

Locally Led Development: Partnering for Improved Nutrition

Lessons from Odisha, India

Introduction

USAID Advancing Nutrition conducted a learning activity with a U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)-funded project in India: Scaling Innovative, Nutrition-Sensitive Fisheries Technologies and Integrated Approaches through Partnerships in Odisha, India (hereafter called “the project”). We aimed to capture insights from the project’s experiences partnering to improve food security and nutrition outcomes in Odisha State. The project, implemented by WorldFish, collaborated with the Fisheries and Animal Resource Development Department (F&ARD) and the Women and Child Development & Mission Shakti Department (WCD&MS) of the Government of Odisha; the Micro, Small, & Medium Enterprises (MSME) Department; Women’s Self-Help Groups (WSHG); and other stakeholders to implement nutrition-sensitive aquaculture and fisheries interventions.



Children eating a hot cooked meal as part of an Integrated Child Development Services program. Credit: WorldFish.

USAID recognizes the importance of working with government and other local partners to effectively reach vulnerable populations. This project provides an example of how a USAID-funded project can successfully work with local actors to scale up interventions. This brief summarizes the project’s lessons learned and challenges related to its collaboration with the Government of Odisha and WSHG to help USAID and other implementing partners understand what facilitated this project’s success. We outline recommendations for USAID staff and implementing partners on how to create and foster partnerships with local governments, systems, and structures to support project effectiveness and sustainability.

Learning Questions

We aimed to answer three learning questions:

- What factors contributed to the successful collaboration between the project and the Government of Odisha?
- What factors contributed to successful engagement with WSHG?

- What lessons learned and recommendations can be drawn for USAID Missions and implementing partners on how to align and work with local systems and structures, including government social safety-net programs?

Methods

To answer the learning questions, we reviewed project reports and completed key informant interviews to understand how WorldFish developed and maintained partnerships to implement successful activities. This included semi-structured interviews with seven key informants, including representatives from WorldFish, the Central Institute of Fisheries Technology (ICAR-CIFT), F&ARD, and USAID (see table 1). We were unable to complete interviews with several government partners due to their availability and time constraints in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. We used thematic analysis to distill key insights from the interviews, including successes, challenges, outcomes, and recommendations.

Table 1. Interview Sample

Respondent Group	Number of Key Informants
USAID	1
WorldFish	4
F&ARD	1
ICAR-CIFT	1
Total	7

Background

The USAID project was implemented from October 2017 to March 2021 and received \$1.12 million in funding. Its primary goal was “to improve food and nutrition security in the Indian state of Odisha through increasing availability, accessibility and consumption of fish and fish products.”¹ Previously, WorldFish had signed a memorandum of agreement (MOA) with the F&ARD to provide support in implementing the Odisha Fisheries Policy, 2015, over a period of six years (July 2016–March 2022). F&ARD awarded WorldFish \$3.2 million for the collaborative project. Although the two projects shared many objectives, the initial MOA primarily focused on increasing fish production and self-sufficiency in Odisha, whereas the USAID-supported project placed greater emphasis on improving nutrition through fish accessibility and consumption, and promotion of nutrition-sensitive aquaculture.

Availability

After launch, the project’s initial activities included piloting several nutrition-sensitive production technologies to increase the availability, accessibility, and consumption of nutrient-rich fish and vegetables. WorldFish collaborated closely with F&ARD, WCD&MS, and several other private and public organizations to introduce carp-mola polyculture, coupled with vegetable and orange-fleshed sweet potato production, to improve availability of these foods. This involved training and organizing individual farmers as well as WSHG to apply these techniques in homestead and community-leased ponds. These activities began in three districts of Odisha and were scaled up to include five districts over the course of the project.

¹ Mohan, Chadag Vishnumurthy. 2018. Scaling Nutrition-sensitive Fisheries Technologies and Integrated Approaches through Partnership in Odisha: USAID IPP-Funded Project (October 2017–September 2020): Annual Report. Penang, Malaysia: WorldFish.

Accessibility

Under its goal of increasing accessibility, the project partnered with private-sector actors and ICAR-CIFT to develop and market fish-based products and collaborated with WSHG to process fish using polyhouse solar dryers. These activities started in six coastal districts of Odisha.

