



# FEED THE FUTURE

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

## Reflections and Recommendations for Establishing Nutrition-Sensitive Agriculture Programming in Assam, India

USAID Advancing Nutrition India's Learning Brief on Establishing Nutrition-Sensitive Agriculture Programming in Assam, India



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## About USAID Advancing Nutrition

USAID Advancing Nutrition is the Agency's flagship multi-sectoral nutrition project, led by JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI) and a diverse group of experienced partners. Launched in September 2018, USAID Advancing Nutrition implements nutrition interventions across sectors and disciplines for USAID and its partners. The project's multi-sectoral approach draws together global nutrition experience to design, implement, and evaluate programs that address the root causes of malnutrition. Committed to using a systems approach, USAID Advancing Nutrition strives to sustain positive outcomes by building local capacity, supporting behavior change, and strengthening the enabling environment to save lives, improve health, build resilience, increase economic productivity, and advance development. This project contributes to the goals of the U.S. Government's Feed the Future initiative by striving to sustainably reduce hunger and improve nutrition and resilience.

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# Executive Summary

## Background

USAID Advancing Nutrition implemented several nutrition-sensitive agriculture activities in Assam, India with local stakeholders, including government actors, local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), civil society, and private sector actors from 2022-2023. As Assam, India has received comparatively less development focus, especially in nutrition-sensitive agriculture programming, in contrast to other regions within India, USAID Advancing Nutrition has created an implementation brief. This brief aims to provide insights for future programming by examining successes, challenges, and recommendations for future nutrition-sensitive agriculture programming, with a particular emphasis on promoting local ownership.

## Successes and Challenges

To develop strong partnerships in Assam, India, we found that the intentional co-creation of activities in the beginning of the activity was critical to receive buy-in from the Government of Assam. During this process, we co-created activities and determined which activities were most aligned with the Government of Assam's needs and priorities, as well as what was feasible given the short duration of the project. For example, during this process, we determined the main implementation of the project would be to work through already-established women's self-help groups (WSHGs) to promote improved productivity, incomes, and diets. Despite co-creation being a success, we also found it challenging and time-consuming to align priorities during this period. Secondly, working through a local NGO was critical for having more informed program activities and easier community entry, as local NGOs understand local gender and social norms, and languages, and have existing relationships with the target communities. Nonetheless, working through an NGO to implement the majority of program activities requires substantial capacity strengthening time and effort to ensure quality implementation.

Regarding successful implementation approaches, we found that targeting female program participants through already-established community platforms, like the WSHG platform, was an efficient approach for providing training and promoting behavior change. Secondly, the project found that conducting human-centered design social and behavior change (SBC) research at the beginning of the project was pivotal for informing the nutrition-sensitive agriculture activities that appropriately account for local gender and social norms. For example, we found that not only do men not have confidence in women for meaningfully participating in agricultural activities (e.g., selecting crops to grow) but women also internalized this lack of confidence due to external reinforcement. Despite seeing working through a local organization and conducting SBC research as being successes, we also found that we needed greater time for community entry to receive greater buy-in of the nutrition-sensitive agriculture activities, given local gender and social norms. The gender and social norms prevalent in Assam, India are deeply ingrained and must be taken into account at every stage of programming.

## Recommendations

It is suggested that future projects budget sufficient time and resources to gain buy-in from local stakeholders in Assam and account for the number of existing government programs and competing priorities. Specifically, future projects should allow for information gathering/research and co-creation

with the project's expected stakeholders. This will allow for informed program activities, as well as to receive buy-in and match the activities to local stakeholders' existing priorities and implementation calendars. Lastly, future projects should account for the substantial time required to build the capacity of stakeholders, particularly local NGOs, to implement nutrition-sensitive agriculture activities. Capacity strengthening activities should be built in at the beginning of the project, as well as throughout the project to provide coaching and mentoring to the NGO to further improve their implementation.

## Introduction

### USAID Advancing Nutrition in India

USAID India provided a scope of work to USAID Advancing Nutrition for a two-year, \$1,350,357 project in Assam State, India. The period of performance for the project is October 1, 2021–November 30, 2023. Using nutrition-sensitive approaches, the project aims to directly benefit over 35,000 women, adolescent girls, and children from socioeconomically disadvantaged families that have been negatively impacted by COVID-19.

