sister publication – Nutrition Exchange (now reconfigured as FEX Digests) – to prioritise national and sub-national authorship.

Our collaboration with the Government of Ethiopia reflects the special connection that Field Exchange has with the country – the idea for Field Exchange came out of a United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)-hosted meeting in Addis Ababa in 1994 and, in 2011, a special focus on Ethiopia in [issue 40](#) was used to showcase a country that has placed nutrition and food security concerns at the heart of its development agenda.

Special edition on Nutrition Cluster Coordination: I can remember attending a meeting in the mid-2000s when the Nutrition Cluster was just getting started and many of us were trying to figure out what it was all about. Fast forward a few years and our [special edition](#) in 2017 helped to pinpoint exactly that. It was guest-edited by the Global Nutrition Cluster Coordinator and encompassed experiences and lessons learned from seasoned, committed Country Cluster Coordinators. This edition was also a sign of ENN's strong commitment to supporting the Nutrition Cluster which has continued, not least in our role as [knowledge management lead](#) for the GNC-Technical Alliance.

Management of small and nutritionally at-risk infants under six months and their mothers (MAMI): Articles in Field Exchange highlighted the challenges that programmers were facing in managing malnourished infants under six months in their treatment programmes which were not designed to cater for the particular needs of this vulnerable group. This sparked investigative research led by ENN, together with University College London Centre for International Child Health and Development, and ACF funded by the Global Nutrition Cluster ([the MAMI Project](#)). In the 12 years since, an active collaboration between policymakers, researchers and programmers ([MAMI Global Network](#)) has continued to use Field Exchange as a vehicle to [document experiences](#), share the latest evidence and innovations, raise the profile of this issue and ultimately influence practice for the better.

I am now a little older than both the field worker I was in South Sudan and that researcher plying her trade during the Kosovo crisis – and I'm not sure any wiser – but I have never forgotten those feelings of isolation in the field, how Field Exchange helped me practically to connect with others and do a better job and the value that the editorial team placed on my frank personal experiences as a way of contributing to our global collective effort. These principles have remained very much at the heart of Field Exchange, 25 years later.

So, has Field Exchange made a difference? In other words, have **you** made a difference? It's a resounding yes from me...

Marie McGrath (*Field Exchange Co-Editor*)

What difference has Field Exchange made to you in the last 25 years? Let us know at fex@ennonline.net