



Learning Brief

REAP for Nutrition: Early Learnings and Implications in Samburu and Turkana



R4N retail trader displays goods accessed through market linkages in Turkana North ©USAID Nawiri, Mercy corps 2022.

Introduction

USAID Nawiri's **resilient livelihoods strategy** envisions **resilient livelihood systems** that build and protect human, social, economic, physical, and natural capital while supporting peaceful co-existence. These systems provide people, households, and communities in Samburu and Turkana with equitable, sufficient, and uninterrupted access to the resources and strategies they need and want to sustainably escape poverty, food insecurity, and chronic undernutrition in the face of complex risk and recurrent shocks and stresses.

The poverty graduation approach—implemented through REAP for Nutrition—is one of the core pillars of USAID Nawiri’s resilient livelihoods for nutrition security strategy. REAP for Nutrition is not a silver bullet to addressing extreme poverty and chronic undernutrition and is not implemented as a standalone project. USAID Nawiri believes that its potential for contributing to lasting change at scale will be activated when implemented in tandem with nutrition-specific and -sensitive interventions targeting other vulnerabilities and opportunities within the broader system. As part of a larger package, R4N offers a pragmatic pathway to sustainable livelihoods and nutrition security for ultra-poor households and their communities by advancing key objectives of equity, resilience, opportunity, and peaceful coexistence.

Background

Households living in extreme poverty face a multitude of challenges that constrain their capacity to thrive in the face of adversity. Among others, these constraints include limited human, social, and financial capital; retrogressive social norms; exposure to various shocks and stresses; and being disconnected from markets.

It is widely acknowledged that while global economic growth will be a powerful driver in reducing the proportion of the world’s population living in extreme poverty, more targeted and tailored approaches are required to fulfill the sustainable development goal of “leaving no one behind.” The graduation approach is one such approach, targeting the poorest and most vulnerable households with a time-bound and carefully sequenced package of multi-sector interventions to lift them out of poverty. However, it is not without its limitations, and evidence from northern Kenya highlights the catch-22s of poverty graduation: populations most affected by multidimensional poverty are those for whom “graduation” to resilient livelihoods takes longer, is more expensive, and is least likely to be sustained without complementary investments to address the multi-dimensional determinants of their poverty. Relatedly, people caught in the poverty-undernutrition trap remain in extreme poverty because they cannot build a livelihood, and they cannot build a livelihood because they are perpetually overwhelmed and undermined by the physical, financial, mental, and emotional stresses that extreme poverty and multiple vulnerabilities create. USAID Nawiri uses this evidence as a call to action, asking: “How can BOMA’s REAP model—a model of poverty graduation adapted for Kenya’s arid and semi-arid lands—be further adapted and incorporated within larger strategies to improve its cost-effectiveness and enhance its contribution to the **sustainable** reduction in poverty and undernutrition at **scale** in *Samburu and Turkana*?”

R4N is designed to unleash the **ability** in **vulnerability** and position the ultra-poor as a source of productive growth and resilience for underserved communities affected by P-GAM. To do this, R4N preserves the sequencing of the standard REAP model—henceforth referred to as “REAP Classic”—but draws on evidence, learning, and logic to refine approaches, add new elements, and intentionally leverage USAID Nawiri’s investments in a nutrition-enabling environment.

This brief highlights some key insights and implications around themes prioritized for adaptive learning.

REAP for Nutrition: Results at a Glance (Cohort I)

Geographic Targeting: P-GAM “hotspots” in 17 Wards in Samburu and Turkana

HH Targeting: 8,700 ultra-poor households (41,380 individuals) targeted for R4N; this includes:

- **9,115** children younger than 5 years of age, including **3,067** children younger than 2 years of age, with or at risk of acute malnutrition (**454** cases of SAM and **2,795** cases of MAM identified among children 6m-5yrs during targeting)
- **4,101** pregnant and lactating women with or at risk of undernutrition
- **3,955** adolescent girls aged 10-18 years (of whom 206 are business group members) with or at risk of undernutrition

Business Group Formation: 2,900 business groups formed (3 women each; one woman per each of the 8,700 ultra-poor HHs targeted)

Working Capital: KES 87 million in working capital was distributed to jump-start businesses and improve market access to food and other essential commodities in last-mile locations.

