



FEED THE FUTURE

The U.S. Government's Global Hunger & Food Security Initiative

Learning from the USAID Nutrition Innovation Lab Partnerships

Brief on Lessons Learned and Recommendations

Introduction

USAID Advancing Nutrition engaged in a learning activity with the USAID Nutrition Innovation Lab to document experiences on partnering and develop recommendations on how innovation labs can partner to improve nutrition outcomes. During the 10-year award period (2010-2020), the Nutrition Innovation Lab partnered with a range of organizations, including other USAID innovation labs, to advance nutrition outcomes. Near the end of the award period, USAID Advancing Nutrition collaborated with the Nutrition Innovation Lab to document and identify successes, challenges, lessons, and opportunities to improve partnerships moving forward. This brief is intended for USAID innovation labs, technical advisors, and program managers to help them to plan and establish successful partnerships to improve nutrition.

Objectives and Learning Questions

This activity had three learning objectives:

- Determine how the Nutrition Innovation Lab partnered to improve nutrition-related research and its uptake.
- Document the perceived outcomes of these partnerships.
- Identify lessons and recommendations from the Nutrition Innovation Lab's experience for the next iteration of the Nutrition and other innovation labs.

We developed the six learning questions below with USAID and the Nutrition Innovation Lab in alignment with these objectives. We defined partners as any individual or organization that the Nutrition Innovation Lab identified as a collaborator that was not the management entity (Tufts University) or a United States (U.S.)-based consortium partner.¹

Partnership Implementation

- I. What types of partnerships did the Nutrition Innovation Lab engage in to try to improve nutrition-related research or its use?
 - a. What were the main objectives of these partnerships (e.g., host-country institutional relationships, research, innovation transfer, dissemination, scaling)?

¹ Johns Hopkins University, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Boston Children's Hospital, Purdue University, Tuskegee University, and Cornell University.



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Partnership Outcomes

2. What types of partnerships did or did not help the Nutrition Innovation Lab to improve nutrition- and agriculture-related research or its use?
 - a. What factors facilitated or limited the success of these partnerships?
3. What nutrition-related outcomes did the Nutrition Innovation Lab achieve through these partnerships?
 - b. Which of these outcomes did the Nutrition Innovation Lab think would not have been possible without partnerships?
4. How did partnerships help the Nutrition Innovation Lab to improve the relevance and use of nutrition-related research for multi-sectoral nutrition programs?

Lessons and Recommendations

5. What are lessons about how innovation labs can partner to improve nutrition-related research or its uptake and use?
6. What are recommendations for how innovation labs can partner to improve nutrition-related research or its uptake and use?

Approach

We reviewed project documents and conducted semi-structured interviews to answer the learning questions, understand the Nutrition Innovation Lab’s range of partnerships, and identify key lessons and recommendations. However, given the number of partnerships that the Nutrition Innovation Lab had over its 10 years in operation, we chose to focus on partnerships in two countries to explore the composition, activities, achievements, and challenges of partnerships. The Nutrition Innovation Lab identified Malawi and Nepal as countries with successful partnerships that we could use as illustrative examples.

We reviewed 28 documents and extracted information in a common template. The template reflected the key themes related to the learning questions. The Nutrition Innovation Lab did not include intermediate indicators related to partnership implementation or collaboration in its evaluation plan, so we could not use monitoring and evaluation data to assess the strengths and weaknesses of partnerships.

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 key informants based in the U.S., Malawi, and Nepal from five interviewee groups (table 1). We completed thematic analysis of the interview notes to identify themes related to the learning questions.

Table 1. Interview Sample

Interviewee Group	U.S.-based	Malawi-based	Nepal-based	Total
USAID	1			1
USAID Nutrition Innovation Lab	4			4
Government		1	2	3
University or research institute		1	2	3
Nongovernmental organization			1	1
Total	5	2	5	12

Note: We conducted two interviews with two representatives from the Nutrition Innovation Lab participating in each interview.

Once we completed the data analysis, we shared our preliminary findings with USAID and the Nutrition Innovation Lab to vet and ensure they reflected the experiences of the Nutrition Innovation Lab. In addition, we sent the preliminary findings to the Global Knowledge Initiative (GKI), which is developing a community of practice to facilitate collaboration between the innovation labs. GKI is investigating the partnership experiences of all of the innovation labs, so it was able to provide feedback on our findings based on its broader perspective.

