



# Connecting the Pieces: Structuring a Nutrition Learning Network that Lasts

## Introduction

In most countries, including high-income countries, most people do not consume diets that adhere to dietary guidelines.<sup>1</sup> Policies that target context-specific gaps in nutrition can help address this issue; however, policies and programs will not be effective if they are not supported by data, evidence, and sensible actions. The availability of data remains a significant challenge for nutrition practitioners in eastern Africa. Data that is available is often not interpreted, translated or synthesized effectively between those generating the data and those using it to make decisions around policy and programming.

The Learning Network on Nutrition Surveillance (LeNNS) launched in November 2022 following an extensive consultation and co-creation process with funding from USAID East Africa under the USAID Advancing Nutrition project. The learning network is quickly gaining momentum to fill the nutrition information gap by fostering learning and the exchange of information and practices on nutrition surveillance among experts from Djibouti, Malawi, Zambia, Tanzania, Rwanda, Kenya, Somalia, and Uganda. This learning brief reflects on the design and structure of LeNNS, summarizing lessons learned and next steps for the network.

## USAID Advancing Nutrition Approach

### Why a learning network?

Learning networks that bring together key actors for continuous open and honest dialogue, collaboration, and knowledge sharing are important strategies for enhanced impact and sustained change.<sup>2</sup> Learning networks can be formulated in various ways to meet differing needs, so USAID Advancing Nutrition supported an extensive co-design process with stakeholders that resulted in a unique LeNNS structure that stakeholders said would best meet their needs and interests in the long-term.

### Purpose

Participants in the co-design processes first explored the primary purpose of LeNNS. They considered whether it should be created as a learning network, with the primary objective of sharing, or a coordination network, with the primary objective of exercising influence outside the network.<sup>3</sup> Stakeholders expressed the need for a platform to support and facilitate learning and information exchange among public and research institutions involved in nutrition surveillance in the region, so the co-creation process established LeNNS primarily as a support network. However, there is need and interest in coordinating on regional policy, and making LeNNS a hybrid of the two models was also discussed.

As a result, the LeNNS network was established with the following objectives:

- I. Foster the exchange of information and experiences on nutrition surveillance in the region

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<sup>1</sup> Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN), GALLUP, Harvard T.H. Chan. School of Public Health. *Measuring What the World Eats: Insights From a New Approach*. October 2022.

<sup>2</sup> USAID Knowledge-Driven Microenterprise Development (KDMD) project. *Practices of Successful Learning Networks: Documenting Learning from The Groove Learning Network*. August 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Ratcliff, Kimberly. "What Kind of Network?" *USAID Learning Lab*. March 31, 2021.

2. Facilitate the development of harmonized and innovative analytic tools and methods for nutrition surveillance
3. Provide a platform for the provision of high-level technical support in nutrition surveillance
4. Prioritize investments in nutrition surveillance in the region
5. Support the synthesis and translation of available nutrition data to inform policy-making, programs, and advocacy.

Establishing these objectives early on in the process was critical for guiding the focus and work of LeNNS.

## Membership and Leadership

Another set of critical decisions in designing LeNNS was defining the network's membership and leadership. Networks can have *open* membership, available to all interested stakeholders, or *closed* with formally defined membership requirements.<sup>4</sup> The co-creation process revealed that stakeholders believed that an open network, available to all interested professionals in the region, would better promote regional growth and knowledge sharing. Members are expected to actively participate in learning, information exchange, and technical workshops. To successfully launch this initiative with in-person components, it was necessary to keep membership numbers manageable. Key stakeholders decided to begin with a limited number of countries, focused in one region, to facilitate exchange. The longer-term vision for LeNNS, however, is to encourage continental support and collaboration once the network is more established.

LeNNS is unique because it brings together policy-makers, nutrition program implementers, research institutions, universities, and development partners from across the region. Previously, academics, practitioners, and policymakers worked largely independent of one another with few opportunities to collaborate and share information and experiences. Stakeholders prioritized the creation of a space where these actors could identify their common needs, set priorities, and take action to share information.

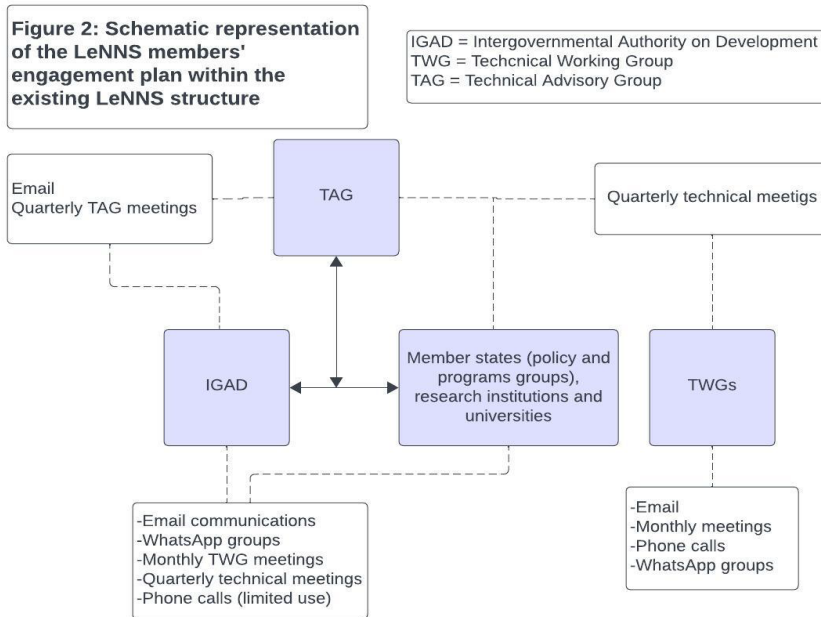
Additionally, key stakeholders determined that an entity already established in the region would be best-positioned to facilitate participation and collaboration, encouraging members to be the main drivers of the network. USAID Advancing Nutrition selected the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) as the lead implementing partner with USAID and USAID Advancing Nutrition supporting IGAD during the launch period.