Consumption

Recognizing the potential of fish-based products to contribute to the nutritional quality of diets of pregnant women, lactating mothers, adolescent girls, and children, the project implemented an awareness campaign to promote consumption of these products during the first 1,000 days. Fish-based products were successfully introduced in several feeding programs in schools and other public and private institutions as a source of protein and micronutrients. Given the success of these initial trials, the project is now conducting a six-month pilot with WCD&MS to test adding fish-based products in the Supplemental Nutrition Program under Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS). Dried-fish powder has been introduced into the “Hot Cooked Meal” at 50 Anganwadi centers,² involving 1,200 children ages 3 to 6. Dried small-fish packets are also being distributed to 800 pregnant and lactating women and adolescent girls ages 16–18 through the “Take Home Ration.” The project also developed and implemented social and behavior change communication materials to improve the public’s acceptability and consumption of fish products.

Key Findings

The project partnered with a broad array of government, private sector, and research organizations to implement activities. From the outset, the project aimed to not only implement, but also scale up nutrition-sensitive fisheries technologies. Partnering with the government and WSHG was critical to the project’s strategic approach. With their broad resources and networks, these partners enabled the project to better reach vulnerable populations and scale up project activities to all 30 districts of the state.

Because of the essential role of the government and WSHG in facilitating the project’s success, these partnerships are the focus of this report, not those with the private sector or other stakeholders. Below we highlight activities that involved collaboration between the project, the Government of Odisha, and WSHG, highlighting factors that either facilitated or challenged the implementation of these partnerships.

Partnerships with the Government of Odisha

The project’s primary partner was the F&ARD, which implemented the project with WorldFish. As shown in table 2, the project also partnered with other departments that are part of the Government of Odisha, including the WCD&MS and MSME. The WCD&MS in turn sponsors and manages the WSHG.

² Rural community centers run by the ICDS that provide nutrition, health care, and childcare services.

Table 2. Areas of Collaboration

Activity	Key Government Partners
Implementing innovative nutrition-sensitive aquaculture production technologies (carp-mola polyculture)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • F&ARD • WCD&MS • Panchayati Raj & Drinking Water Department, Government of Odisha
Quality dried-fish production using polyhouse solar fish dryers by WSHG	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • F&ARD • WCD&MS • Odisha Rural Development and Marketing Society, Government of Odisha • MSME • ICAR-CIFT
Linkages with institutional feeding programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WCD&MS • Social Security and Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities Department, Government of Odisha • ICAR-CIFT

Factors That Facilitated Collaboration

Below we outline several factors that facilitated collaboration between WorldFish and the government.

Leveraged Existing Institutional Relationships

One of the primary factors for success cited by interviewees was the longstanding, strong relationship between WorldFish and the Government of Odisha. Before the project began, WorldFish had an MOA with F&ARD to provide technical assistance for implementation of the Odisha Fisheries Policy, focusing on sustainable production systems and technologies. “One of the main advantages for us was when we bid for the USAID [India Partnerships Program] IPP project, at that time we were already embedded within...the Government of Odisha, only within the Department of Fisheries,” as one interviewee described it. Several interviewees said that USAID co-designed and funded this project because of this existing relationship. Indeed, this project built directly on the previous project. As an interviewee said, “When we got the USAID project, this came in very nicely for us and we partnered very strongly with the existing ongoing Department of Fisheries project, and that’s how it helped us to slowly take up this activity.”

Hired Staff with Relevant Networks and Multi-Sectoral Expertise

The project also built an effective foundation for partnerships by recruiting staff who already had a deep understanding of government priorities and processes, including staff who had previously worked directly for the government. A WorldFish staff member said the following:

“Hiring somebody who has already been integrated in nutrition programs and policy development and knows what priorities are being pushed at what time, and who to make appointments with, and when budgets might be coming up, all of that has been key in navigating the different departments that we’ve worked with—having someone who is already familiar to them.”

Another staff member said that by developing a multidisciplinary team, including staff with experience in both nutrition and fisheries, the project was able to more effectively facilitate cross-sectoral collaboration within the government. “Bureaucratic and scientific languages are different—we need to bridge that gap. So, I also learned how to speak with bureaucrats, how to speak with other department

staff, and how to speak with the simplest language,” a project staff member said. WorldFish sought out staff not only with specific expertise, but also people who could effectively relate technical concepts to government counterparts.