Overview of the Nutrition Innovation Lab Partnerships

Overall, the Nutrition Innovation Lab engaged in at least 63 partnerships across 17 countries (table 2). Most were with international or U.S.-based organizations, followed by organizations based in Asia and Africa. Partners range from universities and other research institutions to nongovernmental organizations (including international organizations with in-country offices) and hospitals.

Table 2. Nutrition Innovation Lab Partners by Geography (includes informal partnerships)

Organization Type	Other (U.S. or International)	Asia	Africa	Total
USAID nutrition program	2			2
Government (including intergovernmental)	4	3	5	12
University/school	13	3	8	24
Research institution	1	4	5	10
Nongovernmental organization	5	6	3	14
Hospital			1	1
Total	25	16	22	63

Note: We developed this list using the partners included in the introduction section of the Nutrition Innovation Lab's annual reports, which it included from 2014 to 2019.

Partnerships in Malawi

The Government of Malawi has elevated nutrition as a national priority, as illustrated through its National Nutrition Policy and Strategic Plan (2007–2011) and recent National Multi-Sectoral Nutrition Policy (2018–2022). The Nutrition Innovation Lab received buy-in funds in 2012 and an Associate's Award in 2014 for nutrition capacity building to support these policies and the implementation of nutrition interventions. The Nutrition Innovation Lab's three primary activities were the following:

- Building pre-service training capacity by creating a national food composition table.
- Guiding the development and implementation of a dietetics program.
- Providing recommendations on how to update the national medical curriculum with nutrition content.

Activities were implemented in collaboration with at least seven implementing partners and in consultation with a range of stakeholders. Government representatives, including the Ministry of Health Department of Nutrition and HIV/AIDS and the directorate of clinical services were engaged in the

Nutrition Innovation Lab's activities. Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources (LUANAR) and the South Africa Research Council developed the national food composition table, while the Ministry of Health agreed to host the completed table and database. LUANAR and the College of Medicine hosted the dietetics training program; national and international hospitals served as clinical internships sites for students; and the government provided employment opportunities for graduates. The Nutrition Innovation Lab developed a framework for incorporating nutrition education into the medical curriculum and interviewed stakeholders from various disciplines for their input. More information on the implementation and outcomes of these partnerships is below.

Partnerships in Nepal

In Nepal, the Nutrition Innovation Lab's work also supported policy implementation, but adopted a more research-oriented approach. Researchers examined ways to help policymakers overcome nutrition program and implementation challenges while also producing evidence as a global public good. Its work aimed to help the Nepalese government develop its Multi-sectoral Nutrition Plan (2018–2022) by providing evidence linking agriculture to nutrition. Research centered on the following high-level questions:

- In what ways do investments in agriculture achieve significant measurable impacts in nutrition? As a corollary, can pathways to impact be empirically demonstrated?
- How can large-scale programs best incorporate such knowledge into cost-effective multi-sectoral interventions aimed at improving nutrition?
- How can policy and program implementation processes be enhanced to support both nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive actions?

The Nutrition Innovation Lab collaborated with more than 12 partners to implement seven major research programs, some smaller-scale research studies, and dissemination and capacity-building activities. Some of these partnerships were formed using memoranda of understanding (MOU), such as with the Ministry of Health and Population Family Welfare Division (formerly known as the Child Health Division), Institute of Medicine at Tribhuvan University, and the Ministry of Health and Population National Training Center, while others were more informal and did not involve a financial component, such as with the National Planning Commission, Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock, and development partners including United Nations Children's Fund, World Food Programme, and the Food and Agricultural Organization.

An example of larger-scale research activities included the Policy and Science for Health, Agriculture, and Nutrition (PoSHAN) surveys, led by Johns Hopkins University in collaboration with Helen Keller International (HKI) and local researchers at the Valley Research Group and Patan Academy of Health Sciences. The activity engaged existing multi-sectoral programs to complete two multi-year studies, including the PoSHAN policy process and community surveys. They gathered nationally representative data on nutrition status, drivers of malnutrition, the association between agriculture and nutrition, and other important data to inform evidence-based policy and programs. Another activity examined the relationship of aflatoxin, pregnancy outcomes, and early growth and involved partners from Ministry of Health and Population Family Welfare Division, Patan Academy, HKI Nepal, ward and village government stakeholders, and Nepalgunj Medical College. In addition, a sub-study involved collaboration between the Nutrition and the Post-Harvest Loss Innovation Labs.

