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USAID Advancing Nutrition East Africa Buy-In: Establishment of the Learning Network on Nutrition Surveillance (LeNNS) Final Report

Fiscal Years 2022–2023



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.

Disclaimer

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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Contents

- Acknowledgments..... iv**
- Acronyms..... v**
- Executive Summary vi**
 - Background and Objectives..... vi
 - Major Accomplishments..... vi
 - The Way Forward vii
- Overview I**
 - Project duration I
 - Starting date I
 - Geographic focus I
- Background..... 2**
 - Context..... 2
 - Project Goal and Objectives 2
 - Structuring the Learning Network and Its Implementation 3
- Accomplishments..... 4**
 - Workstream 1: Establishing a sound, sustainable leadership structure for the learning network..... 4
 - Workstream 2: Support activity implementation 4
 - Workstream 3: Support the development and implementation of handover and sustainability plans .. 12
- Key Learning..... 14**
- Conclusion and Way Forward..... 16**
- Annex I: Environmental Mitigation and Monitoring Report 18**

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Acronyms

DQQ	Diet Quality Questionnaire
Early-LeNNS	Early warning surveillance and dietary intake assessments
ECSA	East, Central, and Southern Africa
ECSA-HC	East Central and Southern Africa Health Community
ESARO	Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Office (UNICEF)
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority for Development
IGN	Iodine Global Network
LeNNS	Learning Network and Nutrition Surveillance
LMICs	low- and middle-income countries
Micro-LeNNS	Intake of micronutrients and impact of micronutrient program surveillance
RECs	Regional Economic Communities
Routine-LeNNS	Strengthening of routine surveillance
TA	Technical Assistance
TAG	Technical Advisory Group
TFNC	Tanzanian Food and Nutrition Centre
TORs	terms of reference
TWG	Technical Working Group
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development
WHO	World Health Organization

Executive Summary

Background and Objectives

In October 2021, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) East Africa provided a scope of work to the USAID flagship multi-sectoral nutrition project named USAID Advancing Nutrition to establish an initiative on nutrition surveillance among several countries in the East Africa region. The Learning Network on Nutrition Surveillance (known as LeNNS) was designed to connect researchers and academics with policy makers and program planners in government institutions to jointly advance nutrition surveillance. To realize this vision, USAID Advancing Nutrition worked with partners in the region to design a sound, sustainable structure for the learning network, support its launch and first year of implementation and then handover the network to an established regional organization, recognizing that ongoing funding will be needed to sustain the network over a longer term.

Countries involved in this initiative were : Djibouti, Kenya, Rwanda, Somalia, Tanzania, Uganda, Malawi, and Zambia.

The specific objectives of LeNNS are to:

- Support learning and exchange among members, with strong leadership from regional institutions to set priorities in nutrition surveillance and guide the exchange among various stakeholders.
- Strengthen institutional networking to achieve excellence in nutrition surveillance.
- Encourage exchange among research institutions to find strategies for achieving permanence as well as financial sustainability.
- Create a sustainable learning network that can continue to function when USAID funding ends.

Major Accomplishments

Workstream 1: Establish a sound, sustainable structure for the learning network

Recognizing that the funding horizon included support for only the first year of LeNNS, we set out to design a network that would be flexible, locally-led, and owned by members. After conducting a series of interviews and assessing what structures stakeholders thought would work best, the Intergovernmental Authority for Development (IGAD) was selected as a suitable organization to lead implementation of the network. IGAD demonstrated strong political connections with government and the needed technical expertise, with very good networking and convening ability. In addition, IGAD demonstrated a high level of interest in the initiative and commitment to collaborating with other regional institutions as technical co-leads.

Once IGAD was selected as the network's lead implementer, we worked together to formalize a leadership structure and design a basic approach to the learning network. We identified which other regional organizations were well-positioned to help lead LeNNS' first year and formed a technical advisory group (TAG) to define the structure of the network, set the agenda for the first year and ensure that member interests and needs are met. The TAG includes the United Nations Children's Fund Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Office (UNICEF-ESARO), the East, Central and Southern Africa Health Community (ECSA-HC), World Health Organization (WHO), Institute for Global Nutrition (IGN), USAID, and USAID Advancing Nutrition, and is led by IGAD.

Workstream 2: Support activity implementation

IGAD conducted the first member survey with potential members, assessing how the network can add value, motivate participation, explore experiences (positive and negative) with other learning networks, and prioritize topics of interest. The TAG also recommended holding an online consultation in October

2022 to gather recommendations from both government and implementers before the official network launch in November 2022.

In LeNNS' first year, we designed a member engagement plan that was updated quarterly, established four TWGs to allow a deeper focus on key themes from members (micronutrients, routine surveillance, and early warning surveillance). In addition, we delivered quarterly learning events in November 2022, then February, May, and August 2023, which also included a one-year anniversary celebration, reviewing LeNNS' achievements and getting member input on the five-year strategic plan.

Workstream 3: Support the development and implementation of handover and sustainability plans

This last workstream was focused on sustainability for the network by planning for a clear handover to a regional partner and developing longer-term plans that include strategies to secure funding. Although USAID Advancing Nutrition set the initial direction for the learning network based on guidance from USAID East Africa, we worked hand-in-hand with IGAD to establish leadership structures that leverage a range of partners and expertise from within the region. Over the first year, USAID Advancing Nutrition moved into a supportive role, with IGAD driving decisions for the network with support from the TAG. USAID Advancing Nutrition and IGAD agreed on areas where technical assistance and training would support IGAD's role in the network. USAID and USAID Advancing Nutrition supported communication with potential funders and provided strategic input on the longer-term strategy.

The Way Forward

Over the first year of implementation, LeNNS has gained momentum and accelerated learning on nutrition surveillance in the eight member countries. Through the TWGs, methods showcase events, and the quarterly technical meetings, LeNNS members were able to receive technical guidance, advice, and information on their current systems and explore innovative approaches, tools, and methodologies that could be adopted or adapted at the country level.