Aligned with Existing Government Priorities

The project first focused on leveraging existing activities being implemented by WorldFish and F&ARD. The new activities it introduced were also in line with the priorities of the national and state governments, particularly their nutrition commitments. The National Nutrition Strategy, launched in 2017, showed renewed government focus on undernutrition.³ In 2018, the government launched a National Nutrition Mission, aiming to improve nutritional outcomes for children, pregnant and lactating women, emphasizing the need to improve “convergences,” or collaboration between sectors.⁴ Nutrition was also a priority area for the Government of Odisha, as the state has one of the highest portions of undernourished women (41 percent) in India, and 20 percent of children in Odisha are wasted.⁵ One interviewee said that the Government of Odisha aimed to work across government departments to achieve strategic priorities related to nutrition and food security but that “they were not very clear how these departments can come together but our project could show them a model.” The project provided an opportunity and support to bring these sectors together, an area of interest and growing priority for the state government.

Aligned with Existing Government Activities and Intentionally Designed Programs for Government Scale-Up

Although the project did bring a new emphasis on linking nutrition and fisheries priorities, interviews described how the project focused on providing technical assistance and scaling up the government's own activities versus developing their own or implementing through project-led structures.

“We did not introduce any intervention that was outside of the programs of the department. We made only the operations of the department better, more efficient, more science-based, and tried to assist them through awareness and capacity building. We helped them to make their schemes better... This process of embedding, integrating, and implementing their own schemes—we thought it was more sustainable.” —Project staff member

The project introduced and tested several new activities but worked with the government for scale-up and implementation. For example, the project initiated activities to produce orange-fleshed sweet potato and other vegetables alongside carp-mola polyculture and to engage WSHG in production. It also pilot-tested the use of low-cost solar dryers for hygienic drying of fish and the feasibility of adding fish-based products to institutional feeding programs. Although the project initiated these new activities, they were implemented at scale through the government. For example, the project initially supported 20 WSHG to initiate carp-mola polyculture activities, but once the project demonstrated the effectiveness of this partnership, the government quickly expanded the activity to include 6,000 WSHG over three years. The project introduced carp-mola in 700 homestead ponds, and the government added an additional 10,000 per year; similarly, the project supported 10 WSHG to use low-cost solar dryers, and the government scaled this up to include 150 groups over three years. This approach to implementation was built into the project from the design stage, as further described below. USAID saw this project as an opportunity to work with the government to have a much larger impact with limited resources. “From the get-go, the project was about scaling through partnerships,” one interviewee said.

³ NITI Aayog. 2017. *Nourishing India: National Nutrition Strategy*, Government of India. New Delhi, NITI Aayog.

⁴ NITI Aayog. n.d. “POSHAN Abhiyaan.” *NITI Aayog*. Accessed April 16, 2021. <http://niti.gov.in/poshan-abhiyaan>.

⁵ NITI Aayog 2017.

Used Existing Evidence and Awareness Raising to Build Support for Activities

WorldFish leveraged existing evidence from projects in other countries to convince government officials about the feasibility and benefits of small-fish production and to raise awareness about the nutritional importance of fish. Sharing evidence was particularly important because the project was the first major initiative to leverage fish production and marketing to support improved nutrition outcomes in India. Several interviewees said that government officials were initially concerned that small carp-mola production would interfere with the production of other commercial fish. They were also apprehensive about the acceptability of fish products in their communities. For example, some interviewees said fish were perceived as prone to spoilage or contaminated with pathogens. Dried-fish products are seen as particularly unhygienic and unsafe due to the poor conditions under which they are normally dried.



Solar drying racks used by the Women's Self-Help Groups to hygienically dry small fish. Credit: WorldFish.