In addition to research, the Nutrition Innovation Lab provided training to local partner field staff and students at collaborating universities on data collection and analysis. It also worked with partners to hold multiple national survey design and data collection workshops in-country and worked with three universities to develop new public health nutrition degrees and/or curriculum updates. The Nutrition Innovation Lab also leveraged support from local and international partners to disseminate findings

through seven international scientific symposiums in Nepal. These events convened national policymakers and other stakeholders interested in using research on agriculture, nutrition, and health to inform policy and programs. Although topics and formats varied, the symposiums included activities such as oral and poster presentations of findings, policy panels, and student workshops.

Key Findings

Through the document review and semi-structured interviews, we identified key findings and lessons learned about partnership frameworks, implementation, partnership outcomes, and recommendations to answer the learning questions. Our findings largely draw from the experiences of the Nutrition Innovation Lab in Malawi and Nepal; however, we also present some findings about partnerships in other countries based on project documents and interviews with Nutrition Innovation Lab and USAID staff. First, we discuss findings related to how the partnerships were identified and implemented, and factors that facilitated and constrained the partnerships. Second, we present findings related to outcomes of the partnerships, including the types of outcomes that the Nutrition Innovation Lab achieved through partnerships.

Partnership Implementation

Partnership Identification and Development

Strategic partnership identification was crucial to set the groundwork for success. In each country, the Nutrition Innovation Lab started by identifying local and international organizations with an on-the-ground presence. The identification and development of partnerships was an important first step that set a foundation for successful partnerships and implementation in each country. From the beginning, the Nutrition Innovation Lab would first identify what types of partners they would need throughout the course of their work in a country based on their intended objectives and outcomes, bulleted below. As one Nutrition Innovation Lab interviewee said, “We knew what the end result needed to be, so you work backward to make sure you touch all the right bases.”

- **Conducting research and building research capacity** were central goals of the Nutrition Innovation Lab’s work. Capacity building of researchers in-country was both a goal and necessity to complete research. This required partnerships with governments, universities, NGOs, and other innovation labs.
- **Providing credibility and generating buy-in** was generated through partnerships with local academics and government ministries. This was needed to support research and its uptake.
- **Using and applying research findings** to inform intervention design and policy development was the ultimate objective of the Nutrition Innovation Lab’s work. Partners who used findings included USAID Missions, implementing partners, and the private sector.

The Nutrition Innovation Lab engaged partners that could help achieve each of these goals from the beginning, rather than phasing in different types of partners as work progressed. As a Nutrition Innovation Lab interviewee said, “Based on the set of questions that we ask in different countries we try to figure out... who would need to be engaged to operationalize any finding that comes out from this research – from the beginning – and seek out their partnership, from the beginning.”

Once the Nutrition Innovation Lab identified the key players were in a country that they needed to engage, they worked to engage those must-have partners. One Malawi partner interviewee described the utility of this approach, saying that the Nutrition Innovation Lab “identified the major players for things to happen...they would bring all these major players together to have this solid output. I find that important strategic thinking.” It typically began engaging actors and organizations through formal channels facilitated by the government and the USAID Mission, and as needed, would follow up through informal channels, and “use informal channels to cement the formal ones,” according to a Nutrition

Innovation Lab interviewee. The Nutrition Innovation Lab also used a snowballing approach to begin conversations with the actors and institutions it knew and asked them to introduce it other key players.

Beyond the must-have partners, the Nutrition Innovation Lab identified others that could help achieve its goals. As one Nutrition Innovation Lab interviewee said, “The choice comes with other partners,” who were not must-have partners, such as “Implementing partners for intervention trials, for example, or related activities.” Because there were more of these types of partners, Nutrition Innovation Lab staff assessed the fit and any potential reputational, delivery, or financial risks before moving forward. One way that they identified these partners was through a call for proposals. Instead of typical call for a U.S. institution that would partner with country organizations, the Nutrition Innovation Lab called for proposals from country organizations that selected U.S. institutions to work with. This process, while challenging at times to implement, enabled the Nutrition Innovation Lab to engage partners that it did not previously know.