Although quantifying the impact of sharing and exchange can be a challenge in the short term, member feedback clearly points to a set of positive outcomes at the individual and country level. Some of the key successes realized during LeNNS first-year project are:

- Increased awareness of nutrition surveillance across countries, with a deeper understanding of which regional countries can provide support and advice in specific technical areas.
- Countries and institutions are already mentoring each other through bilateral engagements without requiring external involvement from USAID Advancing Nutrition, IGAD, or ECSA-HC.
- Mapping nutrition surveillance systems in the region has enabled countries to understand more deeply the gaps that exist. Some are already planning to start country-level LeNNS discussions, linking and coordinating in-country information systems and mechanisms to ensure that the gaps are filled.
- Some countries are on course to adopting novel data collection tools that have been shared in LeNNS, one case in point is the food insecurity module of the Demographic Health Survey (DHS), which many countries were not aware of before they heard about it through LeNNS.
- In the one year of the initiative, LeNNS has developed a strategic framework which can guide ongoing implementation of the network and support continued resource mobilization. Advocacy and communication products have also been developed for IGAD and ECSA secretariat, as well as for TWGs, to support this endeavor.
- Countries outside the initial members have contacted IGAD to find how to join this initiative.

Before the learning network was established, there was no similar network or community of practice within the region despite the desire for cross-learning among those involved in nutrition surveillance. LeNNS met an important need in the region and provided a platform for cross-learning and fertilization of ideas between researchers, academia, and program managers—and established in-country linkages that had not previously existed. This one-year implementation period of LeNNS has tested the concept of a learning network and clearly, from the learning and the achievements realized, though modest, can inform an expanded network to include more members and countries. Maintaining the current implementation structure, LeNNS will build on successes made in the first year to demonstrate ongoing results.

Overview

Project duration

Fiscal years 2022–2023

Starting date

October 2021

Geographic focus

This project involved operating in the regions of East, Horn, and Southern Africa, specifically in the following countries: Djibouti, Kenya, Rwanda, Somalia, Tanzania, and Uganda. Representatives from Malawi and Zambia also participated, although activities did not occur specifically in those countries.

Background

Context

In October 2021, USAID provided a scope of work to its flagship multi-sectoral nutrition project USAID Advancing Nutrition to establish an initiative on nutrition surveillance among the countries of the Eastern Africa region. The initiative, in the form of a learning network, was designed to bring together health research institutions and academics involved in nutrition surveillance. It aimed to connect them with nutrition policy makers, program planners in their respective Ministries of Health, and other relevant government institutions to exchange information and experiences on tools, approaches, and methodologies for nutrition surveillance. Based on their knowledge of nutrition surveillance work in the region, USAID recommended including the following countries: Djibouti, Kenya, Rwanda, Somalia, Tanzania, Uganda, Malawi, and Zambia (with no in-country activities in Malawi and Zambia).

The learning network was proposed in response to a recognized need from countries to strengthen nutrition surveillance practices within the region. Over the last decade, these countries have been implementing nutrition programs such as fortification of commonly consumed foods; preventive micronutrient supplementation for pregnant women, infants and young children; promotion of optimal breastfeeding, and infant and young child feeding; nutrition-sensitive agriculture such as biofortification and kitchen gardening; among other programs that are geared towards improving the quality of people's dietary intake and nutrition outcomes. However, the scaling up of these programs has not been in tandem with the surveillance practices that should provide data on the implementation and impact. Countries have multiple challenges along the data continuum including weak coordination, limited data (dis)aggregation, analysis, and difficulties with interpretation to decisively show the impact of programs and inform policy and program review.

In 2006, the A2Z Micronutrient and Child Blindness Project, funded by USAID and working through the ECSA-HC, initiated a TWG on food fortification, which included in some degree monitoring and evaluation of nutrition. The group formulated an action plan based on the needs and priorities for monitoring and evaluation of food fortification programs, and started by taking stock of some of the ongoing routine surveys that can be used as proxy data on coverage and consumption of fortified foods at household level. However, this technical group, despite of its many achievements, did not ensure the continuity of the project after A2Z ended. The desire to learn and share experiences on nutrition surveillance has since lingered within the region, and especially among those involved in surveillance practices as demonstrated by some short-term initiatives funded by other partners in the region.

The need for a forum among the nutrition surveillance professionals to learn of new and innovative approaches and exchange country experiences served as the background to the establishment of the LeNNS.

Project Goal and Objectives

The focus of LeNNS is to provide a platform in the eight countries to promote the exchange of experiences and activities related to nutrition surveillance (e.g., anthropometry, dietary intake, biomarkers, and program performance) among public and research institutions.

The goal of the network is to strengthen the quality and coverage of nutrition programs and interventions among the populations of the eight countries involved in the program, with special attention to children under five years of age and women of reproductive age. Furthermore, the initiative set out to advance performance assessment of national and regional nutrition interventions.

The specific objectives of LeNNS are to:

- Support learning and exchange among members, with strong leadership from regional institutions to set priorities in nutrition surveillance and guide the exchange among various stakeholders.
- Strengthen institutional networking to achieve excellence in nutrition surveillance.
- Encourage exchange among research institutions to find strategies for achieving permanence and financial sustainability.
- Create a sustainable learning network that can continue to function when USAID funding ends in December 2023.

Structuring the Learning Network and Its Implementation

In establishing the learning network, USAID Advancing Nutrition set out to design a fit-for-purpose and sustainable platform, avoiding the pitfalls of similar, but short-lived communities of practice that existed in the past. In the first phase of the project (October 2021–September 2022), USAID Advancing Nutrition conducted a landscape analysis to understand how to structure and implement the learning network in a manner that facilitates engagement among members, and ensures sustainability beyond the initial funding provided by USAID.

We conducted key informant interviews with institutions and experts engaged in nutrition and nutrition surveillance (both within and outside of the region) including intergovernmental institutions. We also reviewed literature on successful models for learning networks to determine the enablers and inhibitors to success, potential challenges, and lessons-learned for sustaining networks over time. Central to these discussions was the need to identify a “home” and establish a local leadership structure, with the goal that the network will be institutionalized and supported beyond USAID Advancing Nutrition. The discussions explored ideal leadership structures, priorities for nutrition surveillance in the proposed countries and region, and suggestions for a feasible overall design and structure.

