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PATHWAYS FOR IMPROVED NUTRITION OUTCOMES FOR THE ULTRA-POOR

LEARNING BRIEF

INTRODUCTION & RATIONALE

Poverty graduation is a sequenced, time-bound set of interventions that supports ultra-poor households to build the skills and assets they need to establish sustainable livelihoods, protect against shocks, sustain their well-being, and “graduate” out of poverty. Graduation models are difficult to scale given the resources required, but they have the potential for enormous impact.

The BOMA Project’s Rural Entrepreneur Access Project (REAP) is an adaptation of the poverty graduation approach, tailored specifically to the unique needs of the ultra-poor in the drylands of Kenya, where it has been implemented and rigorously tested since 2009. USAID Nawiri’s approach to REAP Adaptations for Nutrition aims to incorporate positive nutrition outcomes into the graduation approach and catalyze community-level effects for the nutrition resilience of ultra-poor households in the wider community. While there is a correlation between poverty and malnutrition, poverty graduation alone does not guarantee sustained positive nutrition outcomes. USAID Nawiri sought to

Three-fourths of the population in Samburu and Turkana counties live in poverty, well above the national poverty incidence of 36%. Sustainably lifting households out of poverty, such as through a graduation model, has direct effects on the social and health drivers of persistent acute malnutrition.

identify pathways to improving nutrition outcomes for women of reproductive age and children under 5 in participating ultra-poor households.

LEARNING JOURNEY:

The initial REAP for Nutrition design was part of a Human-Centered Design (HCD) process which drew findings from program research, experience, and evidence from BOMA's programs; input and feedback from community engagement and prototyping; and refinement from stakeholder co-creation sessions. With support from ThinkPlace Kenya, the consortium identified three questions for further exploration through HCD ideation: 1) How might we optimize REAP as a platform that enhances key nutrition practices?; 2) How might we enhance REAP businesses as catalysts for improved access to nutritious foods and uptake of ideal nutrition-related practices?; and 3) How might we adapt REAP targeting to optimize the nutrition outcomes of women entrepreneurs?

We also considered the viability of REAP enterprises in the face of shocks and stresses, informal social protection systems, gender roles and power dynamics, linkages with other community structures, and layering with nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive interventions. The team drew upon insights from BOMA's recent REAP learning and innovation work, including Women and Money research, their partnership with IDEO.org on digital last mile financial services, and testing image-based recordkeeping. Finally, the team integrated feedback from the REAP endline survey results from the USAID Livestock Market Systems program, and Nawiri's Household Economic Analysis, Food Markets, and Labor Market studies.

INSIGHTS AND IMPLICATIONS:

INSIGHT N°1: Building the capacity of last-mile food supply chain actors can enable inclusive food systems that address food security and malnutrition of ultra-poor households.

Poverty graduation is strengthened when embedded within an inclusive market system, which provides economic opportunities for ultra-poor women, including as last-mile vendors or service providers. This approach serves to extend markets closer to pastoral populations while building connections to wholesalers or larger vendors. As a result, REAP businesses serve as a commercial lifeline and potential source of nutritious foods for rural communities.

Formative research findings showed that non-REAP participants requested that REAP businesses sell more diversified, nutritious foods (e.g., fruits and vegetables, beans, and animal protein) in last-mile markets. Further, the food market systems research raised the need to address market disintegration that affects availability of diversified, nutritious foods, high food prices, and limited private sector investment at the last mile. An integrated approach is needed to strengthen networks and improve access to finance for food supply chain actors.