The Nutrition Innovation Lab relied on a range local partners to conduct activities in each country. For example, the AflaCohort study examined the impact of mycotoxin exposure on child growth in Nepal required the Nutrition Innovation Lab to collect breast milk and blood samples at regular intervals from 17 rural communities. This required establishing cold chains to process and store samples. To do so, the Nutrition Innovation Lab developed formal relationships with hospitals and clinics that provided access to laboratories, office space, and nursing staff. Ward and village-level governments provided access to meeting halls and community health volunteers. These partnerships were essential to the extensive data collection activities over the 4-year study period.

One lesson that the Nutrition Innovation Lab learned was that it was fundamental to their success that they engaged several partners, rather than relying on one or two. One Nutrition Innovation Lab interviewee explained that staff spread out as soon as they arrived in Nepal to develop a web of contacts. As a result, they had other actors and partners that they could work with as a back-up plan if someone left her/his position. Staff also worked to ensure that they had institutional engagement that went beyond specific individuals and maintained a range of partnerships because nutrition research is inherently multi-sectoral.

While the Nutrition Innovation Lab sought to engage all types of partners from the beginning, its work and objectives evolved over time. As this happened, it adapted existing and began new partnerships to meet new goals.

Partnerships varied based on the partners and goals. While the Nutrition Innovation Lab formally engaged many partners through MOU and sub-awards, it did not formalize relationships with partners in all cases. It typically found it advantageous to formalize relationships, however, one Nutrition Innovation Lab interviewee noted, there is a danger of over-formalizing partnerships. The Nutrition Innovation Lab found pros and cons to financial relationships with partners. Sub-awards were required for partners that were responsible for managing and conducting data collection. The Nutrition Innovation Lab also supported graduate students in the U.S. and in-country to conduct research. In addition, it provided financial support for some discrete activities, such as funding logistic support and scholarships for exchange visits, with organizations with which it had MOU.

Facilitating Factors

Partnership engagement was integral to day-to-day work. Partnership engagement and management was a routine and expected part of all Nutrition Innovation Lab management field staff roles and responsibilities. Partnerships were considered core to all of the Nutrition Innovation Lab’s work, so it did not silo partner engagement and interactions under a specific staff position. However, for each country, the Nutrition Innovation Lab found it helpful to have a point person at the global level, a local representative, and a principal investigator for each study. These individuals worked with the USAID Missions and were ultimately responsible for ensuring that partnerships were cultivated,

maintained, and successful. The mission staff in Nepal were particularly helpful in introductions to various government contacts, some of whom became important partners in the research and capacity-building agendas.

“One of the most important achievements was not just about the training but also to support us to get established...They were very helpful in making sure the government got on board – this linkage and coordination.”

—Malawi-based partner

Established and communicated clear roles, responsibilities, and objectives. The Nutrition Innovation Lab recognized the importance of establishing clear roles and responsibilities with partners. One partner interviewee in Nepal noted that when implementing complex research studies, it was particularly important to maintain distinct roles and responsibilities between partners. A partner interviewee in Malawi explained that a key strength of the partnership was that the Nutrition Innovation Lab had and communicated clear objectives.

Capacity building helped partners deliver results. The Nutrition Innovation Lab provided capacity building to partners through technical assistance, training, and collaboration. Partners reported that the Nutrition Innovation Lab largely provided high-quality technical assistance and helped build staff capacity, as discussed more in the next section. This capacity building helped partners to be successful in their collaboration with the Nutrition Innovation Lab. For example, A partner interviewee in Malawi said, “We only properly support these things when we [have] capacity.” A partner interviewee in Nepal noted that capacity building helped ensure that it collected high-quality data. Another partner interviewee emphasized the importance of building the capacity of students, stating that, “Every single partnership that I’ve developed under the Innovation Lab that has been successful has been a partnership that was tied to a graduate student.” Students brought partners together to participate on advisory committees, facilitated access to data, and supported field experiences and other activities, serving as the “glue holding everything together.”