Targeting and Timing

GAM levels that are consistently at or above the emergency threshold of 15% are symptomatic of widespread, chronic vulnerabilities and weak resilience to shocks and stresses. USAID Nawiri uses population-level nutrition data (i.e. P-GAM “hotspots”) and opportunity for layering with other interventions as the main criteria for selecting the geographic priority areas for implementing R4N. At the household level, USAID Nawiri has learned that using malnutrition as a criterion for participant selection can create perverse incentives and lead to exclusion of ultra-poor HHs from nutritionally vulnerable and at-risk groups. Ongoing reflections on the targeting criteria and process have raised new questions about whom to enroll in a poverty graduation project that is designed to contribute to sustainable reductions in P-GAM. Some of these questions include: *How must the model adapt to respond to the unique needs of HHs with current cases of acute malnutrition or other vulnerabilities linked to immediate and underlying drivers of GAM, including maternal mental health? How might the timing and sequencing of the R4N components need to be adapted to avoid creating tradeoffs between business growth and HH nutrition outcomes? How can we effectively mitigate against the risk of increasing women’s time and energy poverty, and aggravating drivers of P-GAM?*

R4N is among USAID Nawiri’s key “anchor models” – defined as such because it anchors USAID Nawiri within an ultra-poor household. In R4N, the woman is the primary participant and point of entry in the household, but all household members are actively engaged in USAID Nawiri activities. For instance, adolescent girls within R4N HHs are targeted with GIRL 3.0 – a safe-space model adapted to the local context and designed to support healthy, productive transitions to adulthood. This is a key departure from standalone REAP Classic which has minimal

engagement with other household members of participant women. USAID Nawiri continues to explore the potential for R4N as an anchor model for integrating, layering, and sequencing complementary interventions that address the multi-dimensional vulnerabilities of ultra-poor households and their members.

Enabling Environment

R4N places strong emphasis on the **enabling environment**, believing that more equitable gender norms; equitable governance and management of natural resources; peaceful societies; and inclusive health, food, and market systems (including the presence of retail, input, and service providers in the “last-mile”) are critical to realizing returns on investment for nutrition at scale and over time. For instance, because it is nested within USAID Nawiri, and not implemented as a “stand-alone” activity, R4N benefits from the program’s gender mainstreaming component, inclusive of gender and protection from exploitation training for all staff (including mentors/coaches). USAID Nawiri uses an approach called Building Resilience through the Integration of Gender and Empowerment (BRIGE) to identify and challenge gender norms related to women’s engagement in livelihoods and men’s roles in the home related to childcare and food preparation, among others. USAID Nawiri’s dedicated gender, youth, and social dynamics (GYSD) team is responsible for supporting the adaptive implementation of R4N to promote equitable gender dynamics, and for monitoring and swiftly addressing any emerging gender-related challenges.

Coaching

R4N places heavy emphasis on the role of a **mentor or coach** as a “connector” and facilitator of change at multiple levels of the socio-ecological framework. This includes the facilitation of HH dialogues among adults in R4N households to nurture empathy among genders and generations, while strengthening capacity to jointly manage the household economy for both immediate needs and long-term objectives. This also involves linking households to existing health and other services, including formal safety nets, and identifying barriers to availability and access for concurrent action by USAID Nawiri’s broader program interventions. Mentors are responsible for coaching women to develop and grow profitable businesses *for nutrition outcomes at scale*; this includes identifying opportunities and linking individual and umbrella business groups¹ with private sector actors for business expansion and diversification. USAID Nawiri is learning that emphasis on businesses for *nutrition* requires identifying and pursuing opportunities to catalyze positive spillover to the wider community, while at the same time carefully monitoring for unintended consequences on participant women’s time and energy use.

In R4N, the ratio of mentors to participants is 1 mentor to 50 BGs (or 150 HHs); while this is a reduction from the 1 mentor to 60 BG ratio under REAP Classic, the role of REAP Classic mentors does *not* include regular, structured engagement with participant HHs. The expanded role and increased expectations on mentors under R4N raise important questions about the optimal ratio of mentors to participants that will achieve desired outcomes and can be replicated

¹ Umbrella Business Groups are made up of between 5 to 15 R4N business groups in each last mile location. They were formed by USAID Nawiri’s market-systems strengthening team for the purpose of improving the availability, affordability, and accessibility of food in last-mile communities. Working with and through R4N mentors the markets team supports UBGs to access wholesale markets by taking advantage of economies of scale in bulk ordering and sharing transport costs.

at scale. While USAID Nawiri supports the graduation community in its conviction that coaching is crucial to the success of the graduation approach, we are also keenly aware that coaching is resource-intensive and thus a key barrier to the scalability and institutionalization of poverty graduation models. The question of modifications and adaptations in coaching is a critical area for ongoing adaptive learning. USAID Nawiri is exploring opportunities for reaping the benefits of coaching at lower costs, including through technology-enabled “e-coaching”, linking graduated REAP Classic participants with R4N businesses, and partnering with local institutions, including community health volunteers.