To overcome these barriers, the project facilitated a number of events to build government officials' awareness on how these activities had been effectively implemented in similar contexts. For example, a workshop in 2019, "Maximizing Nutritional Outcomes in Odisha through Fish," brought together senior government officials from F&ARD, WCD&MS, Odisha Livelihood Mission, and others to visit a successful example of a mola-carp polyculture and nutrition project in Bangladesh as well as a visit to a community feeding program in Cambodia and WorldFish headquarters in Malaysia. A staff member said that this cross-country exposure visit "boosted their confidence on [the] inclusion of fish in the first 1,000 days of life." In particular, this sensitization activity convinced a key government official, who was later instrumental in securing approval for pilots. The project also held regular meetings and follow-ups to further make the case for their activities with key government officials. To build support for the feeding program activities, a staff member described how the project staff "bombarded [government officials] with scientific evidence—all the peer reviewed evidence by us and evidence by scientists anywhere in the world—we provided them so much literature to show how many African countries and other places are using fish in their national nutrition agendas." The project also prepared a brief on the benefits of fish for nutrition and shared it with senior officials in the fisheries and nutrition sectors. Over time, these technical interactions "helped to speed up the implementation process through stronger collaboration," as one project staff member said.

Used Demonstration Pilot to Generate Evidence of Feasibility and Acceptability

The project used a small trial to test whether including small fish in institutional feeding programs was acceptable to children and whether the fish would meet food safety standards. The project received support from the District Administration, WCD&MS, and the Social Security and Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities Department (SSEPD) to incorporate small fish into meals served to children

through Child Care Institutions and Special Schools.⁶ The trial demonstrated that small fish were accepted by the children, a finding which supported the feasibility of a larger pilot. As one staff member said, the “project report [from the demonstration] formed strong evidence that the fish can be acceptable by children. This became a strong precedent for the WCD&MS to pilot the scale oriented fish inclusion program in the [Integrated Child Development Services] ICDS Supplementary Nutrition Program with [a] 1,000 days approach.” The project used the buy-in generated by this trial to establish a pilot with WCD&MS, which will include dried small fish and fish-based products in the Supplementary Nutrition Program in ICDS Anganwadi Centers (child daycare centers).

Designed Project Operations with Partnership in Mind

The project made operations and staffing decisions intentionally to support their collaboration with the government. The project staff were co-located and embedded with F&ARD staff. WorldFish staff negotiated workspace in the office of the Directorate of Fisheries because they recognized that physical proximity and access was essential for regular and seamless communication: “Many projects set up their own office and sit somewhere outside, but we wanted, right from the beginning, to be embedded with the Department of Fisheries... Working hand-in-hand with the department, that made a big difference,” a staff member said. Another staff member described how other government departments started to take notice of the effectiveness of this approach: “Other departments started...seeing that this is more beneficial than an external agency sitting outside.” In these close working relationships, project staff spent most of their time finding ways to support government counterparts. “Our presence there was more like holding the hand of department staff on a day-to-day basis,” one project staff member said. Several interviewees said WorldFish went “above and beyond,” working extra hours to draft presentations, collect data, and generally surpass project requirements to solidify their relationship. USAID also provided WorldFish with the flexibility to engage with the government as needed to develop and maintain the partnerships.

Fostering Close Relationships through Co-Location

“WorldFish was directly sitting within the Office of the Directorate of Fisheries. That was quite helpful because they were not seen as a separate entity...there was seamless integration between the government and WorldFish stakeholders.” —Government official

Collaboration Challenges

Overall, interviewees did not cite significant challenges between the project and government partners. This may be because the project’s approach focused on “first adjust[ing] to [the government],” as one interviewee said. Stakeholders did describe some general difficulties with implementing activities in alignment with government processes, including the significant amount of time required to build and sustain effective partnerships. A project staff member said, “It is initially very slow, very frustrating.” It took time to understand government personalities, priorities, explain the project, and gain government buy-in. “It took around two years to lay a strong foundation to a good working relationship with WCD&MS,” another said.

Staff sometimes had difficulty staying focused on project objectives because they would get involved in other government initiatives. One interviewee explained that their close collaboration with the government was further complicated by frequent staff turnover and transfers. Each time this occurred, they would need to restart with introducing the project and working to gain support from the newly

⁶ This included the Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences in Bhubaneswar, a free boarding school for 27,000 tribal children run by a local trust, which included the fish powder and whole dried fish in the midday meal.

appointed individual. Overall, however, project staff were convinced that this slow, deliberative approach was worth the time and investment:

“We should not think it as a loss of our time, a waste of time mingling with the government officers. It is very important for us that they also have very good grassroots understanding...They have a 360-degree view of the problem...The social engineering part of it, they can do it much better. We need to integrate with the government.” –project staff member

Partnerships with WSHG

The project also partnered with WSHG, which are existing groups important to social development in India. They address poverty and empower women by supporting them to undertake agriculture practices, including aquaculture using micro credit facilities. The Government of Odisha supports about 600,000 WSHG, with approximately seven million female members, for socioeconomic and women’s empowerment activities at the village level. Within the government, WCD&MS promotes and supports the groups, which enables them to access financial assistance, undertake capacity strengthening, and strengthen market linkages to enhance their livelihoods and incomes.