From this landscape analysis we identified critical considerations for success. These included the need to:

- build a strong leadership structure;
- identify and consistently meet network member needs;
- build around clearly stated goals; and
- include strategies for ongoing learning and financial sustainability.

Thus, in the second phase of the project (October 2022–September 2023), we embarked on building a leadership and implementation structure of the network around the four aforementioned key points, to support the implementation of the learning network, in the following workstreams:

- Workstream 1: Establishing a sound, sustainable structure for the learning network
- Workstream 2: Support activity implementation
- Workstream 3: Support the development and implementation of handover and sustainability plans

Accomplishments

Workstream 1: Establishing a sound, sustainable leadership structure for the learning network

The aim of this workstream was to support the establishment of the leadership structure for the learning network with clear roles for each of the institutions within the structure, issue the grant under contract, and administratively support the lead implementer to establish the learning network. We were looking for an organization or organizations to drive the learning network forward over the longer term. Based on the criteria that we developed, we conducted a series of interviews with intergovernmental organizations that we identified during the landscape analysis and that are based in the region and spoke with other regional partners involved in nutrition programming.

The IGAD was selected as the lead implementer. IGAD has strong political connections with government bodies (all matters of development are ultimately reported and ratified by the Heads of Member States) and the needed technical expertise with very good networking and convening ability. USAID Advancing Nutrition worked with IGAD to formalize a leadership structure and approach to the learning network, and drew up an implementation structure for the network.

Weekly meetings between USAID Advancing Nutrition and IGAD ensured a solid understanding of project goals and objectives, which then increased efficiency during the start-up phase for the network. IGAD understood the sustainability goals of the network and their role in carrying the work forward in the coming years, which enhanced ownership, accountability, and performance at both individual and team level.

Although IGAD was selected as the lead implementer, we recognized that other regional organizations have critical knowledge, expertise, experience, and networks that would benefit the learning network if well-leveraged under mutual collaborations.

A TAG was set up with clear terms of reference (TORs), with a focus on providing technical guidance and shaping the agenda for the network. The initial membership of the group included IGAD and USAID Advancing Nutrition as the co-chairs, and USAID, UNICEF-ESARO, WHO, IGN, and ECSA-HC as members. Later on, the three LeNNS Technical Working Group (TWG) chairs and representatives from the member states were included.

IGAD is in charge of the day-to-day implementation of the LeNNS activities while the TAG provides overall guidance and technical backstopping to the network.

The advisory group helped shape the LeNNS agenda by proposing the design of learning events, including the themes and presenters. This enriched the discussions and learning among the members and provided a unique mix of international and regional speakers. The speakers shared international trends and innovations in nutrition surveillance, while reflecting on practices from within the region. Having international partners as part of the TAG—particularly WHO, UNICEF, and IGN—also helped align the network’s discussions with the international guidelines on nutrition surveillance. IGAD and ECSA-HC both facilitated sharing of regional practices from their member institutions, and from countries that were not represented on the learning network.

Workstream 2: Support activity implementation

This workstream was focused on USAID Advancing Nutrition’s role providing support to IGAD for the actual implementation of the learning network. IGAD and USAID Advancing Nutrition jointly created structure and definition for LeNNS, identifying potential members, and seeking guidance on learning network structures that they expect will work best. Additionally, we conducted a technical needs

assessment to sharpen the focus of the network, prioritizing the topics that would be most useful to members.

Establishing a system to ensure responsiveness to member needs

Technical Working Groups

Informed by the initial technical needs assessment, the TAG agreed to establish three TWGs addressing three key technical areas:

- TWG I: Dietary assessments and early warning systems (Early-LeNNS)
- TWG II: Routine Surveillance (Routine-LeNNS)
- TWG III: Micronutrient Biomarkers (Micro-LeNNS)

Specifically, the dietary assessment and early warning surveillance (Early-LeNNS TWG) supports learning in Standardized Monitoring and Assessment of Relief and Transitions surveys, sentinel sites assessments and Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), food security assessment, hunger indexes, among others. The routine surveillance (Routine-LeNNS TWG) promotes learning and information exchange in data collected from Health Management Information System and District Health Information System, DHS, Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys, among others. The Micronutrient surveillance (Micro-LeNNS TWG) is concerned with issues on biomarkers and other bioindicators as well as the performance of specific interventions such as salt iodization, food fortification, and micronutrient supplementation.

These functional units allow for increased engagement, exchange of information, and learning among the network members creating greater depth in learning in key areas. Once formed, LeNNS members—including government, research institutions, and university representatives—selected which TWG they wished to join, with a goal to have each country represented in each TWG. All members of the TAG also joined one TWG, further reinforcing the ability of the TAG to understand member needs and be part of key conversations across the network.

Each TWG selected one member to serve as the lead. The TWG leads organize WhatsApp groups for regular communication, monthly calls, and set an agenda for the TWG in-person meetings, which are part of the quarterly technical meetings. Each TWG also includes one representative from IGAD, who supports the organization and structure of the TWGs, ensuring that IGAD is able to provide implementation support as needed and ensure that all TWGs are functional.

Quarterly Technical Meetings

Once the TWGs were established, we agreed on a structure that would build relationships within the region and optimize access to the latest innovations, research, and promising practices. Through quarterly in-person technical meetings, we agreed to feature presentations from individuals doing notable nutrition surveillance work in the region. Additionally, a portion of each quarterly technical meeting was dedicated to the TWGs, allowing each TWG time to engage in-person and address specific topics of interest.

The location of quarterly meetings rotated among member countries. In this way, we were able to have increased involvement from the host country, both from government ministries and research institutions. In the countries where LeNNS meetings were held, we were able to raise the profile of LeNNS and received increased support and commitment for the work and for the members representing those countries.

Having quarterly in-person technical meetings allowed the TAG to keep current with the needs of members, through formal and informal conversation, gauge member reactions to the topics presented, and prompt discussion to explore topics of interest.