Fostered relationships that supported teamwork. Several partners noted that their relationship with the Nutrition Innovation Lab was conducive to collaboration, teamwork, and joint problem-solving. A partner in Malawi characterized its relationship with the Nutrition Innovation Lab as “A highly successful environment.” The Nutrition Innovation Lab team was passionate and engaged. The drive of their staff was important to help move activities despite delays from partner organizations. A partner

Success Story

The Feed the Future Innovation Lab for Post-harvest Loss Reduction and the Nutrition Innovation Lab conducted research examining mycotoxin contamination in Nepal. Although the labs had slightly different research objectives, they collected similar data in some of the same communities. Initially, there was some misunderstanding when trying to reconcile this redundancy, but after discussion, the labs came to an agreement. For overlapping study areas, the Post-harvest Lab agreed to use the Nutrition Innovation Lab’s survey data, which the Nutrition Innovation Lab had already collected. The Post-harvest Lab gathered its own data in the sites that fell outside the Nutrition Innovation Lab’s research scope. Through this agreement, the labs avoided duplication and an additional time burden on study participants. They also collaborated to build the evidence base on agriculture for nutrition, informing Nepal’s multi-sector response to nutrition and food safety issues.

interviewee from Malawi said there is a difference in results when there are staff “who are really keen to deliver irrespective of the challenges.” In addition, several partners said that the Nutrition Innovation Lab staff developed relationships that were based on respect, trust, openness, and transparency. A partner interviewee in Nepal explained that s/he “Developed and maintained mutual trust between [his/her organization] and the Nutrition Innovation Lab, along with other related partners.” One partner in Nepal said it was able to solve problems because the Nutrition Innovation Lab was open, transparent, ready to listen, and respectful in its positions. Another described how the Nutrition Innovation Lab was proactive when challenges arose and provided support to overcome them, whether that required improving communication at a management level, or providing technical assistance or other support to help complete work. In addition, the Nutrition Innovation Lab tried to ensure that partners felt that achievements were collective.

Partners valued information-sharing and networking. The Nutrition Innovation Lab organized formal research meetings with partners. In countries such as Nepal, these were held annually. The Nutrition Innovation Lab also held a large research meeting in Boston that partners across country programs traveled to. Several partner interviewees said these meetings allowed them to share research, learn from others, and network. As one partner interviewee said,

The annual meetings in Nepal provided a venue to allow students and me to present work and engage with a broader community of scholars... and policy makers that I would otherwise not be in contact with... Providing a community and celebrating and validating my work has been part of the partnership that caused me to reinvest my time and energy in a way that [I] would have not done otherwise.

The Nutrition Innovation Lab also linked partners that were not connected previously. In Malawi, for example, the Nutrition Innovation Lab established linkages between government and local university partners. A partner interviewee in Malawi explained that the Nutrition Innovation Lab had a “vertical and horizontal approach,” in bringing together high-level actors and partners that could implement the work. The Nutrition Innovation Lab was also able to facilitate meetings and introduce partners to high-level policymakers, such as the United States Ambassador.

Constraining Factors

Partners did not report significant challenges. The partner interviewees did not report significant partnership challenges other than those beyond their control, such as delays in local research ethics reviews or constraints stemming from the enabling environment. The Nutrition Innovation Lab noted that it had challenges with some types of partners, particularly the private sector, and in some cases, academic institutions and ministries. These partners required significant engagement and identification of supportive individuals within the organizations.

Partnerships and relationships were resource intensive. The Nutrition Innovation Lab reported having to invest a significant amount of time to develop and maintain partnerships, which had budget implications that USAID did not always acknowledge. As one Nutrition Innovation Lab interviewee quipped, “Time for partnership is kind of an open-ended black hole and we just accept that we have to do it.” While the Nutrition Innovation Lab recognized the time required to develop partnerships and the value in doing so, the investment required was challenging at times. Nutrition Innovation Lab staff traveled extensively both to establish and implement partnerships. In addition, establishing partnerships for research studies was a long-term endeavor.