Partnerships with WSHG provided an opportunity to further the nutritional objectives of the project, while also providing the women with financial assistance, a livelihood, and income-earning opportunities in the fisheries sector. The government also recognized this activity as an opportunity to expand the WSHG’s role in the fisheries sector as part of advancing government objectives of increased food security and self-sufficiency in fish production. The project partnered with existing WSHG to implement carp-mola polyculture activities in community ponds and initiate activities to process and package the fish-based products used to supply the feeding programs.



Members from the Women’s Self-Help Groups weighing fish produced as part of the carp-mola polyculture activity. Credit: WorldFish.

Factors That Facilitated Collaboration

Below we outline several factors that facilitated collaboration between WorldFish and WSHG.

Used Awareness-Building Activities to Generate Interest and Participation

Project staff said that awareness-building activities were critical to the WSHG involvement in the project. For example, many women already were already participating in fish-drying activities at home with their families using traditional methods. To make the case for participating in the food processing activities with the project, project staff and government partners explained the benefits of organizing as WSHG, including the opportunity to take advantage of the government local bank-credit linkages. To build interest in the project activities, the project also adopted a cluster approach, implementing the food processing activities with 10 WSHG across six districts. Implementing the activities across different districts provided an opportunity to demonstrate and spread awareness of the project’s activities to other WSHG and generate additional interest. Additionally, as described by a project staff member, although the project formally partnered only with WSHG, the women actively engaged their families in their activities, expanding the project’s reach and participation within the community.

Coordinated Actors to Support WSHG Participation

Interviewees said that the idea for the activities with the WSHG came from the government, but that the project played a “catalytic role in initiating an interdepartmental convergence scheme between three departments,” to support these activities, including bringing together F&ARD, WCD&MS, and the Panchayati Raj & Drinking Water Department.

WCD&MS linked the project to the WSHG, F&ARD supported the technical fisheries aspects of the activity, and the Panchayati Raj & Drinking Water Department was responsible for leasing community ponds to the WSHG for the



Women using net to catch fish produced as part of the carp-mola polyculture activity. Credit: WorldFish.

polyculture activities. The project facilitated a number of workshops with government and WSHG to discuss the linkages between small-fish consumption and human nutrition, illustrating how they could collaborate to achieve shared interests. “In the process of implementation, the Directorate of Mission Shakti under WCD&MS Department appreciated WorldFish’s role, and the people-to-people contacts we developed, which led to goodwill,” one project staff member said.

The project adopted a similar approach to work across several government partners to implement the fish solar-drying activities. The project first worked with the WCD&MS to identify suitable WSHG for piloting the production of hygienic solar-dried fish. Interviewees said the drying activities were particularly challenging because of the numerous skills required to process, market, certify the products, and coordinate logistics from production to marketing. One way the project worked to overcome these challenges was by identifying another government partner, ICAR-CIFT, to provide training in drying techniques and support the fabrication and installation of solar dryers. To further support coordination between activity components, the Odisha Rural Development and Marketing Society (ORDMS) used their resources and network to provide logistical support in linking the fish production activities to the WSHG engaged in processing.⁷

In 2020, WorldFish signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the WCD&MS and agreed to collaborate in the scaling up of nutrition-sensitive fish agri-food systems in the state of Odisha and training and empowering WSHGs in nutrition-sensitive fish farming and fish processing. The collaboration also plans to connect the women’s processing activities and the ICDS’s Hot Cooked Meal programs to supply processed fish for their midday meals. In this way, the project helped forge connections between the WSHG and government departments to support successful implementation.