Following each quarterly technical meeting, a few hours were reserved for the TAG to meet in-person. These in-person TAG meetings allowed the leadership team to reflect on the event that had just occurred, discuss member needs, and make decisions about the agenda for the next quarterly event.

Quarterly Member Surveys

In addition to establishing the TWGs and quarterly technical meetings, we also sent an online survey for members to complete quarterly. This was critical during the first year, when we needed to capture member commitment and interest to get the network established. The following were identified as common needs in the first two LeNNS member surveys:

1. Sharing experiences and best practices on how to increase the quality of data using the state-of-the-art methods for data collection.
2. Harmonization of indicators to improve comparability across countries and to facilitate learning and sharing of best practices and experiences.
3. Mapping systems for collecting data within member countries and identifying what might be standardized at a regional level.
4. Creating a database of institutions involved in nutrition surveillance to facilitate further networking and idea-sharing.
5. Capacity strengthening (training) across the entire data chain: conceptualization/design, data collection, handling, analysis, interpretation, and use for policies and program.
6. Development of a regional data hub for priority indicators where countries and their partner institutions can access information on indicators in usable formats.
7. Facilitate the use of state-of-the-art methods for data collection, e.g., instead of depending on laborious paper-based 24-hour recall, support use of available relevant apps.
8. Facilitate the integration of surveys with existing DHS to streamline logistics and the costs involved (e.g., integrating micronutrient surveys into DHS).
9. Network laboratories for key biomarkers to share experiences in analysis of biomarkers, compare methods, and share analytical approaches.
10. Support for continued advocacy at regional and national level to incorporate missing nutrition indicators into the established data collection systems, e.g., inclusion of adolescent nutrition data into DHS, or considering systematic and periodical establishment of complementary mechanisms such as specific micronutrient surveys.

The needs identified from each member survey were shared in the quarterly TAG meetings. The survey results documented member priorities and continued to guide the engagement of the network members within TWGs and during quarterly technical meetings. Understanding member priorities also enabled the TAG to mobilize participation from external researchers and experts.

Taken as a whole, this method of engaging members and keeping a pulse on member needs facilitated effective vertical and horizontal linkages and communication among the LeNNS units and the members, and ensured that the objectives of the network and expectations of these members were met.

Network launch and successful delivery of four learning events

USAID Advancing Nutrition, with other members of the TAG, launched the learning network in November 2022. The launch event, delivered alongside the first technical meeting, was attended by members of the network, select development partners, and researchers and nutrition experts from within the region.

The launch event succeeded in increasing awareness of LeNNS in member countries, allowing a range of stakeholders to attend either in-person or join an online broadcast of the event. The goal and objectives of the network were shared, with an emphasis on our member-led, consultative approach. In describing the technical direction for LeNNS, we shared results from the first member survey and an online consultation with LeNNS member country governments and members held in October. This approach helped secure commitment from members and their respective governments.

IGAD and USAID Advancing nutrition, with technical support from the TAG successfully organized a total of four learning events over the one-year period from October 2022 to September 2023, as follows.



First Technical Meeting: Introduction, framing of the learning network and facilitating institutional linkages (Nov. 2023)

The first technical meeting served to introduce the learning network, its intended goal and objectives, and the proposed implementation structure to the members. In this meeting, participants reaffirmed the need to link policymakers and research institutions and universities especially in data collection, synthesis, interpretation, and use.

It also provided an opportunity for the countries to share a synopsis of their needs and current priorities in nutrition surveillance, which they extensively discussed to identify cross-cutting priorities which informed the areas of thematic discussions and learning within the network.

The three TWGs were introduced (food security and early warning surveillance; micronutrients; and routine surveillance) and LeNNS members identified the working group that they wished to join.

These TWGs have continued to be the main functional learning and engagement platforms for the LeNNS members where they share innovative approaches in each of the specific areas. In order to enhance the learning and engagements, each TWG drafted their respective TORs and nominated the chairs and secretaries. Virtual meetings were then held on a monthly basis according to TORs and one of their initial tasks in these meetings was to finalize the TORs and draw respective work plans.

In addition, the working groups served to catalyze the linkages between the universities, research institutions, and the government, which members noted needs to be strengthened in most countries. Discussions during the working group meetings underscored the importance of communication and establishing feedback loops between policy making and program managing bodies and the health research institutions/academia.

Second Technical Meeting: Innovations in food and nutrition surveillance—Global and regional perspectives (Feb. 2023)

This was a larger learning event, which included both LeNNS members and selected international experts in nutrition research, programming, and surveillance. The meeting was aimed at providing LeNNS members with an opportunity to learn about innovative systems, methods, and tools, alongside other practices in nutrition surveillance that have been developed globally for regional, country-level, and institutional adoption and adaptation. The international experts discussed methods for designing nutrition surveillance programs, data generation and use for accountability and action, and the need for institutionalizing the entire data value chain.

Based on the thematic areas prioritized in the first learning event, the international experts shared innovations in these areas both in plenary sessions as well as in the TWG breakout sessions. Some of the innovations included use of data generated from routine surveys (e.g., the household consumption and expenditure survey) to make dietary inferences; use of data collection applications that are easy to apply and administer (e.g., INDDX24 Dietary Assessment Platform, Intake4Earth app); integration of biomarkers into routine surveys, such as in the panel survey (an agriculture-focused household survey); and the use of easy to use and interpret tools such as the diet quality questionnaire (DQQ) to collect population data on dietary intake.

LeNNS members also learned of some of the ongoing global research initiatives such as the Mahidol University/Harvard University collaboration aimed to strengthen capacity for population measurement of nutritional biomarkers and diet quality to capture under and over nutrition in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs); and the existing global platforms for nutrition surveillance such as the Micronutrient Data Innovation Alliance. Some of the members of LeNNS have since joined and are now part of these global initiatives.