In recruitment of mentors, USAID Nawiri has learned the importance of prioritizing competencies in the “5Ls” of listening, learning, linking, localizing, and leveraging. Basic knowledge of nutrition is an important competency of R4N mentors; however, this knowledge is easily transferred – relatively speaking. In contrast, the essential soft-skills required of an effective mentor, including skills for listening, questioning, and reflecting—those that allow mentors to build rapport and empathize with participants, while guiding them to find their own answers—are not so easily or quickly built and require learn-by-doing approaches. In addition, USAID Nawiri is realizing the importance in the local context of building competencies of mentors to provide psychosocial support and psychological first aid. Recent midline findings of a randomized control trial (RCT) conducted by UC Davis suggest that pre-existing depression symptoms has a substantial impact on the potential to benefit from REAP; REAP Classic participants in Samburu with severe depressive symptoms at baseline were less likely than their non-depressed counterparts to maintain their assets and increase their income. USAID Nawiri is exploring options and opportunities for layering psychosocial peacebuilding approaches with R4N to advance objectives in peace, resilience, and nutrition simultaneously.



R4N retail trader in Samburu North sub ©USAID Nawiri, Mercy corps 2022.

Time and Energy Poverty

Starting a business requires **time and physical, mental, and emotional energy** – which are also essential capacities for optimal self-care and the care and feeding of young children (and hence nutrition outcomes). For women in Samburu and Turkana, time and energy poverty is intensified during drought periods and is not directly offset by consumption stipends. USAID

Nawiri is learning that in order to be fully “adapted” for nutrition, poverty graduation approaches must expand the concept of “poverty” to include time and energy poverty. In this way, graduating from poverty becomes not just about achieving economic self-reliance, but doing so while also improving capacity for self- and child-care. USAID Nawiri is seeing the importance of deliberately tracking indicators of **time and energy poverty** to ensure that we don’t unintentionally promote economic self-reliance at the expense of women’s wellbeing (including mental health and nutrition outcomes). R4N beneficiaries reported that although they now (thanks to Nawiri) have the financial resources to purchase food items required to prepare meals for their small children, having the time to do so is still a problem, and the time needed to set up and run the business has added to the demands on their time. A major focus of learning with R4N BGs, households, and communities will be on co-creating time-saving adaptations that can be integrated into the R4N model for improved nutrition outcomes among participant HHs as well as the larger community.

Market-Based Approach

The design of USAID Nawiri’s Resilient Livelihoods for Nutrition Security Strategy is grounded in a market-based approach. In the context of severe drought and food-price inflation, USAID Nawiri paused to reflect:



R4N retail traders receiving their bulk orders in Kangakipur village, Turkana South Sub County ©USAID Nawiri, Mercy corps 2022.

How might we apply a market-based approach to help populations cope with the effects of the current crisis without resorting to maladaptive strategies that compromise livelihoods and nutrition outcomes in the near and long term? What opportunities exist for layering “emergency” and “development” funds and imperatives to transform market systems for resilient livelihoods and nutrition by unlocking demand- and supply-side barriers in tandem?

Fuel- and food-price inflation has aggravated barriers to food access through markets at a time when four failed rainy seasons have aggravated production-side barriers to food security. The cost of meeting basic needs, as captured by the minimum expenditure basket (MEB), has

increased by 31% and 34% in Samburu and Turkana, respectively, since March 2022, according to

the Kenya Cash Working Groups report of their joint market monitoring initiative in July. As part of its integrated response to this complex crisis, USAID Nawiri is providing 3,555 HHs across 11 wards with monthly unconditional cash transfers and nutrition education. At the outset, USAID Nawiri realized that the UCTs would inject significant liquidity into last-mile communities, many of which lacked even a single retail shop where recipients could spend their transfers. Communities where retail shops were operational, lacked sufficient stock to absorb any substantial increase in demand, and consumers (women) were trekking 12 km on average to purchase food and other goods, with serious implications on time and energy poverty. The team set about to better understand the context-specific barriers to market access of affordable, quality nutritious foods in the last mile, and leveraged structured dialogues with communities, government, and private sector actors to co-create local solutions for addressing the immediate needs of populations in crisis, while laying a foundation for the market integration of last-mile communities. We layered UCTs with supply-side interventions to holistically address immediate needs and chronic vulnerabilities in tandem, and were careful not to bend under pressure to deliver quick results that would introduce new risk or undermine long-term goals. The intentional layering of R4N in communities targeted with UCTs unlocked additional opportunities. The injection of working capital into BGs helped activate market linkages – local wholesalers now saw a strong business case for supplying last mile communities, and the formation of umbrella business groups strengthened the negotiating power of last-mile retailers.

Women in last-mile communities generally lack the self-confidence to interact with suppliers from



R4N retail trader in Turkana North Sub County ©USAID Nawiri, Mercy corps 2022.

outside the community. Unscrupulous market actors can easily take advantage of this situation. USAID Nawiri learned that it can play a key role in facilitating linkages and securing agreements, whilst supporting women to learn in the process and begin to build relationships and trust with market actors. “Bulking” in the last mile is a concept that appeals to both wholesalers and retailers. Wholesalers from primary markets appreciate when the last mile is organized so they can be sure of sales – they don’t want to return with any goods. In more populated areas, the incentives for bulking are not there, and it benefits wholesalers when retailers are divided.