Implications: USAID Nawiri will collaborate with the private sector, county governments, and financial institutions to reduce risks associated with expanding to new markets, building on lessons from REAP businesses and efforts to support business models that engage ultra-poor households in selling and transporting nutritious foods. Furthermore, to contribute toward local markets reliably supplying sufficient quantities of affordable, safe, and nutritious foods all year long, there is a need to invest in supply chain actors alongside the REAP enterprises. USAID Nawiri will establish an actionable context

monitoring system that will enable the design of shock-responsive and risk-informed business grants. USAID Nawiri will advocate for the county government to invest in business development services and public and private partnerships related to the food system. This will include advocating to government and private actors to invest in infrastructure (e.g., storage facilities, road networks). Finally, USAID Nawiri, in partnership with financial institutions, will invest in building the capacity of food supply chain actors across various markets to improve planning, access to financial and advisory services, and pilot or scale up technologies that provide solutions that promote efficiencies. USAID Nawiri will improve coordination of supply chain actors and linkage to financial agents, leveraging any potential for scale up of Boda Pesa, a roving mobile money agent model currently under pilot by BOMA and partners that also provides demand aggregation.

INSIGHT N°2: Poverty reduction efforts should include layered nutrition and women’s empowerment approaches to ensure improved nutrition outcomes

REAP, as currently designed and implemented, plausibly improves nutrition by improving household food security and supporting capacity to manage shocks and stresses. An [external evaluation](#) of REAP shows an increase in women’s participation in household decision-making.

In addition, a secondary research analysis of REAP data to ascertain the relative importance or strength of interactions between potential nutrition pathways showed the following:

- 1) **Improved Dietary Intake Pathways** - Increased women’s household decision-making had a positive effect on improved dietary intake. Increased income had an indirect effect on improved dietary intake.
- 2) **Decreased Disease Pathways** - Increased women’s household decision-making had a positive direct effect on decreased disease.
- 3) **Increased Household Food Security Pathways** - Both increased women’s household decision-making and increased income had a positive direct effect on food security.

Implications: USAID Nawiri will apply context-specific male engagement strategies and adaptations to REAP with the aim of further increasing women’s agency and joint decision-making. This includes specific activities to ensure that households create nutrition-sensitive household budgets through shocks and stresses. Furthermore, USAID Nawiri will use household and community dialogues to facilitate sessions and work through community structures and with community champions and influencers, to support an enabling environment around social-cultural norms, beliefs, and practices related to women empowerment.

INSIGHT N°3: Bridging social capital strengthens informal social protection and mainstreaming the voices of the ultra-poor to increase their participation in governance processes to advocate for investment necessary for nutrition outcomes.

Ultra-poor households live in remote areas often disconnected from markets and excluded from social services such as health care, education, and water provision. Marginalization of the ultra-poor results in exclusion from the government participation process to influence resource allocation, which negatively impacts their capacity to cope and adapt during shocks.

The HCD process showed that REAP participants and enterprises routinely bridge social capital and vulnerable households rely on them to access loans and food on credit. Social capital contributes to women's empowerment, promotes behavior change, and transforms social norms — all of which strengthen resilience capacities and can have a positive impact on nutrition outcomes. While REAP businesses have strengthened coping mechanisms during shocks and stresses in some communities, there have been some negative impacts on REAP businesses (e.g., households unable to pay for goods on credit or credit extended by VSLA groups).

REAP Locational Committees play an instrumental role in targeting the ultra-poor and are the main community interface during REAP implementation. However, insights from Phase I indicate that committees could be strengthened and more sustainable by revisiting membership composition and empowering members with appropriate training and tools.

Implications: USAID Nawiri will support the Ward Development Planning process and the program will work closely with the counties in designing tools and planning processes that ensure increased participation and more equitable resource allocation that extend to the ultra-poor. USAID Nawiri aims to link the REAP Committees with the Ward Development Planning Committees or build the capacity of existing WDP Committees on engaging and targeting the ultra-poor within the mainstream process.

USAID Nawiri will also establish an Actionable Context Monitoring System aimed at strengthening institutions across various levels (from village to county). This system will regularly collect and use information to anticipate and rapidly respond to potential shocks and adapt to evolving stresses. Information will be disseminated and formatted in ways that are actionable by REAP participants to ensure they can make risk-informed decisions to protect their assets and recover during shocks. Information can also be used to make decisions around food supply chain enterprises.