Third Technical Meeting: Addressing challenges in the nutrition data value chain for greater impact (May 2023)

Having been provided some significant information on nutrition surveillance tools and state-of-the-art practices in the previous event, this follow-up technical meeting guided LeNNS members to critically review the nutrition data value chain. LeNNS members also discussed the application of tools and approaches previously shared, using specific country cases and experiences, and agreed on the actions needed to increase the impact of evidence and data on policies and programs in countries and across the region.

The importance of creating demand for data at the country and regional levels was a key theme and there was a call for increased use of data to make decisions. A case study from International Food Policy Research Institute provided a perspective on using data and evidence for policy and programs—where it is critical to work with countries in co-designing and co-implementing of research and programs; identifying policy development cycles relevant for the utilization of research recommendation and lessons. The TWG members also discussed progress made towards the implementation of their objectives and more importantly the regional efforts to profile, harmonize, standardize surveillance methods, approaches, and tools. With the invitation and organization of the Ministry of Health, Uganda, participants also visited the Uganda National Health Laboratory and Diagnostic Services facility as part of the learning and sharing.



It was clear that the in-person quarterly technical meetings are important platforms allowing effective relationship building, exchange of information, and complements to the virtual monthly TWG meetings.

Participants unanimously agreed that learning is useless if not applied and well utilized for the benefit of the countries and institutions represented in LeNNS. This meeting enabled LeNNS members to reflect on how to adopt or adapt the information gained and learned thus far, and how to resolve challenges that may hinder the application of the innovative tools and methods shared. It was resolved that the time was right for the deliberations to really lead to improved actions and impact at national level, which could begin immediately. It was agreed that a mechanism to influence country actions for positive change in nutrition surveillance should be deliberated upon and implemented. These discussions still continue within the TWGs.

This May Technical Meeting was preceded by a complementary learning event called the Methods Showcase. In response to calls from LeNNS members for more in-depth learning on specific methods and practices discussed during the February Technical Meeting, USAID Advancing Nutrition coordinated three concurrent events that spanned 2 days of learning, designed and facilitated by researchers in the thematic fields:

1. Interpreting program performance and biomarker indicators of micronutrient: surveys: Provided a comprehensive overview of key micronutrient biomarkers or indicators, followed by examples using real data from the LeNNS countries and case studies of countries' decision-making experiences with nutrition and health policies
2. Regulatory monitoring indicators and procedures of large-scale food fortification programs: Examined the role of food fortification in managing micronutrient inadequacies and facilitated sharing of food fortification success stories that highlight key factors for success, as well as LeNNS country experiences with food fortification monitoring

3. The DQQ, a tool for population-level diet quality monitoring: Aimed to give participants an understanding of why measuring diet quality is important in a nutrition surveillance system, what the DQQ tool measures, and indicators that can be calculated from the DQQ
4. Nutrition indicators beyond anemia and micronutrient biomarkers in the DHS: Imparted knowledge on the nutrition data collected in DHS surveys and Service Provision Assessment surveys, the role of DHS Program data in the nutrition data ecosystem, ways to read and interpret nutrition-related indicators collected in these surveys and utilize the data for action.

Fourth Technical Meeting: Moving from regional achievements to influencing country-level actions in nutrition surveillance (Aug. 2023)

The final learning event was organized to take stock of LeNNS achievements, discuss mechanisms for moving regional discussions to country-level action, and chart a way forward for the network's continuation and sustainability. The event also served to celebrate the LeNNS one-year anniversary by demonstrating achievements to date of the TWGs, and to discuss mechanisms for catalyzing change in nutrition surveillance at country level. It took place in Mombasa, Kenya.

Over the past year, the Early Warning TWG generated resource lists, which map early warning data collection activities that are being conducted in the region and the institutions to contact for capacity development support. Through these TWG discussions, Zambia connected with FAO to mobilize the expertise and funding for a training on Integrated Phase Classification (IPC-Acute Malnutrition), a system for data analysis that helps inform decision makers to decrease acute malnutrition. This TWG also drafted modules focused on food security and diet indicators, ensuring that critical data are included in early warning data collection systems. These modules are already being used by LeNNS members who are affiliated with universities, with the aim to revise their own data collection models. IGAD will use these modules when developing a nutrition surveillance curriculum.

The Routine Surveillance TWG undertook a mapping of routine nutrition-related data needs and data collection platforms using a data value chain approach and proposed mechanisms for filling the identified gaps. The group has drafted a technical brief on the ability of routine nutrition surveillance mechanisms in LeNNS member countries to track hunger and food and nutrition security by the year 2030. This technical brief will help countries identify next steps for strengthening data collection systems in LeNNS member countries.

The Micronutrients TWG achieved a number of milestones. As the TWG with the largest membership, this group decided to form sub-working groups (fortification, laboratory capacity and micronutrient studies). Over the past year, the TWG began mapping nutrition biomarkers and food analysis laboratory capacity, with a focus on Tanzania, Malawi, Uganda, Kenya, and Zambia. This mapping allows interested institutions and researchers to identify locations where specific biomarkers can be sent for analysis. The mapping is ongoing, with a plan to include more LeNNS countries. This TWG has also taken stock of micronutrient studies done in the region and identified remaining gaps. Further, the group also identified gaps in fortification and has drafted an advocacy brief for regional fortification standards in LeNNS countries for dissemination.

Having been in existence for about a year since its launch in November 2022, LeNNS celebrated its first anniversary by exhibiting the achievements made by the TWGs in booths. These achievements included technical briefs, policy briefs, resource lists, sharing of best practices in consolidated reports, and a repository of learnings in the LeNNS website. In addition, IGAD, in collaboration with ECSA, also exhibited some of the products developed including publications that were developed by the two regional blocs in various thematic areas as well as the LeNNS website. In the speeches given, LeNNS members were encouraged to change their mode of operation going forward with learning and country-level actions with no or minimal funding. This event culminated in a cake cutting ceremony to symbolize the one-year mark.