Differing perspectives and priorities posed challenges. While this was only reported in a minority of cases, it was a challenge when partners had different perspectives and understanding of their roles and objectives. In some cases, these differences resulted from personality or other individual factors; in others, it was due to differences in disciplinary or sector backgrounds. For instance, one partner interviewee noted that some challenges and misunderstandings about roles and responsibilities

derived from partners coming from different fields, like agriculture and nutrition, which resulted in a bit of a conflict. In other cases, partners simply had unequal funding amounts from USAID or competing priorities that took precedent over work with the Nutrition Innovation Lab. There was also a misunderstanding about roles between innovation labs that needed to be (and was) resolved to avoid overlap of data collection.

Funding delays constrained partners' implementation. USAID delays in Nutrition Innovation Lab funding led to delays in partner funding, which delayed activities when partners did not have enough money to conduct them. Larger organizations based in the United States were able to continue working through funding delays, but in-country partners were typically not. The timing for receiving funding from USAID on an annual basis was also uncertain, so partners did not know when to expect the funds or how long to plan for funding gaps.

Communication could be a challenge. While partner interviewees largely reported that they had good communication with the Nutrition Innovation Lab, there were some communication constraints. It was challenging to maintain full communication with Nutrition Innovation Lab staff based in the United States. One partner in Nepal described how it tried to maintain communication, but sometimes shared information during in-person meetings that was new or unexpected. In some cases, connectivity problems constrained cross-country communication as well.

Partnership Outcomes

Partnerships were vital to all of the Nutrition Innovation Lab's outcomes. Partnerships were critical for meeting the Nutrition Innovation Lab's immediate capacity building and research objectives as well as ensuring the long-term impact of activities through the uptake of findings. An interviewee from the Nutrition Innovation Lab stated, "I can't think of one [outcome] that wasn't done through partnership." S/he reiterated that "The entire endeavor was based on partnership." The Nutrition Innovation Lab did not differentiate outcomes or achievements by partners, as USAID did not request this disaggregation. Many participants assessed the success of partnerships based on the overall outcomes of their research and capacity-building activities, citing indicators such as the number of research publications, articles, presentations prepared, and people trained. We do not detail the many achievements of the Nutrition Innovation Lab here, but below we summarize other results that interviewees suggested relied on partnerships.

Strengthened local capacity. Most of the Nutrition Innovation Lab's activities included a capacity-building component, even if it was not the primary objective. Interviewees said that capacity building was both a necessary input and key outcome of the Nutrition Innovation Lab's successful partnerships. It was also deemed critical to sustained institutional and individual capacity to continue key activities (research, teaching, laboratory work, and policymaking) beyond the life of the innovation lab projects. For example, partners in Nepal did not have expertise required to conduct the complex longitudinal research activities, so the Nutrition Innovation Lab provided training to field staff in statistical analysis, survey methods, and research ethics. This build the skills of partner organizations while improving the quality of research. Similarly, the Nutrition Innovation Lab helped build the scope and rigor of the Nepal Health Research Committee's standards in conducting institutional reviews of human subjects' research. The Nutrition Innovation Lab also emphasized training for postgraduate students who contributed vital human resources to the Nutrition Innovation Lab's research activities while also providing development opportunities for young nutrition and research professionals. Through these activities, the Nutrition Innovation Lab produced in-country and U.S.-based graduate students who continue to work in food security and nutrition.

Fostered lasting relationships between and among partners. Workshops, annual symposiums, and other activities supported networking between partners. One partner interviewee asserted that, "As a growing leader and scientist in this country, linkages are important." Efforts linking local partners

and governments were perceived as an important, long-term outcome of the Nutrition Innovation Lab's programs.

Facilitated uptake of research results to influence programs and policy. Partnerships with local research institutions, academics, implementing partners were necessary to implement activities and facilitated research uptake and dissemination. They played a role by directly applying relevant findings to their programs in Nepal and Malawi. For example, in Nepal, a partner interviewee reported that the partner incorporated research findings into its work on post-harvest loss, including by supporting

“[The study] was an incredible experience for all of us. Because we worked through it all and [came] out with interesting new findings. There was a sense that we did something really worthwhile and beneficial.”

—Nepal-based partner

adoption of improved food-drying technology. Local partners were also key to the Nutrition Innovation Lab's policy outcomes because local actors “are also the ones who are involved and engaged in the local government...they are the ones who will present findings to the local government. They are the ones who convince and advocate to their government for action.”