USAID Advancing Nutrition in India provides technical assistance to government and public-sector partners in Assam State to demonstrate the potential for community-led, nutrition-sensitive agriculture to achieve our goal of improving diets while aiming to engage with potential private-sector partners to identify partnership pathways for sustainable, scalable actions. We implement activities under the following three objectives:

- Strengthen women-led, nutrition-sensitive agricultural practices and business opportunities.
- Strengthen partnerships among multi-sectoral and multi-interest nutrition stakeholders to implement nutrition-sensitive agricultural activities.
- Document lessons learned and best practices and disseminate them through a learning platform.



USAID Advancing Nutrition implements activities in six blocks in three districts (Tinsukia, Goalpara, and Barpeta) in Assam State.

### Learning Brief Objective

Nutrition and livelihood development programming in India targeting nutrition has been ongoing for the last three decades. However, there has been limited international development-funded programming focused on nutrition-sensitive agriculture in Assam. Further, the USAID Advancing Nutrition project in Assam is unique in that it aims to work directly within government structures and through the women's self-help group (WSHG) platform at the community level. Therefore, the USAID Advancing Nutrition

project is well placed to share learnings regarding implementation in Assam, India. This learning brief documents the successes, challenges, and recommendations for future actors implementing similar programs and working more intensively with government actors in Assam, India.

## Background

### Setting the Scene: Designing the USAID Advancing Nutrition Activity in Assam

USAID Advancing Nutrition conducted a scoping exercise in late 2021 to inform the project's implementation approach, partnerships, and initial work plan. A few takeaways were garnered from the scoping exercise that informed our overall implementation approach and who we would partner with. First, key stakeholders and informants from various departments in the Government of Assam—including the Assam State Rural Livelihood Mission (ASRLM), Department of Fisheries (DoF), and Department of Agriculture (DoA)—identified the lack of a coordinated and cohesive effort in implementing nutrition-sensitive programs in the state. Specifically, they noted that government, non-governmental organizations, and the private sector were unaware of each other's initiatives, leading to overlap and duplicated efforts. Key stakeholders highlighted the need for a multi-sectoral approach that involves the relevant government and non-government actors in the state from the beginning planning phases. They also noted that fostering local ownership for scaling successful implementation models is a significant challenge within Assam. Therefore, the project aimed to test a model within the government's existing framework and approach – the WSHG platform – so that it could be owned and scaled up organically within the system. Specifically, these stakeholders acknowledged the significance of WSHGs as a platform for promoting positive health and nutrition behaviors, including dietary habits among women, adolescent girls, and children. The project collaborated from the beginning with ASRLM, which is part of the flagship National Rural Livelihoods Mission in India, and worked with the WSHG and community cadre platforms. We engaged with other departments, including DoA and DoF, on specific activities under the project.

Because of the project's short implementation period, we needed to work with local actors with inroads into the community and mobilization activities already underway. Therefore, in addition to the government's efforts, it was important to involve a local agency that is already working within the communities and familiar with their needs and expectations. Through a selection process, the project identified a local nongovernmental organization (NGO) – Seven Sisters Development Assistance (SeSTA) – working with communities to strengthen WSHGs, agriculture, and livelihoods. USAID Advancing Nutrition worked with the NGO on the following:

- Introducing the project, its expected outcomes, and the scope of work including different district-level stakeholders and line departments.
- Sensitizing important community players including Anganwadi workers, Panchayati Raj Institutions, school management committee members, and tea garden workers to ensure their commitment and involvement to reach out to the larger community

- Increasing training capacity and creating a pool of trainers within the ASRLM community cadres so that training efforts can continue beyond the scope of the project.
- Overseeing the cascade-level training of the WSHG members.

In addition to supporting the NGO to implement these activities, USAID Advancing Nutrition also aimed to leverage and support important government actors like the ASRLM, DoF, DoA, and other government actors to improve their nutrition-sensitive programming in the state through capacity strengthening, knowledge sharing, and the development of technical tools and resources, such as training modules.

## Successes

### Partnerships

**Involving public sector actors from the beginning enables better buy-in.** The project undertook substantial buy-in activities with public sector actors at the beginning of implementation. Though these meetings, workshops, and collaboration activities were time-consuming, they helped in setting expectations and receiving feedback on which activities were government priorities. The project took recommendations from public sector actors in earnest, which helped build their trust in the project. Ultimately, this process resulted in a strong relationship with ASRLM and their commitment to carry out specific activities.