Social capital contributes to women's empowerment, promotes behavior change, and transforms social norms — all of which strengthen resilience capacities. Self-help groups, or socio-economic networks supporting marketing facilitation, can strengthen bonding and bridging social capital. REAP enterprises provide an opportunity to strengthen the informal social protection systems and social capital among ultra-poor households. This is done through embedding social and behavior change (SBC) within livelihood interventions, with a focus on social cohesion (enhancing networking outside normal social groupings, especially in areas that have potential inter-ethnic tensions and conflicts), facilitating community dialogue sessions, and bridging social capital through market systems to encourage trade across communities. Ultimately, pairing these interventions provides an important opportunity to increase individuals' and enterprises' ability to mitigate and recover from shocks, thus having a ripple effect at the community level on nutrition outcomes.

INSIGHT N°4: Adoption of a multi-pronged approach is required for demand creation and promotion of nutritious foods for the ultra-poor

The Cost of Diet Study confirmed that the availability and affordability of nutritious foods are not the only determinants of household food consumption. The study for both Samburu and Turkana clearly demonstrates that food choices are influenced by knowledge, tradition, culture, convenience, and desirability. Furthermore, the food market system assessment highlights the challenges ultra-poor face in terms of lack of purchasing power. Having few resources to spend on food results in low demand for products, which discourage traders from stocking their shops/kiosks with nutritious foods and products.

Demand for nutritious foods is inconsistent outside of Lodwar and Maralal due to limited and seasonal purchasing power tied to livestock sales. During consultations, stakeholders suggested that to bolster supply and demand for nutritious foods, local businesses, including REAP enterprises, could encourage shops to order in bulk, thus helping with the stock and price point—and making nutritious products more affordable to the ultra-poor.

Implications: *Business models for sustainable action:* USAID Nawiri will map out key private sector actors within the food supply chain (in the county and elsewhere) and co-design demand creation strategies. This process will require an understanding of the ultra-poor consumer, what motivates them (incentives for behavior change), and their decision-making process and tradeoffs when making purchases. The emergence of behavioral, cultural, and business insights will become the bedrock of value proposition development, campaigns, or product design.

Motivating consumers to take action: We will identify synergies around market demand creation, promoting nutritious foods, and strengthening consumer agency. USAID Nawiri will invest in nutrition education and a ‘smart voucher’ system to stimulate year-round purchasing of both fresh produce and other essential foods for nutritional diversity from food vendors and traders.

Policies and regulations to reinforce demand creation: USAID Nawiri, in partnership with the Multi-Sectoral Platform and private sector actors in both counties, will develop a policy advocacy strategy aimed at improving market incentives. We will examine regulations that encourage the production and consumption of safe, nutritious foods, and encourage last mile enterprises.

INSIGHT N°5: Adopting an adapted reap for nutrition model can catalyze community-level nutrition outcomes, through reducing women’s time poverty, and embedding and layering nutrition-specific interventions.

A study on the impact of BRAC’s Challenging the Frontiers of Poverty Reduction: Targeted Ultra-Poor program on nutrition demonstrated positive impact across a number of indicators, including: a reduction in wasting; reduction in underweight children younger than 5 years; increase in exclusive breastfeeding; and greater food security, as measured by at least two meals per day, among ultra-poor and poor. The study concluded that participation in the program positively impacted nutritional status, and the impact was most notable in children--both in treatment and spillover groups.

A 2018 Randomized Control Trial (RCT) in Bangladesh found that when healthcare access and nutrition education were integrated into the poverty graduation approach, the blended model delivered substantial, positive effects on the long-term health and nutrition of direct and indirect participants. The 2021 final evaluation of the USAID-funded Feed the Future Kenya Livestock Market Systems program suggests that the integration of agri-nutrition content in short “micro-trainings” with REAP savings groups was sufficient to increase participants’ dietary diversity, with 90% of sampled participants reporting consuming at least 7 of the 14 food groups tracked at end-line. REAP’s formative research in Samburu and Turkana found that although participants are busy, they are eager to learn more about nutrition.