## Network Structure

LeNNS is structured specifically to promote greater ownership of the network by its members through two key structures: technical working groups (TWGs) and the technical advisory group (TAGs).

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<sup>4</sup> Derr, Alex. "Closed Vs Open Networks: When is Each Most Effective?" *Visible Network Labs*. February 10, 2021.



**Technical Working Groups (TWGs)** are the network’s primary learning mechanism. Each member actively participates in at least one TWG based on their individual expertise and interest area. Three TWGs each have a specific focus. The Early Warning Surveillance TWG looks at nutrition surveillance areas that provide information for emergency and early action. The Routine Surveillance TWG focuses on data that is continually or regularly collected by systems such as the Demographic Health Survey. The Micronutrient Surveillance TWG discusses issues and concerns on biomarkers, bioindicators, and the performance of specific interventions like food fortification and micronutrient supplementation.

Each TWG has terms of reference which guides the group’s engagement, outlining specific objectives for information exchange and sharing within the respective thematic areas. TWG members engage through quarterly in-person technical meetings, WhatsApp groups, phone calls, monthly virtual meetings, and email.

The **Technical Advisory Group (TAG)** is the governance structure of LeNNS. This body oversees the work of the TWGs, provides technical backstopping support, and guides the network’s critical decisions in implementing learning and exchange initiatives. Members draw from IGAD, the Eastern, Central, and Southern Africa (ECSA) Health Community, the regional office of the World Health Organization, UNICEF East and Southern Africa Regional office, a representative from each of the TWGs, and representatives from government, universities, and research institutions. The TAG meets quarterly in person and convenes ad-hoc virtual meetings. At the quarterly meetings, the group reviews progress in learning and sharing at technical meetings, develops strategies to support the TWGs, and works to set a strategic vision and plan for LeNNS work. Each TAG member participates in a TWG, which enables them to be aware of the work being done and elevate any issues to the TAG and leadership.

One organization serves as the **implementation lead**, anchoring the network to keep it sustained over the long-term. Though members drive the work of LeNNS and strategic decisions happen within in the TAG, an established regional organization is necessary for making connections with key nutrition stakeholders and handling the day-to-day implementation of the network. This includes convening LeNNS workshops, facilitating the work of the TWGs, organizing the TAG meetings, linking LeNNS with the relevant stakeholders in nutrition surveillance, and managing the administrative and financial aspects of the network. IGAD is in this role because of its ability to engage potential members and

provide ongoing engagement in the topics, willingness to work with other regional entities, and enthusiasm to spearhead this initiative.

## Lessons Learned

The co-design process illuminated some core elements for successful network design and implementation:

1. Engage a regional organization as lead implementer

A key takeaway was the importance of incorporating existing regional leadership at every point, from bringing in local nutrition experts to advise during the scoping phase to serving on the TAG and guiding the direction of LeNNS. An existing regional organization already has many of the political and technical connections needed to launch the network quickly and ensure it meets the needs of members. This also ensured that the TAG and TWGs were structured in contextually-relevant ways to keep the network focused and relevant. Most importantly, regional organizations understand regional politics, member state dynamics, and how to properly handle the logistics of regional meetings. A regional organization that leads implementation also promotes the sustainability of LeNNS beyond the funding timeline, ensuring that the progress and learning from the first year continue.

2. Structure the network to build personal relationships and trust

Structuring the network to foster good relationships among members and with leadership bodies is also critical. Within LeNNS this is done through the TWGs and their representation in the TAG. Giving members the opportunity to take on leadership roles encourages further participation and promotes more regular engagement through the TWGs and at the TAG level. TWG outcomes are the result of member collaboration, which encourages solidarity and minimizes competition among individual members. Finally, the network's structure and design fostered relationships through mechanisms for member participation and accountability. By establishing quarterly meetings and regular check-ins with TWGs and setting clear expectations for members from the beginning, LeNNS not only launched but also flourished in its first year.

## Institutionalizing the LeNNS Network

LeNNS will continue to evolve in response to members' changing ideas and interests as they drive the work forward. Through the co-creation process, the network was specifically designed to put members in charge to promote long-term sustainability after the initial funding period. The network's initial momentum and members' motivation shows promise for an institutionalized learning network that will continue to meet members' needs and achieve their shared goal of better nutrition for all.



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