Given significant demand for a second Methods Showcase, IGAD organized another two-day event that preceded the fourth LeNNS meeting. This Methods Showcase focused on creating a comprehensive and coordinated concept of public health nutrition to guide national interventions. Themes included:

- making better use of resources by avoiding duplication and waste and preventing unintended consequences. It generated significant interest from participants, who are working to identify more feasible, effective interventions that fit their specific country context.
- use of high-level biomarkers for child stunting compared to chronic malnutrition and the potential reason for slow reduction of anemia— recognizing that anemia in LMICs is caused by factors beyond inadequate of several related micronutrients.
- pathophysiology of key anemia biomarkers, key factors that could obscure accurate interpretation and quantification of population burden and contextual factors needed to interpret micronutrient deficiencies such as altitude over the sea, smoking, presence of endemic infections, subclinical inflammation, and population genetics.
- assessment of diets and nutrient intakes using Household Consumption and Expenditure Survey.
- limitations in large-scale food fortification.
- applying isotopic and related nuclear techniques for nutrition assessments.

Given that the funding from USAID Advancing Nutrition supported only the first year of LeNNS that ended in October 2023, members recognized the need to identify practical strategies for continuing the network until further funding can be identified, hopefully within the coming six months. Members expressed their commitment to LeNNS and the value of the network. As such, finding ongoing funding for LeNNS that covers several more years, until a member-funded model can be established is critical.

The following next steps were agreed during the fourth LeNNS technical meeting:

- Continue with online TWG meetings. The TWG will develop new work plans focusing more on influencing country-level actions, leveraging regional-level achievements made in the preceding year.
- Promote in-country actions and cross-learning in priority areas related to nutrition surveillance.
- Through the TWGs, continue mapping existing structures in countries to be able to move from regional to country-level actions.
- Advance linkages with other relevant partners and Regional Economic Communities (RECs) including the Southern Africa Development Cooperation.
- Identify LeNNS focal persons in each country to more solidly institutionalize the LeNNS network and promote quick follow up on implementation.
- Finalization of the LeNNS strategic framework and vision and begin implementation.
- Continue with resource mobilization for regional and in-country LeNNS activities.

Overall, these four learning events were carefully designed to respond to the main objective of the learning network, which was to provide a platform for nutrition program managers, health research institutions and the academia from the selected eight countries to learn from each other and receive external expertise information on how to strengthen nutrition surveillance practices in their countries.

Workstream 3: Support the development and implementation of handover and sustainability plans

This last workstream was focused on encouraging sustainability through clear handover from USAID Advancing Nutrition to IGAD, ensuring the staff have the right skills, a refined focus for the network and plans that help secure future funding. USAID Advancing Nutrition provided technical assistance (TA) support to IGAD in the implementation and leadership of the learning network, and supported the development of a long-term vision and plan for the network.

To ensure a successful transition, USAID Advancing Nutrition had a very active role in setting the direction for the learning network and establishing initial engagement plans and leadership structures, while engaging in a consultative process IGAD to ensure that even early decisions would fit with IGAD's way of working over the long term. As time went by, USAID Advancing Nutrition strategically shifted more decision-making and leadership to IGAD, taking on more of a supportive role as the learning network became established and the TAG settled into a stronger decision-making role.

Provision of TA and training to support IGAD leadership

As part of the handover, USAID Advancing Nutrition set out to support IGAD in carrying out its coordination and facilitation role for LeNNS effectively and efficiently. This included supporting the development of a longer-term vision for LeNNS and effectively communicating LeNNS achievements and aspirations to stakeholders including policy makers and donors.

To this end, USAID Advancing Nutrition supported training for IGAD staff to support their ability to carry out their roles related to LeNNS. Three (3) IGAD staff were trained on strategic leadership, further strengthening their skills to work with member states and other partners in health and nutrition programs. Effectively leading LeNNS requires outstanding communication and engagement skills, given the large number and diversity of members. For this reason, the IGAD staff who led day-to-day interactions with LeNNS members attended training on effective communication and presentation to continue refining their skills. Two IGAD finance staff also benefited from a training on financial management for donor funded projects, including cash flow forecasting and liquidity risk management. The skills acquired will continue to be used beyond the project period.

One-to-one mentorship and technical support provided by USAID Advancing Nutrition was also given and highlighted by IGAD as particularly important. Through this side-by-side working model, USAID Advancing Nutrition and IGAD staff navigated challenges together, jointly working through issues considering IGAD's stronger regional perspective and USAID Advancing Nutrition's international lens and experience working with USAID. Reflecting on this engagement over time, IGAD has indicated that they are now more prepared to implement another USAID-funded project. Nutritionists from USAID Advancing Nutrition and other technical assistance partners also provided technical and program management insights, especially on the global perspective of nutrition surveillance and how they can be contextualized for IGAD and ECSA regions. Through this TA provision, IGAD was also connected with donors, institutions, and technical persons in Africa and elsewhere and supported through conversations about ongoing funding.

Developing a longer-term vision for the learning network

In addition to the above support, USAID Advancing Nutrition and IGAD contracted a consultant to develop a strategic framework which provides a long-term vision for LeNNS including strategies to expand network partnership and geographical coverage and achieve sustainability. The strategic framework takes into account what has been achieved by LeNNS in the past year, summarizes views and aspirations of the members, and outlines opportunities that have arisen during that period. The strategic framework also aligns with the African Union Agenda 2063, with a focus on Africa as a global powerhouse of the future and delivering inclusive and sustainable development.

In addition to having strategic actions for the short- and medium-term, the strategic framework articulates a long-term vision of transitioning LeNNS into a conduit for the continental nutrition surveillance agenda. This vision starts with involving other RECs, one by one. The strategic framework also guides IGAD and partners on what to resource mobilize for, to facilitate regional exchange that allows LeNNS member countries to improve nutrition surveillance and strengthen evidence-based nutrition policies and programs.

To support the goals outlined in the strategic framework, IGAD and USAID Advancing Nutrition also engaged a second consultant to develop an advocacy and communication package, which includes materials about LeNNS that target policy makers, donors, and other key stakeholders for action. Materials include a policy brief, an investment case, and fact sheets for each of the TWGs.

