



Establishing a Nutrition Learning Network that Lasts

Experiences from the Regional Learning Network on Nutrition Surveillance

Introduction

The Learning Network on Nutrition Surveillance (LeNNS) aims to foster learning and exchange of information and practices on nutrition surveillance among regional experts in Africa, as well as promoting the collaboration between universities and local research institutions with the public sector. With funding from USAID East Africa, USAID Advancing Nutrition guided the establishment of LeNNS in November 2022. The vision of LeNNS is to improve the quality, effectiveness, and population coverage of nutrition programs to enhance impact, with the overarching goal of facilitating information sharing and exchange on early warning, dietary intake, micronutrient, and routine surveillance data.

The network brings together key stakeholders from policymaking institutions, nutrition program implementers, research institutions, universities, and development partners from Djibouti, Malawi, Zambia, Tanzania, Rwanda, Kenya, Somalia, and Uganda. LeNNS provides a forum for discussing approaches to nutrition surveillance work, supporting efforts to strengthen systems for collecting nutrition data, and promoting innovative and strategic approaches in nutrition surveillance. LeNNS also plans to provide support to stakeholders prioritizing and advocating for regional investments in nutrition surveillance and to those synthesizing and translating available nutrition data to inform policymaking, programming, and advocacy efforts. Given that the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) provided funding for LeNNS' first year, we designed the structure and leadership to encourage sustainability beyond the start-up period.

This learning brief details the LeNNS' conception and design phases in the hopes that stakeholders can use this information to establish and sustain other learning networks. We created it based on reflections and discussions with participants, and summaries from key events and documents.

Co-Creating the Network

We developed LeNNS in response to an expressed need in the region: to strengthen available, translated, and synthesized regional nutrition surveillance data at the country level. There were no existing platforms for sharing data, knowledge, and expertise between agencies and institutions in the region.

Recognizing the wealth of knowledge that already exists in the region, USAID Advancing Nutrition identified the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) as the suitable regional organization to serve as the lead implementer. IGAD and USAID Advancing Nutrition linked with other regional organizations to engage in a co-creation process. This co-creation process was a critical step in establishing LeNNS as a credible, effective, and sustainable network.

During the scoping phase, from March to May 2022, the team gathered information through literature/desk reviews, looking specifically at models for learning networks that have demonstrated successful, sustainable leadership structures and the ability to keep members engaged, including financial structures and ongoing support required. They also conducted key informant interviews with regional institutions, USAID Missions, national institutions, development partners and funders (e.g., the World

Food Programme, UNICEF Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Office). The questions sought to assess each informant's involvement in nutrition surveillance work, priorities, and past participation in learning networks, as well as receive their opinion on valuable qualities for the lead implementer, current regional gaps/challenges in surveillance work, and the structure and design of the network. The most critical question we asked was, "is there really a need for a regional learning network on nutrition surveillance?"

Informants confirmed that a learning network would help fill a regional gap in nutrition surveillance, and provide a much-needed platform for exchanging information, strengthening capacity, learning from experts, and collaborating with regional partners. These interviews also identified the desire for a regional organization to serve as the network lead, a multi-sectoral membership to overcome in-country silos, and facilitate learning on topics of greatest interest to potential members. These interviews critically informed the development of the LeNNS vision statement, objectives, and leadership structure.

The design phase, from June to October 2022, laid the foundation for the learning network, and resulted in a draft charter, leadership structure, goals, and a vision statement for LeNNS. More detailed information about the LeNNS structure can be found in the learning brief titled, "Connecting the Pieces: Structuring a Learning Network that Lasts." The last step in the design phase was an online consultation with policymakers and a second consultation with implementers in the eight LeNNS countries, where stakeholders identified specific areas of value that would make the network worthwhile.

The official launch of LeNNS took place in November 2022, which was also the first in-person network quarterly meeting. Participants at this event formed the three technical working groups (TWGs), discussed nutrition surveillance issues they were most interested in exploring, and agreed on a theme for the next quarterly technical meeting: innovations in food nutrition surveillance from global and regional perspectives.

The structure that emerged from the co-design process was one that has built-in stakeholder ownership and accountability. A technical advisory group guides the network's critical decisions in implementing learning and exchange initiatives. Members benefit from leadership and support from IGAD; the East, Central, and Southern Africa Health Community; the regional office of the World Health Organization; UNICEF Eastern and Southern Africa Regional office; and select representatives from member states and research institutions, with USAID providing resources and technical guidance through its flagship nutrition project, USAID Advancing Nutrition.

Lessons Learned

Many key lessons in creating a thriving, locally-led regional learning network were gained:

1. **Ensure the network creates value for members.**

A key component of sustaining any network is ensuring its members deem the network valuable for themselves, their work, and their region. The LeNNS experience demonstrated that by creating feedback mechanisms responsive to member needs and adapting the network design to their interests sustains member participation. Members took the lead in advancing the work, with funders taking a networking and supporting role, listening to the experience of regional institutions. This was particularly true early on, when the technical advisory group identified that involving government before launching the network was critical. IGAD used existing linkages with government to bring them to the table for a consultation quickly. After the launch, it became clear that this made a significant difference in the quality of discussions happening through LeNNS and increased members' ability to affect change in their own countries.

2. **Build trust and relationships among members.**

Another critical aspect of LeNNS was building relationships and establishing trust between members to facilitate collaboration, promote sustainability, and encourage sharing beyond network meetings. Our experience showed that expecting each member to participate in at least

one of the TWGs was an important way to create stronger interpersonal linkages. These shared technical spaces allowed for focused discussion, where members could share ideas and challenges with other regional experts. We quickly began to see member-to-member sharing on issues unique to the context.

3. Create clear guidance for network membership and engage multi-sectoral actors.

Another key lesson was to create a network structure with clear benchmarks for membership and sustainable engagement. LeNNS's multi-sectoral closed network prescribes which actors from specific member states may join the network, underscoring the shared ownership of the network and its success among members. Doing so has kept the work focused on regional issues and maximized the coordination opportunities among members.

4. Give responsibility to working groups to define their goals, objectives, and activities.

LeNNS laid out clear responsibilities for each TWG to identify their own leaders, research questions, long- and short-term goals, and work plans with success indicators. TWGs set their own annual deliverables and grow their resources to show quantifiable proof of their work. While it has taken some TWGs longer to start up, several TWGs have become dynamic spaces for peer engagement, which has focused the direction of the work.

5. Sustain participation through a mix of in-person and online meetings.

The final key element of the LeNNS structure involved taking clear steps to sustain member participation and build relationships over the long-term. Holding in-person technical meetings on a quarterly basis and TWGs meetings online every month created a reliable structure to support country-level changes over time. By using a mix of communication methods—face-to-face meetings to build commitment and relationships, then online meetings, WhatsApp groups, and email communication to make progress—members achieved a deeper level of exchange, trust, and relationship building.

Moving Forward

As LeNNS moves into its second year, a recently developed strategic framework will guide the network. The focus will remain on developing TWG work plans that can influence country-level actions and promoting cross-country learning. Using the member-driven structure established in the first year, LeNNS will continue to identify and respond to regional needs.



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