

# Enhancing National Nutrition Services

## Approaches to Systems-Level Capacity Strengthening

Many cultures tell a folk story involving a plentiful banquet where people seated at a large table receive long, unwieldy spoons. In hell, people try to feed themselves. Unable to do so, they starve. In heaven, people feed one another across the table, and all are well fed.

This allegory illustrates the beauty of effective collaboration. Communities' needs are not met when each sector works in isolation, without the advantages that come with others' perspectives. A systems approach to development recognizes communities and societies as complex and dynamic systems of actors, relationships, incentives, and norms (see figure 1). Local capacity strengthening focuses on enhancing the relationships among actors so they can together catalyze positive change, leading to more sustainable development.<sup>1</sup> Using this approach, actors within the system not only fulfill their own mandates, but also collaboratively nourish the communities they serve.

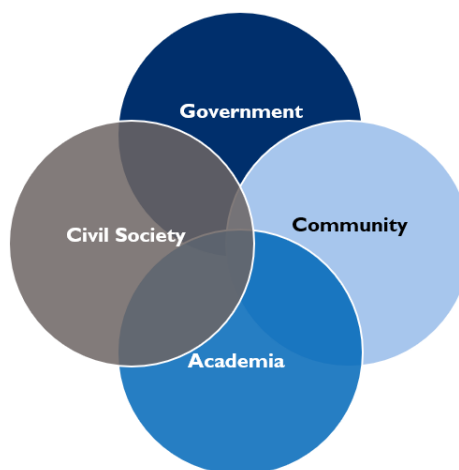
Since 2020, USAID Advancing Nutrition has been applying a systems-oriented approach to nutrition programming in Kenya. Our multi-sectoral program strengthened government capacity to improve the health of populations at risk of nutritional deficiencies in three Kenyan counties (subnational)—Kakamega, Kisumu, and Kitui. The program sought to improve stakeholder collaboration for nutrition planning, resource allocation, and coordination by connecting national and local government, international agency, civil society organization (CSO), and community partners. In doing so, we identified the need to connect with the private sector more.

This learning brief summarizes that approach, its successes and challenges, and our lessons learned through our program in Kenya for the benefit of others working in and with communities across the globe.

### Support for CSOs with Multi-Sectoral Nutrition Programming in Kenya

Ideally, government, CSOs, and communities have complementary roles. The government, as the policy maker, allocates resources and sets quality standards for the delivery of health services. CSOs play dual roles in complementing government service delivery and, at the same time, holding it accountable for responsive resource allocation and utilization. Communities participate in planning meetings and monitoring the public services they need most. However, in Kenya, a capacity assessment and social network analysis conducted by USAID Advancing Nutrition revealed a different story. We mapped the

**Figure 1. USAID Advancing Nutrition Systems Approach for Nutrition**



<sup>1</sup> USAID (U.S. Agency for International Development). 2023. *Local Capacity Strengthening Policy*. Washington, D.C.: USAID. <https://www.usaid.gov/policy/local-capacity-strengthening>

critical partners in the nutrition delivery system, saw who was connected to whom, and how often they connected.

The results were eye opening. Communications between government and local CSOs were ad hoc with limited synergies; multi-sectoral planning and reporting systems did not align and participation of communities in the process was low. We found that the government primarily connected with international organizations and was largely unaware of the work and contribution of CSOs. In turn, local civil society organizations did not play a significant role in the multi-sectoral nutrition coordination mechanism at either the national (federal) or county level. Historically, CSOs hold the government accountable for budget allocation and service delivery expenditures. Today, however, CSOs rely on government approval for their activities, limiting their ability to challenge government decisions. USAID Advancing Nutrition was working across five sectors: health, agriculture, education, social services, and water, sanitation, and hygiene, with a focus on collaboration. As part of its support for CSOs in the three counties, USAID Advancing Nutrition administered a rapid organizational capacity assessment which revealed limited partnership and coordination. One area identified as needing action and attention was working with local CSOs.

### **Strengthening Government and CSO Cooperation**

Providing quality nutrition services at the community level requires strong cooperation among the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Agriculture, among others, working alongside CSOs. We focused on improving coordination through the wider adaptation of Kenya's National Nutrition Scorecard to bring other sectors key to nutrition outcomes and the financial tracking tool. These two tools equipped local CSOs with the evidence needed to review their performance and allocate and utilize resources appropriately. Hosted by the Ministry of Health, the scorecard tracks health status along with several key indicators for both planning and accountability. Previously, government-trained technical teams in the health sector and county government primarily used the scorecard and it was not easily accessible to other stakeholders. CSOs did not know how the results were derived, how they contributed, or how to access the scorecard. Communication between the CSOs and government had become disconnected.

USAID Advancing Nutrition worked with CSOs to map their interventions to the scorecard and define their own indicators as well as revising data collection tools and intervention packages to ensure that government reporting captured their work. We provided training so they understood national nutrition policies such as the Kenya Nutrition Action Plan (KNAP) and their respective county action plans and could speak confidently about how their work contributed to National Nutrition Scorecard results. Presenting their work in these terms enabled government officials to recognize CSOs as valuable partners in helping the government achieve its mandate.