**Signing a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with partners is helpful for garnering support and commitment.** The project signed an MOU with ASRLM, which led to a more successful and streamlined implementation, as expectations for collaboration were clearly articulated. Specifically, it articulated that we would leverage the existing government community cadre work (Krishi Sakhis and Pashu Sakhis) and WSHG platforms. This enabled us to leverage government's time, via the community cadres, as well as their existing infrastructure for the training programs. The district and block officials aided in organizing the training program through their cadres for the WSHG members and integrated project messages into cadres' household visits to promote adoption and motivate their families to practice the prioritized behaviors.

**Working with an NGO already embedded in the community allows for more efficient implementation.** The local NGO's position in the community expedited collaboration with local stakeholders, including the government, and helped in project planning and implementation. For example, the local NGO had existing relationships with the community, which made the initial project introduction and other activities that required community buy-in much easier.

**Working with an NGO from the community is required for successful implementation.** Various social groups including the tribes from tea gardens and other indigenous communities live in the intervention areas in Assam. Therefore, it was critical to involve an organization knowledgeable about the population's cultural norms, gender dynamics, food habits, taboos, and livelihood preferences. This also was important in establishing trust between the communities and the project.



**Local stakeholders' knowledge and expertise should be leveraged.** Through partnerships with government actors and other local implementers, the project leveraged local expertise in developing program materials, such as training modules, and delivering master trainer trainings. The project organized a series of consultative workshops with the DoA and DoF, where they provided technical input in the design and finalization of the training modules on nutrition-sensitive agriculture practices on horticulture and aquaculture for both the cadres and the WSHG members. We further leveraged subject matter specialists from Krishi Vigyan Kendra to deliver parts of the master training on basic principles for developing year-round vegetable gardens, including how to select nutrient-rich crops for production. During the aquaculture training, DoF officials shared similar insights on aquaculture. The project also signed an MOU with WorldFish, a consortium member of the International Agricultural Research Centers, to provide capacity-strengthening support for improved aquaculture practices in Assam. Together with DoF, they conducted a training for the local NGO, focusing on strengthening their capacity around the technical aspects of aquaculture and contextualizing the best practices of fish production for improved nutrition in Assam.

## Implementation Approaches

**Using a community cadre approach to cascade training to WSGHs is an effective way to build trust and promote behavior change.** The community cadre approach involves training and engaging individuals in the community who have a deep understanding of the local culture and context to serve as a community cadre. Using community cadres helps program participants feel more comfortable and receptive to the information shared, as they are from the same or nearby community. Since the community cadres are known and trusted within the communities, they bring a level of credibility to the training sessions. This trust factor ensures greater participation and engagement in the training. As role models, they can inspire positive behavior change within the community, and WSHG members are more likely to adopt and implement best practices.

**Adopting a community cadre approach facilitates the efficient dissemination of information and harnesses the power of existing networks.** When using a cascading model, the trained community cadres share their knowledge with WSHG members who then pass it on to others in the community, thus maximizing the project's impact. This particular approach leverages existing local resources and human capital, making it a budget-friendly method for reaching a larger audience. The approach also fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility among the trained members—they become advocates of the project and work towards sustaining positive change in their communities. They can easily gather feedback from the beneficiaries, which can help in the continuous improvement of the training program to make it more effective and responsive to the evolving needs of the community.

**Conducting social and behavior change (SBC) research at the beginning of implementation allowed the project to better target its interventions** The SBC research conducted at the beginning of the project helped reveal the factors that influence nutrition and agriculture behaviors in the target districts. It also provided insights into the local attitudes and practices related to nutrition and agriculture as well as barriers and facilitators to adopting desired behaviors. This understanding can aid in designing effective interventions and strategies that are culturally appropriate and address needs in a way that leads to evidence-based outcomes. Understanding the communication preferences and channels

used by the target audiences informed the project's SBC strategy and activities to bring about the desired behavior change. Lastly, the activity involved the community in selecting target behaviors and activities during the SBC research, which fostered local ownership and collaboration. Respondents actively participated in the research process and prioritized the behaviors the project targeted, which garnered increased support for our interventions.