Implications: USAID Nawiri will integrate nutrition specific and sensitive behavior themes into the micro-training offerings, drawing on the Nawiri SBC strategy for nutrition. Mentors and/or community health volunteers (CHVs) will deliver sessions on dietary diversity; exclusive breastfeeding;

BOMA uses solar/crank radios that can play preloaded audio training content from a USB drive to deliver similar messaging to women, their family members, and neighbors, especially in regions with poor cell phone network coverage. To date the IVR and radio content has included: business diversification, group dynamics, recordkeeping, savings planning, time management, natural resource management, financial literacy, managing credit, hand hygiene, and girl child education.

complementary feeding practices; water, sanitation, and hygiene; use of the family-led mid-upper arm circumference (MUAC); nutrition-sensitive household budgeting; and adolescent nutrition. In addition, REAP for Nutrition participants will receive messaging via low-cost, targeted Interactive Voice Response (IVR)¹ technology and radio to reinforce key messages around nutrition and nutrition practices. Recent use cases in Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Ghana, India, Rwanda, and Uganda have shown IVR can be effective in curriculum delivery,² diagnosis, and treatment of common childhood disease;³ coaching and mentoring for better health;⁴ and improving knowledge, attitudes, and practices around complementary feeding.⁵

USAID Nawiri will scale up the use of the IVR technology to help reach the ultra-poor. Using BOMA's Performance Insights system, USAID Nawiri will track the messages and the rate of participant engagement. Performance Insights also allows for IVR messages to be targeted by livelihood zone, business type or status, participants' ages, their children's ages, language, and other key determinants.

CONCLUSION & PRIORITY AREAS FOR ONGOING LEARNING

Food insecurity and malnutrition are interlinked with poverty and inequality creating a vicious cycle, and an integrated approach is needed to tackle these issues. USAID Nawiri will integrate both nutrition-sensitive and nutrition-specific activities with poverty graduation interventions. As households' livelihood outcomes are shaped by their vulnerability to shocks, USAID Nawiri sees the need to invest in strengthening both formal and informal social protection systems. This will help protect or safeguard individuals and households from the impact of adverse shocks that may affect their nutrition status or push them into poverty. Results from the REAP RCT in Samburu will be released during Phase 2, which will be used to inform continuous adaptations and refinements of the REAP for Nutrition approach to achieve the goal of sustainably reducing malnutrition in Samburu and Turkana.

¹IVR is a phone-based technology that uses voice recordings to disseminate information and solicit simple feedback via touch tone keypad selection (or speech recognition in supported languages).

²UNICEF programming in Ghana and DRC

³Byonanebye et al. (2021). "An Interactive Voice Response Software to Improve the Quality of Life of People Living With HIV in Uganda: Randomized Controlled Trial." *JMIR Mhealth Uhealth* 9(2). Accessible at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33570497/>

⁴Catholic Relief Services quasi-experimental study on using mHealth messaging to change complementary feeding practices in Gikuriro, Rwanda, 2019

⁵BBC Media Action. (2015). "How has the Mobile Kunji audiovisual job aid improved family health outcomes in Bihar, India?" *British Broadcasting Corporation*. Accessible at: <https://www.bbc.com/mediaaction/publications-and-resources/research/summaries/asia/india/mobile-kunji-bihar> & Catholic Relief Services Afghanistan, 2021

USAID Nawiri had included additional nutrition-sensitive indicators on REAP and made adjustments to the monitoring tools based on the adaptations of REAP for Nutrition. Through robust monitoring and adaptive management, USAID Nawiri will continuously investigate 1) what context-specific pathways affect nutrition outcomes of women, adolescent girls, and children under 5; and 2) how to maximize benefits from REAP and layered systems-level investments to catalyze community-level effects on nutrition for other ultra-poor/poor women and children not directly involved in the intervention. USAID Nawiri will also continue to explore the layering of systems investments to maximize impact, while also weighing cost-efficiency for scalability. Finally, we will look at layering options with government social protection and other government, NGO, and private sector investments.

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