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LeNNS: A Multi-Country Nutrition Surveillance Learning Network

Malnutrition remains a significant public health concern around the world. Global hunger, measured by the Sustainable Development Goal indicator “prevalence of undernourishment,” has risen since pre-COVID-19-pandemic levels. It affected around 9.2 percent of the world population in 2022 and is still on the rise in all subregions of Africa.¹ Diets insufficient to satisfy nutritional requirements impede the physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional development of individuals, families, and communities. Effective nutrition surveillance plays a critical role in reducing these threats by providing accurate, timely, and relevant data to inform evidence-based policies and interventions. However, fragmented and under used surveillance systems with weak in-country and regional linkages make it challenging for academics, practitioners, and policy-makers to collaborate and learn from one another. To address this, the USAID East Africa mission funded a nutrition surveillance coordination initiative, delivered through USAID Advancing Nutrition, the Agency’s flagship multi-sectoral nutrition project.

The Learning Network on Nutrition Surveillance (LeNNS) launched in November 2022. Under the leadership of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), and in collaboration with USAID Advancing Nutrition, the network is expected to continue in 2024, after the USAID Advancing Nutrition comes to an end. Countries participating in this network as of September 2023 include Djibouti, Kenya, Malawi, Rwanda, Somalia, Tanzania, Zambia, and Uganda. Additional neighboring countries may be included in the future.

LeNNS has promoted the involvement of local universities and research institutions and their interaction and coordination with different entities of the public sector at the national and regional levels.

The LeNNS Approach

LeNNS was designed to directly respond to stakeholder needs, gaps and recommendations identified through an initial landscape analysis, key informant interviews, and ongoing conversations with the then potential members. LeNNS offers policymakers, practitioners, universities, and research institutions a unique forum to share knowledge, concepts, and globally recognized best practices in nutrition surveillance for effective country-led programs.

¹FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO. 2023. The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2023. Urbanization, agrifood systems transformation and healthy diets across the rural-urban continuum. Rome, FAO. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc3017en>.

Vision

Effective nutrition surveillance for socio economic development in Africa.

Mission

To harness the power of surveillance for evidence based nutrition actions through advocacy, capacity development, and knowledge management.

Objectives

- To foster the exchange of information and experiences on nutrition surveillance in the region.
- To facilitate the development of harmonized, innovative, analytic tools and methods for nutrition surveillance.
- To provide a platform for the provision of high level technical support in nutrition surveillance.
- To promote effective governance and coordination of nutrition surveillance.
- To support synthesis and translation of available nutrition data to inform policy, programs, and advocacy.

Guiding Principles

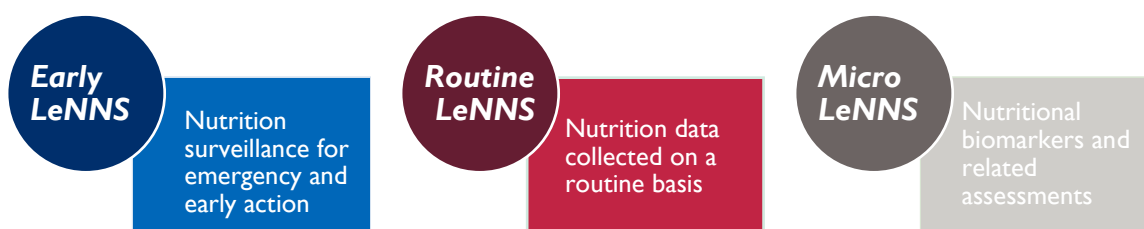
- Information is power
- Convening and mobilizing authority
- Diversity and complementarity
- Openness and confidentiality

What LeNNS Does

LeNNS facilitates cross-sectoral and multi-country peer learning by convening in-person and virtual events for engagement and exchange. Periodical in-person technical meetings bring the network together for panels, country updates, and technical working group (TWG) meetings. At the first technical meeting in November 2022, IGAD and USAID Advancing Nutrition launched the network and formed the TWGs. In the next three meetings, IGAD and the TWGs further solidified the network’s structure and technical focus, with discussions centering around global and regional innovations in food nutrition surveillance (February 2023), opportunities and challenges in the nutrition data value chain (June 2023), and a stocktaking of the network’s achievements and plans for cascading to the country level (August 2023).

The three TWGs cover “early,” “routine,” and “micronutrient” surveillance, as depicted in Figure 1. The TWGs provide members a platform to address their priorities for thematic learning and innovations, harmonize surveillance practices and tools, and influence policy and program practices.

Figure 1. LeNNS Technical Working Groups and Their Focuses



LeNNS Accomplishments To-Date

In its first year, LeNNS harnessed the power of members’ diverse collective knowledge and expertise to contribute to improved nutrition surveillance in the region. By sharing best practices and experiences, members broadened their repertoire of resources and strengthened their country-specific nutrition surveillance systems.