**Integrating gender and social norms into research activities helped the project understand opportunities for women's empowerment in the project.** Considering gender and social norms in the project's research activities ensured that women's needs and voices were central to the project's design and implementation, which can help lead to more inclusive and impactful outcomes. The research activities gave the project a deeper understanding of women's roles and responsibilities in the community as well as their prevalent practices, participation, and time use patterns. The research also helped in identifying the disparities in access to productive resources such as agricultural input and market access as well as areas to strengthen women's knowledge and skills for improving their dietary habits and practices. Further, from the research, the project understood social norms and local influencers and their role in supporting women. Understanding these findings at the beginning of the project helped us better target our technical and community entry activities.

## Challenges & Lessons Learned

### Partnerships

**Prioritizing local stakeholders and aligning with their objectives is difficult but essential.** It is important to acknowledge that not every actor and their priorities may fully align with the project's objectives. In such cases, it may be necessary to prioritize and focus on actors who are most likely to contribute to the desired results. For example, during initial design meetings, the project met with DoA, DoF, the Department of Women and Child Development, Department of Health & Family Welfare and the Assam Agricultural University with the intention to partner with these entities on activities throughout the project. These stakeholders had the potential for significant contributions in the long run and their expectations aligned with both government and project objectives. However, given the time constraints, the project had to prioritize specific objectives and was therefore unable to fully engage and address all the requests and plans put forth by these stakeholders. In the future, given sufficient time, there may be opportunities to gradually involve other actors and their priorities. A phased approach can allow for flexibility and the possibility of expanding engagement as the project progresses, while still maintaining a clear focus on achieving the desired results.

**Engaging with public sector actors in Assam can be resource intensive.** Given the limited international development programming in nutrition-sensitive agriculture in Assam, some public sector actors required additional guidance to understand the scope and limitations of the project. This relationship management required a substantial amount of time on the part of USAID Advancing Nutrition leadership. Future programs should build in time for significant engagement (phone calls, meetings, etc.) with public sector actors in Assam, particularly in the beginning of programming.

**Local partners require intentional capacity strengthening.** Local government and NGO partners in Assam often need capacity building and guidance to prepare them to first take on activities and to

continue activities beyond the project scope. For example, we found that one two-day training on nutrition-sensitive agriculture was not sufficient to equip our local NGO partner with the necessary knowledge and skills to implement the program activities. Some of the technical activities and topics, such as nutrition-sensitive agriculture, gender and social inclusion, and SBC, were new to the local stakeholders and therefore required ongoing capacity-strengthening efforts. Future projects should plan for more time at the beginning of implementation to build the capacity of local actors, especially local implementing partners.

## Implementation Approaches

**Allowing sufficient time for community buy-in is required.** Despite having a trusted local NGO as the implementer for the project, it was still difficult to get community-level buy-in for and participation in the project's activities. Through a pause and reflect session held in early 2023, we found this was a result of inadequate sensitization activities to receive buy-in from the community members, specifically for men to encourage their wives to participate in the trainings. Given the deeply rooted social and gender norms in Assam, additional time to encourage men's buy-in and support is required. This will lead to increased participation of women in program activities as well as better support from family members to adopt promoted behaviors.

**A short implementation timeline did not allow for a pilot period and limited project scope.** The project learned that it would have been more effective if there were time to pilot various activities, particularly the training modules, before implementing the training across the three districts. Additionally, given the limited implementation period, the project also faced challenges in meeting the expectations of its various stakeholders. A longer implementation timeframe would have allowed the project to dedicate more attention to these aspects.

# Recommendations for Engaging with Specific Actors in Assam

## Government

A multisectoral intervention approach that emphasizes localization and locally-driven work guided project implementation. Building rapport with various local stakeholders, including government, was a crucial step and required significant time investment. The project organized multiple workshops and consultations to engage in regular dialogue with stakeholders to align the project's goals with existing government programs and initiatives. Below are specific recommendations for engaging with government stakeholders in Assam for future programs:

- Understand the government's priorities, challenges, and opportunities, and ensure the project's objectives align to facilitate implementation and institutionalization.
- Identify champions within the system (in every department) who support the project objectives and can facilitate its implementation.

- Use established metrics of success from the beginning to clarify process and program outcomes.
- Establish a structured review with metrics to jointly evaluate progress and identify achievements, challenges, and lessons learned and adapt accordingly.
- Engage in regular dialogue (i.e., consultations and scheduled review meetings) with relevant actors/stakeholders on project design and implementation approach and progress to increase local ownership.
- Implement joint field reviews and government participation in activities at regular intervals for clarity and course corrections.