Aligned with Existing Roles and Activities

The project worked within local structures to establish their partnership with the WSHG. As WCD&MS manages the WSHG, the project worked through them to engage with the women, rather than engaging with them independently. WCD&MS was already managing WSHG that served different

⁷ The MSME Department ultimately decided to scale up the food processing activities with WSHG under the Government of Odisha’s “One District One Product” scheme, with 150 solar driers over three years.

roles within the ICDS program, and the project recognized an opportunity to expand on this existing collaboration. As one staff member explained, “WSHG are already part of the supply chain for the...take-home ration and the school for lunch program,” playing a role in packing and distributing food. A government official further explained that, “[WSHG] were a stakeholder when we started increasing the nutrition component of the fisheries program...They were a natural group to actually work with.”

Implemented Activities in Line with Existing Policies

The project recognized an opportunity to leverage local policy in support of the production activity with the WSHG. Several interviewees noted that the community pond activity with WSHG was feasible because of a change in Panchayati Raj & Drinking Water Department policy that made it possible to lease the community ponds (Gram Panchayat Tanks, as locally called) to the WSHGs on a priority basis. This policy change did not arise from the project, but it was an important enabling policy for the activity.

Creating Linkages for Interdepartmental Convergence and Amplified Impact

“The fisheries department is very small, one of the smallest departments in the state...What we learned is that if we join with the bigger departments, our reach can be so impactful and vast and we can achieve these things very speedily. Otherwise, one department alone cannot do these things. And, for example, USAID projects, we stand alone—we cannot work like this... it is impossible for us or any donor for that matter to achieve [our successes] that quickly.” —Project staff member

Collaboration Challenges

Interviewees reported that the project faced few challenges in collaborating with the WSHG or WCD&MS. The interviews did report some minor difficulties, mainly related to women’s initial lack of interest in fish production and processing activities. One interviewee noted that women had different levels of interest regarding fish production, and women typically were not involved in certain aspects of production, including clearing ponds and harvesting fish. Another noted that it was challenging to convince women to engage in hygienic fish-drying activities, even though there were already many women involved in fish processing in Odisha. Fish processing had previously been an activity women conducted individually at home. They did not engage in any marketing or branding and had little economic incentive to organize as a group to produce a higher-quality product because the wholesale market did not pay for higher quality.

To overcome these challenges, the project sought out partnerships with the government and other stakeholders. For example, ICAR-CIFT, a national research agency, offered guidance on technology for fish drying, the private sector provided assistance in helping the WSHG collectively market and brand their products, and the WCD&MS aims to provide a market for the high-quality dried fish by supplying the feeding programs at ICDS Anganwadi child centers throughout Odisha State.

Partnership Outcomes

The partnerships between the project and the Government of Odisha and WSHG led to several successful outcomes beyond the direct benefits to project participants.

Scale-Up

The project successfully carried out several demonstration pilots that showed the acceptability and feasibility of working with WSHG to produce small fish in community ponds, hygienically dry the small fish using solar dryers, and include small fish in institutional feeding programs. These successful demonstration pilots led to a five-year MOU (extending beyond the life of the project) between WorldFish and WCD&MS to implement large-scale pilots, including the following additional activities:

- Piloting inclusion of small fish in the Supplementary Nutrition Program in 50 ICDS Anganwadi Centers in Mayurbhanj District for a period of 6 months is ongoing (April – Sept 2021) using

products from ICAR-CIFT. Dried-fish powder will be included in children’s daily Hot Cooked Meal and dried small fish will be included in the Take-Home Ration for pregnant and lactating women and adolescent girls.

- Piloting carp-mola polyculture in more than 700 backyard tanks and 24 community tanks.
- Piloting an activity to install 10 solar dryers and train 10 WSHG in hygienic solar drying of fish.

Sustainability

WorldFish will continue to work with the government as a member of the Odisha State Nutrition Secretariat for its Technical Expert Advisory Group on Nutrition. In this role, they will continue to advise the government and be a partner to support new initiatives. F&ARD and MSME will promote use of at least 150 dryers over three years (extending beyond the life of the project). In addition, as noted above, the activities with the WSHG and the institutional feeding programs will continue in partnership with WCD&MS without USAID funding.