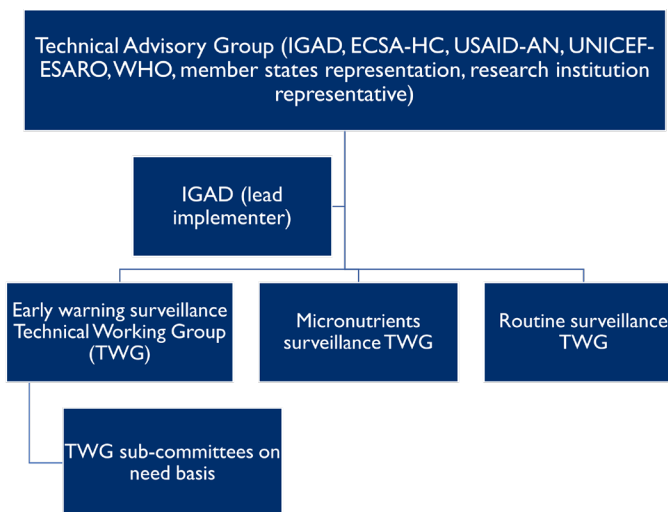
The following table summarizes the achievements of each of the TWGs:

| Early LeNNS | Routine LeNNS | Micro LeNNS |
|--|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mapped available resources for Early Warning Surveillance • Produced a data gap analysis technical brief for missing resources • Drafted training modules for food security and diet early warning and nutrition early warning | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Used a nutrition data value chain approach to map the data lifecycle from collection to use • Concluded that there are inadequate policies guiding data generation and quality food and nutrition indicators, insufficient budgets supporting nutrition information systems, and delays in releasing outputs from nutrition data analysis | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reviewed nutrition biomarkers and food analysis laboratory capacities, studying cases from Tanzania, Malawi, Uganda, Kenya, and Zambia • Shared micronutrient research in member countries, including indicator identification and micronutrient survey results • Generated two briefs on gaps in food fortification in Africa and an advocacy brief on fortification standards in LeNNS countries |

How LeNNS Is Structured

IGAD and USAID Advancing Nutrition created the following structure to ensure an effective, sustainable, and member-led network (Figure 2). The primary groups include:

- **Members** include government policy-makers, nutrition program implementers, researchers, instructors, United Nations agency representatives, non-governmental partners, and donors. Members actively participate in at least one of the three TWGs.
- **Technical Working Groups (TWG)** serve as the learning and information exchange structure for sharing experiences, identifying learning priorities, and developing annual work plans. TWGs meet in person and virtually through monthly meetings, TWG meetings, and WhatsApp groups to achieve learning goals.
- **A Technical Advisory Group (TAG)** guides the network’s decision-making, technical backstopping, and implementation of learning and exchange. TAG members meet in person quarterly and online as needed and include IGAD, ECSA-HC, WHO, UNICEF ESARO Regional Office², member states, and research institution representatives.
- IGAD, as **Lead Implementer**, steers the implementation of LeNNS, convenes workshops, facilitates TWG meetings, and ensures that members are engaged. IGAD also calls TAG meetings, manages finances and administration, links LeNNS with relevant stakeholders in nutrition surveillance, and mobilizes technical and financial resources to foster network sustainability.



LeNNS has been a beacon of collaboration and knowledge exchange, uniting stakeholders from across East, Horn, Central, and Southern African countries.” Agnes Aongola, Member Government Representative

The Future of LeNNS

In its second year of implementation, LeNNS will continue to evolve in response to member interests and ideas. The network’s short-term strategic vision focuses on meeting the immediate needs of member states, providing tangible results, and consolidating resources. The longer-term vision is to align with the 2030 agenda for the Sustainable Development Goals and open the network up to other regions for a continental metamorphosis. Priorities in the LeNNS 2023-2030 Strategic Plan include:

1. Harmonizing nutrition data and indicators by establishing a common framework;
2. Enhancing the use of technology and innovative tools by mapping and apprising existing analytic tools for efficiency and effectiveness;

² Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD); East, Central and Southern Africa – Health Community (ECSA-HC), World Health Organization (WHO), UNICEF East and Southern Africa Regional Office (ESARO)

3. Strengthening the demand for nutrition surveillance data through co-creation and co-design of surveillance systems with intended users;
4. Learning the most promising approaches in multi-sectoral coordination for greater replication;
5. Building the capacity of members; and
6. Advocating for the integration of nutrition surveillance data into national policies, programs, and strategies across sectors, such as health, agriculture, education, and social protection.

“LeNNS’ distinctive strength lies in its regional focus, bringing together a diverse group of professionals who are all highly motivated and committed to addressing common nutrition challenges in surveillance and programming in our specific context. The network fosters an environment of collaboration and peer learning that sets it apart.” Lukonde Mwelwa Zgambo, University of Zambia

Contact for More Information

For more information on LeNNS or on joining the network, visit the LeNNS website:
<https://lenns.igadcen.org/>



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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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