The Nutrition Innovation Lab saw the translation of research findings into policy as the most important outcome of its work. All interviewees generally felt that the Nutrition Innovation Lab was successful at influencing policy, although it could not always directly link its research to policy change. One USAID interviewee described how partnership and collaboration contributed to these achievements by describing a workshop in Nepal to present findings of the mycotoxin research and collaboration activities. The Nutrition Innovation Lab convened a diverse range of local actors but largely targeted government stakeholders for this event, including high-level representatives from Ministries of Agriculture, Health, Finance, and the strategic planning committee. The USAID interviewee was impressed by policymakers' involvement. “The level of attendance and commitment from attendees to stay throughout the whole [workshop], even at the high level, you don't usually see that.” Other interviewees described specific policy outcomes of the Nutrition Innovation Lab's work. For example, the Government of Malawi created 27 dietician positions at hospitals across the country as a result of the dietetics training program, and the Government of Nepal and partners are planning to develop food safety action plans based on the Afla Cohort study's findings.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, USAID Advancing Nutrition developed recommendations to improve the effectiveness of partnerships for research. While these recommendations may not be specific to the nutrition sector, they are applicable to partnerships operating in multi-sectoral nutrition environments.

- **Select partners strategically.** Clearly defining what partnering will do to achieve desired results helps to identify partners that will be strategic. Identifying the partner capacities that will be useful, and how each will contribute to project outcomes should take place before identifying potential partners. Though this might take more time and planning at the outset or require building new relationships, it will maximize the benefits of partnering in the long run.
- **Have multiple types of partners and tailor arrangements.** Categorizing types of partnerships is strategic and important for success. Determining, for example, that you need some partners to help conduct the work, others to lend credibility and generate buy-in, and

others to test and apply findings will help you decide on potential partners and how each partnership should be constructed. Having the right mix of partners at the right times will help to achieve outcomes. Some partners may require formal MOU for long-term partnering, while others might only require regular communication. Similarly, some might require financial support, while others only the investment of time.

- **Develop institutional and alternate partnerships.** Given the natural turnover that occurs at organizations over the life of a program, it is important to develop mechanisms to ensure partnerships and programs extend beyond a specific individual. This includes establishing relationships with several individuals at each organization and developing connections with “backup partners” in case a partnership with one organization falters.
- **Establish clear reasons for partnerships, and then roles and responsibilities.** It is vital that partners have a clear understanding of their respective roles and responsibilities. This not only needs to be established up front but reinforced or revisited as partnerships progress. To ensure that partners from different sectors or disciplinary backgrounds have the same understanding of their roles, ensure a common understanding of research terminology given their different use across disciplines.
- **Monitor partnership processes and outcomes.** Defining what a successful partnership looks like and how to monitor its outputs and outcomes will help with reporting and adaptive management. Designing and referencing appropriate intermediate indicators can inform when program adjustments may be needed and will build accountability for reaching goals. It will also highlight which components of partnering are critical for success and which may be barriers. Including process indicators to monitor partnership development activities, such as meetings, conferences, and exchange visits, will make it more likely that these activities will be prioritized and adapted.
- **Allocate time and budget to developing and monitoring partnerships.** The process of partnering takes time and other resources. As such, ensuring that this is built into work plans and scopes of work is important to enable successful partnerships. Establishing new partnerships requires technical and operational time and money to build relationships, comply with processes and regulations, define goals, develop work plans, build capacity, and develop communications protocols. Maintaining and deepening partnerships can also be supported through specific activities that require funding, such as meetings, conferences, and exchange visits. If these are built into work plans, successful outcomes within realistic timeframes are more likely.
- **Foster information-sharing and networking between partners.** Using opportunities to build relationships between partners can help to sustain outcomes as the partners create their own networks, strengthen capacities, and generate new ways of working together even after the originally defined partnership ends. Opportunities for face-to-face events on a regular (even annual) basis was noted as an ideal way to strengthen collaboration and networks.
- **Draw in high-level policymakers.** Engage policymakers from the beginning by determining what type of buy-in your project needs and what benefits policymakers can provide. This will help establish the credibility of the research, attract other partners and stakeholders, increase dissemination and uptake of findings, and help to get the work done. Though these policymakers may not be formal or long-term partners, engaging them from the beginning will help you meet your goals and the needs of the people you serve.



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