The policy brief is a call of action for LeNNS member countries to make concerted efforts to improve nutrition surveillance by including this topic in policy making and planning. The investment case for nutrition surveillance will be used to advocate for increased resource allocation by the LeNNS countries and partners. The TWGs factsheets help articulate the focus for each working group, a critical communication piece to help both funders and new members understand the vision that the TWGs hold.

Facilitated engagement and relationship building with potential funders

USAID Advancing Nutrition and IGAD conducted a funder mapping and engaged in strategic communication with potential funders. A range of funders were invited to join LeNNS events and where funders expressed interest, specific proposals were developed. This helped to showcase the need for support on nutrition surveillance in the East and Central Africa region and LeNNS' role as a learning network. USAID Advancing Nutrition and IGAD worked together on strategies for approaching funders. As part of this goal, IGAD has been in contact with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Nutrition international and the African Development Bank. IGAD is continuing to follow up on these opportunities, among others. IGAD has also submitted a proposal, alongside a new set of partners, to Irish Aid on addressing acute malnutrition in three IGAD member states and part of this proposal includes facilitating information exchange on nutrition surveillance. USAID Advancing Nutrition and IGAD also engaged with both UNICEF and WHO, both of which supported participation of their staff to provide the needed technical support.

Though we have not yet received a firm commitment of funding for LeNNS through the end of year 2, viable collaborations between funders and IGAD have begun to support LeNNS to fully realize its objectives and the ultimate goal of improving the quality, coverage, and impact of nutrition programs and interventions.

Key Learnings

1. Initially, the learning network was intended to only include research institutions and academia. However, **the careful integration and involvement of government institutions**, especially the Ministry of Health representatives (nutrition program managers and Monitoring and Evaluation officers) helped to establish critical linkages between researchers and nutrition practitioners, and framed the discussions for practical action. This, in effect, completed the loop in the data value chain that requires that data generation should be informed by needs in either policy or programming, and the evidence generated should respond to gaps identified. As explained during the landscape analysis for LeNNS conducted during the scoping phase, despite the critical role of these linkages, they did not exist in most of the LeNNS countries when the network was first launched. There are several takeaways from this learning that might be helpful for others setting up similar learning networks: 1) regional coordination bodies that want to accelerate change need to see their role as bringing the critical change makers at the country level to the table, not only researchers; 2) coordination at the country level is challenging, even for well-established actors and using regional convening power to start conversations and build relationships helps reduce barriers to change; and 3) the experience that IGAD and other RECs bring to this work was essential in securing government participation—leveraging existing relationships and the ability to navigate government bureaucracies accelerated progress and allowed us to achieve critical goals in a short period of time.
2. The structure of LeNNS, including the TAG, the TWGs, and the regional learning events, provided **diverse opportunities for learning and engagement among the members of the network and facilitated interaction with international experts** and organizations, which strengthened relationships that are important for learning over the long term.
3. The involvement and assigning of roles to international organizations such as UNICEF, WHO, IGN, and other international organizations ensured their continued engagement in LeNNS activities, opening the door for the LeNNS members to receive international advice and guidance on nutrition surveillance. The proximity of international staff from these institutions facilitated easy referencing of the international guidelines and requirements related to nutrition surveillance, resulting in better engagement and learning.
4. While this worked well for start-up, we recognize that experts from WHO, UNICEF, Nutrition International, IGN, international universities, and others, could be more closely engaged. The network would benefit from their technical and programming expertise more with shorter, more frequent engagements—for example, monthly—particularly through the TWGs. In year two of LeNNS, there may be an opportunity to deepen these relationships, ensuring mutual benefit and clearer terms of engagement.
5. **Nutrition surveillance is a very diverse practice and determining a clear focus and member priorities is key.** We worked closely with LeNNS members to prioritize country needs, which led to the careful selection of network focus areas. This helped ensure that discussions were relevant and useful to members. Additionally, the use of smaller TWGs enabled LeNNS members to explore their priority areas more deeply and led to better engagement from all the members. Having both specialized discussions and strategic plenaries was a key strategy in keeping LeNNS relevant and building ongoing member engagement.
6. **Allowing the TWGs to nominate their chair and secretary** increased ownership of the network, gave the members the freedom to discuss and engage more freely and chart out the goals that would be most meaningful to the group. Learning networks or communities of practice that are member-led tend to be more relevant and responsive to needs, provided that administrative burdens don't undermine leadership.

7. The relationship between USAID Advancing Nutrition and IGAD was built around **mutual respect and collaboration**. From the outset, the relationship was built with the goal to design the network together and ultimately for IGAD to lead implementation of the work. As such, USAID Advancing Nutrition established weekly meetings to agree on priorities and next steps, ensuring open channels of communication to discuss challenges, concerns, and decisions to be made. This foundation, along with a clear vision for the first year of implementation, allowed the network to move forward at a rapid pace.
8. **Opportunities to deeply examine nutrition surveillance approaches, with support from international experts, supported practical change.** The Methods Showcase events, which were delivered alongside the third and fourth LeNNS technical meetings, provided an opportunity for the LeNNS members to deeply examine the nutrition surveillance approaches, tools, and methodologies and build relationships with international researchers and experts. Though the allocated time was limited, LeNNS members welcomed the opportunity to reflect more deeply, and engage in hands-on practice with specific tools. This was an important complement to the quarterly LeNNS events.
9. Going forward, **LeNNS should consider continuing this approach** as it provides for more close engagement, and better learning through detailed discussions, on-the-spot answering of questions, and practice with nutrition surveillance tools.
10. **Mobilizing stakeholders for a regional initiative like LeNNS and building momentum for a program that will truly benefit countries and institutions takes time.** This comes after much deliberation, active participation, and good facilitation. The need for learning and information exchange nutrition surveillance was felt even before LeNNS was launched. However, given the broad nature of the subject, pinning down what would be of practical importance for members took about six months. Through deeper discussions with members, eventually the TAG was able to identify approaches for LeNNS that created the most value in the short, medium, and long term. The LeNNS strategic framework will be a useful guide, as it has considered all these formed aspirations and plans.
11. **In-person meetings at regular intervals were critical in the first year of LeNNS.** These in-person engagements helped build trust, foster exchange, and ensure that LeNNS members were able to focus on the specific outcomes for their countries. Online meetings were useful in sustaining engagement between the quarterly in-person meetings.
12. Recognizing that online meetings can pose challenges with engagement and attention, more **successful TWGs split into smaller groups and assigned key deliverables with strict timelines.** In this way, a sense of responsibility was built among members where everyone had a contribution to make during each meeting. TWG leaders and IGAD were always looking for ways to sustain attendance and high-level participation by LeNNS members.
13. This requires ongoing funding, both to maintain in-person connections and to keep TWGs engaged and active. **Funding one organization as the lead implementer is an important strategy** to provide the structure, coordination, and administrative support for a successful learning network.