## Local NGOs and Implementers

As noted previously, it is important to engage local implementers, such as NGOs, to receive initial community buy-in, ensure implementation accounts for local customs, and support sustainable outcomes. Below are specific recommendations for engaging with NGO stakeholders in Assam for future programs:

- Identify local implementation partners who have extensive experience in the target geographic areas and project area of work.
- Build in sufficient time and resources to build the capacity of the local implementer to carry out the project's activities. In our case, providing a two-day training on nutrition-sensitive agriculture before the local NGO began conducting program activities was insufficient. It would have been better to have at least a month of intensive capacity strengthening, with piloted activities to oversee the NGO and provide feedback.
- Determine if multiple local partners are needed to implement different activities that cover various objectives. Future programs should consider a flexible partnership process until they know which local partners can fulfill the scope of work. We found specific skill sets in market-led development, capacity building and training best practices, gender mainstreaming, technology integration, and training curriculum development to be lacking.
- Plan for regular dialogue and pause and reflect sessions with the local implementer to understand their implementation experience, troubleshoot challenges, and provide feedback. A mid-2023 pause and reflect session revealed some required adaptations, and, looking back, we could have benefited from having a pause and reflect session in early 2023 to identify challenges and areas for adaptation sooner.

## Communities and Civil Society

The USAID Advancing Nutrition project worked with the following community-level actors: representatives from Panchayati Raj Institutions, Anganwadi workers, school management committees, village and block level officials, village organizations, and labor unions and tribes from tea gardens. The

project identified several opportunities to better engage these actors to support community buy-in, scale activities, and encourage program participant participation.

- Leverage influential community and civil society actors as community-level platforms to raise awareness about the program and its activities and to encourage community buy-in.
- Ensure district and block officials' involvement to encourage the community to adopt recommended practices. District and block officials actively participated in various sensitization meetings conducted under the project's umbrella.
- Consult target program participants on the design of program activities to better align the project's objectives with the needs of the community. For example, the USAID Advancing Nutrition project consulted program participants to choose the focus behaviors for the behavior change activities. These were different from the behaviors the project would have initially prioritized, but they were better aligned with the needs of the program participants.

## Conclusion

Given the economic and nutritional situation in Assam, there are significant opportunities to implement future programming in livelihood development, nutrition and food systems, and women's empowerment. Among Indian states, Assam is one of the poorest. It is home to 31 million people, a third living in poverty (NITI Aayog 2021). While poverty levels in Assam declined between 1994 and 2015–2016, the incidence of poverty remains higher than the national average, with poverty levels being very high in some parts of the state, ranging from 11 percent to 51 percent across districts (NITI Aayog 2021). Assam's population is largely rural, with 86 percent of the population living in rural areas (Census info India 2011) and primarily engaged in agriculture. At the state level, undernutrition persists with 36 percent of children under five years stunted (NFHS-5). Among children in the same age group, wasting increased between the fourth and fifth NFHS (17 to 22 percent). Only 8 percent of children 6–23 months in Assam are fed a minimally acceptable diet, ranking next to last for this indicator of recommended dietary intake among all states (CFNS 2020). Anemia is prevalent among children and non-pregnant women in Assam, with more than 60 percent anemia reported in both groups (CFNS 2020).

The USAID Advancing Nutrition project implemented various nutrition-sensitive agriculture activities to address these challenges in Assam. Over the course of our implementation, we had several successes and challenges, which can inform future programming. Most notably, we found that working with and gaining buy-in from local stakeholders is required in Assam, given the complex gender and social norms, the number of different languages in the state, the number of existing government programs, and the existing expertise in the state which can be leveraged. Further, future projects should account for the substantial time required to receive the buy-in from local stakeholders, specifically government, as well as to build the capacity of local implementers, like local NGOs. Lastly, future projects should allow for information gathering/research and co-creation with the project's expected stakeholders. This will allow for informed program activities, as well as to receive buy-in and match the activities to local stakeholders' existing priorities and implementation calendar.



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USAID Advancing Nutrition is the Agency's flagship multi-sectoral nutrition project, addressing the root causes of malnutrition to save lives and enhance long-term health and development.

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