Saturation and Choice

Having many food retailers per population in the last mile appears to be important to the capacity of the wider community to achieve and maintain food security in the face of shocks. This is because a greater number of businesses means more working capital and thus greater collective bargaining power with wholesalers, translating to improved availability and affordability of food for the wider community (through bulk ordering and economies of scale). It is unlikely that the “ideal” saturation level is static or constant over time or equal across livelihood zones and contexts. Midline findings of the RCT conducted by UC Davis with REAP Classic in Samburu found that higher saturation of poverty graduation participants within a community reduces income impact over time. The specific reasons are unknown, but USAID Nawiri hypothesizes that this finding is linked to limitations on business diversification and growth in last-mile communities. This reaffirms the importance of starting early in the graduation journey to build skills and linkages—connecting participants to options and opportunities and building their assets, curiosity, confidence, and agency to benefit from complementary investments in the enabling environment. Since our immediate priority when it came to promoting positive spillover was to leverage R4N businesses to support the capacity of the wider community to meet its food needs in the face of crisis, USAID Nawiri prioritized food-based businesses for intensive support for market linkages. Through more indirect yet no less significant pathways, other business groups—including those selling clothes, trading livestock, and making beads—have the potential to contribute to the food and nutrition security of the wider community. Supporting the market orientation and integration of these non-food businesses will be key to helping them realize their potential.

Table I: Key adaptations to REAP Classic that USAID Nawiri is testing and iterating through adaptive learning cycles.

Feature	REAP Classic	REAP for Nutrition
Duration	24 months	18 months
Geographic Selection	Poverty Levels	P-GAM hotspots; drought-affected; underserved communities (“last mile”); opportunity for layering and sequencing with Nawiri and non-Nawiri interventions.
HH Targeting	Ultra-poor household with a woman 18-years or older	Ultra-poor HH with a woman 18-years or older Priority to: (1) HHs with nutritionally vulnerable groups, i.e. PLW, U2s, U5s, adolescent girls, those with chronic illness; (2) HHs with documented case of acute malnutrition within last one year.
Business Group	Enroll woman 18-years or	Increased emphasis on encouraging

Formation	older; anchor woman selects 2 other women from the “ultra-poor HH roster” to form a 3-person business.	“blended” groups that balance vulnerabilities and capacities.
Male Engagement	The woman is the primary participant; husbands and male community members are engaged initially to secure “buy-in” and on an ad hoc basis thereafter	Men engaged as partners, consumers, change-agents, and participants of other interventions/services layered with R4N, including livelihood interventions to boost households’ productive inclusion and reduce women’s time and energy poverty.
HH Dialogue	None	Mentors facilitate HH dialogue, using MC’s BRIGE tools and framework, adapted for Nawiri, to engage men, women, and youth in planning and budgeting for short- and long-term nutrition outcomes.
Asset transfers	Jump grant of KES 20k, followed by a progress grant of KES 10k – provided to each 3-woman BG	Jump grant of KES 30k, followed by a progress grant at month 4 of KES 20k – provided to each 3-woman BG. Household Economic Analysis (HEA) and regular market monitoring show that inflation has reduced purchasing power by over 50%.
Consumption Stipend	None	KES 6000 was transferred to every R4N participant HH monthly for 6 months. REAP for Nutrition is implemented in the context of an emergency that has aggravated barriers to nutrition security.
Umbrella Business Groups	None	2,900 BGs aggregated into 61 “umbrella” business groups for the purposes of bulk ordering
Market Integration	only involved market linkages and done 3 months after jump grant disbursement	Market integration started immediately before jump grant disbursement and continues, interventions include market linkages, formation of umbrella business groups, market visits by R4N umbrella group representatives, BDS services to introduce financial services that include digital payment options like LIPA Na Mpesa and Mpesa agents. R4N

		<p>businesses have a twin goal of achieving business growth at Household level but also contributing to better nutritional outcomes at community level through supplying nutritious foods at last mile locations to community members. Market integration is important to ensure R4N businesses are linked with existing wholesalers and their negotiation skills is improved.</p>
<p>Health and Nutrition</p>	<p>None</p>	<p>Mentors coordinate with CHVs for screening, bi-directional referrals, and reporting.</p> <p>Mentors facilitate micro-trainings on health and nutrition at HH, BG, UBG, and SG levels to reinforce health and nutrition education and encourage behavior change.</p>

Photos of R4N Retail traders receiving goods ordered in bulk in Samburu and Turkana Counties





*Photos of
R4N Retail
traders*

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