Another key breakthrough involved positioning government agencies to lead training with CSOs on their nutrition policies instead of asking program staff to learn the policies and organize the training. This was a game changer; engaging government and training institutions to design and implement these technical programs not only saved program resources by inviting the government to lead the conversation and work with CSOs directly, but also strengthened this important relationship.

### **Strengthening CSO Network Collaboration**

When CSOs join together in networks and coalitions, they are better able to hold others accountable. Networking helps civil society have a stronger voice. In collaboration with Nutrition International, we provided support to CSO networks, particularly to Scaling Up Nutrition, and helped establish civil society alliances in the three counties. These networks provide a critical common platform for CSO advocacy as part of the planning process.

Another major success was the linkage between the CSOs involved with USAID Advancing Nutrition and Kenyan academic institutions as part of the multi-sectoral nutrition coordination mechanism. One university is deploying students to local organizations, providing the university with practical experience

for students and research opportunities. The CSO receives much needed expertise and is able to tap into university technical resources.

### **Strengthening CSO/Community Cooperation**

Kenya's system of integrated development planning relies on consultation processes with communities for several key nutrition-related plans, including the Kenya Nutrition Action Plan, County Nutrition Action Plan (CNAP), Agri-Nutrition Implementation Strategy, and county government sectoral annual operations work plans. Previously, the consultation process had been a missed opportunity for communities and CSOs to shape government plans and budgets to be nutrition-friendly, as neither was organized in a way to make a concerted impact. We found CSOs and community leaders to be natural allies in this process, each with a distinct voice. By increasing their cooperation, we could magnify the impact of both.

To help civil society organizations advocate effectively, we linked them with community leaders to directly represent their communities' needs. The program engaged nutrition champions across multi-sectoral nutrition departments trained by USAID Advancing Nutrition. These [champions](#) raise awareness about the importance of nutrition and participate in integrated county activities that enhance household food security. However, the champions indicated that succeeding in their role requires linking with other resources. The local CSOs became an avenue for them to work through and integrate into the process.

Additionally, USAID Advancing Nutrition led a first-of-its-kind co-creation initiative in Kenya that brought together multi-sectoral partners for joint action planning for nutrition. In consultation with the Ministry of Health and county nutrition coordinators, we facilitated four different online and in-person workshops for national leaders and representatives from 47 county governments working across sectors including health, agriculture, social protection, and education. Participants attended a mix of in-person and virtual sessions that served as platforms to discuss recommendations, activities, and priorities for multi-sectoral nutrition as outlined in the plans.

## **Accomplishments/Changes**

At the end of the program, our work contributed to the following results:

### **Strengthened Multi-Sectoral Nutrition Data Collection**

- CSOs can now align their work to national indicators, reflecting their increased understanding of overall monitoring systems and their contribution to them.

### **Strengthened Government Accountability for Nutrition Services**

- There has been increased coordinated CSO advocacy for resource allocation in public forums for the county integrated development plans (CIDP) 2023 to 2028 and across all three counties.
- Participation in civil society alliances has increased, with two of the organizations elected chairs of their alliances as part of USAID Advancing Nutrition Kenya's work with CSOs.

### **Strengthened Multi-Sectoral Development Planning and Implementation**

- CSOs are better prepared to engage in these platforms, ensuring they are part of the decision-making process.
- More county governments are seeking to work with CSOs, recognizing the value CSOs bring as reporting and service delivery partners, particularly because of the relationships and resources CSOs use to reach communities.
- Public participation in planning forums has increased, amplifying community voice.

- The national- and county-level plans developed through the co-creation initiative continue to inform sector priorities in the KNAP, CNAP, CIDP, and Agri-Nutrition Implementation Strategy. Plans prioritize nutrition-specific and -sensitive interventions, which has been the focus of CSO advocacy.

## Lessons Learned

- **Strengthening the relationship between CSOs, government, and communities is critical for health service delivery.** Collaborative engagement not only makes planning more impactful to emphasize nutrition priorities, but also supports civic involvement in accountability.
- **Linkages and networking are a critical game changer.** Linking various stakeholders and institutions (including regulatory policy makers) in their area allows them to work together to deliver quality nutrition services nationally. Linkages help stakeholders access information for decision-making.
- **The private sector is a key stakeholder.** More focus in this area is needed to engage the private sector in a systematic way.
- **Linking stakeholders creates a locally-led capacity strengthening system.** Continuous improvement for a locally-led nutrition development system requires resources for continuous improvement and capacity strengthening. Rather than reinforcing external expertise, we took advantage of numerous opportunities to make expertise locally-led. Not only does this render ongoing capacity strengthening more relevant and sustainable, but it also continues to strengthen relationships and collaboration among the multi-sectoral actors.



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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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