Embedding Sustainability through Government Collaboration

“My main takeaway is that the government is very powerful and its strength is enormous in terms of reaching out to the people. Earlier I was working with other programs...where nobody was there to sustain the project. Today, what is happening with this program is that we are integrated, we are sitting inside the departments, inside the government. What is happening is that we are bringing softer ideas to the government and sowing [them] in their minds. Initially it is very slow, very frustrating, we need a lot of patience to get it done. Once it is done and wanted by [the government], it goes to all districts, all levels of the government in no time. It’s like wildfire.” —Project staff member

Recommendations

Based on our findings, we propose several recommendations for USAID and implementing partners in on how to align and work with local governments, systems, and structures to improve nutrition (table 3). These are all recommendations that should initially be considered and planned for in the initial design phases to ensure that they are enabled by the project plan, teams, budgets, timelines, and expected results.

Table 3. Recommendations and Project Examples

Recommendation	Project Example
<p>1. Align with and facilitate achievement of government nutrition priorities. As a prerequisite, projects should align with existing government nutrition priorities and be designed by USAID and implementing partners to help achieve specific national or subnational nutrition priorities. Projects may also want to identify nutrition priorities or targets that are new or most pressing to capitalize on existing government commitment and buy-in.</p>	<p>The project both aligned with renewed national government commitment to address undernutrition and the state government’s aim to address undernutrition and food insecurity through interdepartmental cooperation and convergence. In this way, WorldFish both aligned with a government priority that was garnering attention and aligned with how the government wanted to address this priority.</p>
<p>2. Identify and design interventions around existing entry points. In line with USAID’s guidance on working through local systems and actors, projects should identify existing structures, actors, and organizations to work through as entry points, and when possible, identify ways to implement new interventions or innovations that are in line with existing roles and responsibilities. This does not mean simply that a project should identify where they think their project aligns with existing structures, but they should identify those entry points and opportunities through co-creation processes with the government.</p>	<p>WorldFish identified existing entry points with the government and WSHG to implement activities. While they implemented new activities and innovations through the project and fostered collaboration between government departments, the activities were in line with the government’s and WSHG’s current roles, responsibilities, and functions.</p>
<p>3. Identify and take advantage of opportunities for integration with local actors. Projects should strategically identify the types of collaboration, along a spectrum from networking, to coordination, to integration, that are best suited for different local partners and the goals of working with them. When it is strategic, identify ways to integrate implementation with local partners to ensure co-ownership and support sustainability.</p>	<p>WorldFish did not simply collaborate with the government through joint planning and routine meetings, but they co-located and embedded staff in government offices. Similarly, they did not directly implement interventions themselves, but provided technical assistance to the government, which carried out the implementation. This approach facilitated scale-up and sustainability of the interventions.</p>
<p>4. Identify and partner with local actors, from the beginning, who can take to scale successful interventions. For interventions that need to continue to be implemented after the project period, identify and partner with appropriate local actors who can scale up successful interventions.</p>	<p>For pilot interventions, WorldFish partnered with government departments that were able to then directly fund and implement interventions at greater scale after successful pilot periods.</p>

Recommendation	Project Example
<p>5. Generate and share evidence needed to support new interventions. Projects should understand what local actors think of proposed interventions or innovations, and what types of evidence they need to better understand and buy-in to the solutions. Projects should then share existing evidence as applicable and generate evidence in the local context as needed through trials or pilots.</p>	<p>WorldFish shared existing evidence from projects in other countries to demonstrate the feasibility and effectiveness of small-fish production and the nutritional importance of small fish to address government officials' concerns. They also generated evidence in the local context for the acceptability of small fish among children through an initial trial to address government concerns about including fish in school feeding programs. In this way, they garnered support from champions within the government, which helped them successfully implement and scale up activities.</p>
<p>6. Build in sufficient time and resources to establish and maintain strong relationships with local actors. It takes time—often several years—to build strong relationships with local actors and organizations. USAID and implementing partners need to plan for sufficient time and resources to build these relationships. It also takes continual investment of time and resources to maintain relationships and ensure that they are mutually beneficial.</p>	<p>It took WorldFish about two years to build a strong relationship with the government departments that they worked with. However, they found that this slow, deliberative process was worth it and enabled long-term success. They also found that continually investing in their relationship with the government and helping them to achieve their objectives, even if at times, not directly related to the project, helped to build a strong, mutually beneficial relationship.</p>

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USAID ADVANCING NUTRITION

Implemented by:
JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc.
2733 Crystal Drive
4th Floor
Arlington, VA 22202

Phone: 703-528-7474
Email: info@advancingnutrition.org
Web: advancingnutrition.org

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