Conclusions and Way Forward

Before the learning network was established, there was no similar network or community of practice within the region despite the desire for cross-learning among those involved in nutrition surveillance. LeNNS met an important need in the region and provided a platform for cross-learning and fertilization of ideas between researchers, academia, and program managers—and established in-country linkages that had not previously existed.

Over the first year of implementation, LeNNS has gained momentum and accelerated learning on nutrition surveillance in the eight countries, as well as international recognition. Through the TWGs, methods showcase events, and the quarterly technical meetings, LeNNS members were able to receive updated technical guidance, advice, and information on their current systems and explore innovative approaches, tools, and methodologies that could be adopted or adapted at the country level.

Although quantifying the impact of sharing and exchange can be a challenge in the short term, member feedback clearly points to a set of positive outcomes at the individual and country level. Some of the key successes realized during LeNNS' first year are:

- Increased awareness of nutrition surveillance across countries, with a deeper understanding of which regional countries can provide support and advice in specific technical areas. For instance, countries and institutions are already planning to send laboratory samples to the Tanzanian Food and Nutrition Centre (TFNC) laboratory for analysis. Before, these samples were being sent outside the continent which are costlier and more logistically challenging. Laboratory capacities in the IGAD and ECSA region have been mapped and the information shared among LeNNS members.
- Countries and institutions are already mentoring each other through bilateral engagements without requiring external involvement from USAID Advancing Nutrition, IGAD, or ECSA-HC. For instance, Zambia is adopting IPC-Acute Malnutrition in their early warning surveillance data collection mechanisms. When the Food and Agriculture Organization presented the case for Kenya in the second LeNNS technical meeting, they asked to be supported on the same and FAO obliged with sensitization and training in Zambia.
- Mapping nutrition surveillance systems in the region has enabled countries to understand more deeply the gaps that exist. Some are already planning to start country-level LeNNS discussions, linking and coordinating in-country information systems and mechanisms to ensure that the gaps are filled. Given the opportunity, this example could be shared during regional LeNNS meetings and set as a model for other countries to follow.
- Some countries are on course to adopting novel data collection tools that have been shared in LeNNS, one case in point is the food insecurity module of DHS which many countries were not aware of before they heard about it through LeNNS.
- In the one year of the initiative, LeNNS has developed a strategic framework which can guide ongoing implementation of the network and support continued resource mobilization. Advocacy and communication products have also been developed for IGAD and ECSA secretariats as well as for TWGs to support this endeavor.

This one-year implementation period of LeNNS has tested the concept of a learning network and clearly, from the learning and the achievements realized, though modest, can inform an expanded network to include more members and countries. For instance, Ethiopia and Zimbabwe would be excellent candidates to join LeNNS, given the commitment that institutions have shown to developing

nutrition surveillance systems. Overall, the network is in a good position to expand, however, its expansion should be strategic and mutually beneficial to the network and to the invited country.

Going forward, LeNNS has plans, in collaboration with its partners, to expand geographically and increase the stakeholders involved. This will be done gradually and in steps. Maintaining the current implementation structure, LeNNS will build on successes made in the first year to demonstrate results. This intensified advocacy will begin using the already developed strategic framework and communication and advocacy tools.

Annex I: Environmental Mitigation and Monitoring Report

In the FY23 work plan, USAID Advancing Nutrition East Africa had two activities under Workstream 2 that required in-person meetings and resulted in minimal waste generation. These activities were “Support for planning and delivery of learning events” and a “Learning network one-year anniversary event.” These activities resulted in four LeNNS meetings, which took place in November of 2022 (Nairobi, Kenya), and February (Dar es Salaam, Tanzania), June (Kampala, Uganda), and August of 2023 (Mombasa, Kenya). Given the need to foster networking connections, exchange information, and promote cross-country learning, these events all took place in person. As part of these activities, paper and non-paper goods (e.g., individual-serving water bottles, cups, and food containers) were used. The minimal amount of waste generated through the implementation of project funded activities was properly managed and discarded in an effort to mitigate any potential negative environmental impact, while adhering to local regulations and customs in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. The USAID Advancing Nutrition environmental compliance guidance, including best waste management practices, were applied.

To ensure the safety of staff, consultants, clients, and partners, and continuity of our activities, we applied COVID-19 precautions in accordance with each country’s specific regulations in our planning and implementation. This included limiting the number of attendees at in-person meetings and events, conducting meetings and training virtually whenever possible, and providing food and beverages in single-use containers. COVID-19 mitigation and single-use materials, including food and beverage items, were provided for participants wherever required and were properly disposed of at the end of each event. All single-use items were disposed of related to refreshment, office supplies, or COVID-19 personal protective equipment.

Mitigation Measure Categories	Mitigation Measures	Outstanding Issues Relating to Required Conditions	Remarks
1. Education, TA, Training	We engaged with management staff of hotels and meeting venues to ensure the proper disposal of waste gathered in waste bins and recyclables in accordance with the venue protocol.	N/A	Country regulations, standard operating procedures, and USAID Advancing Nutrition environmental compliance guidance was applied
2. Research and Development	N/A		
3. Public Health Commodities	No public health related commodities were procured.		
4. Small-Scale Construction	N/A		

5. Small-Scale Water and Sanitation	N/A		
6. Nutrition	No nutrition commodities were procured.		
7. Vector Control	N/A		
8. Emergency Response	N/A		



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