

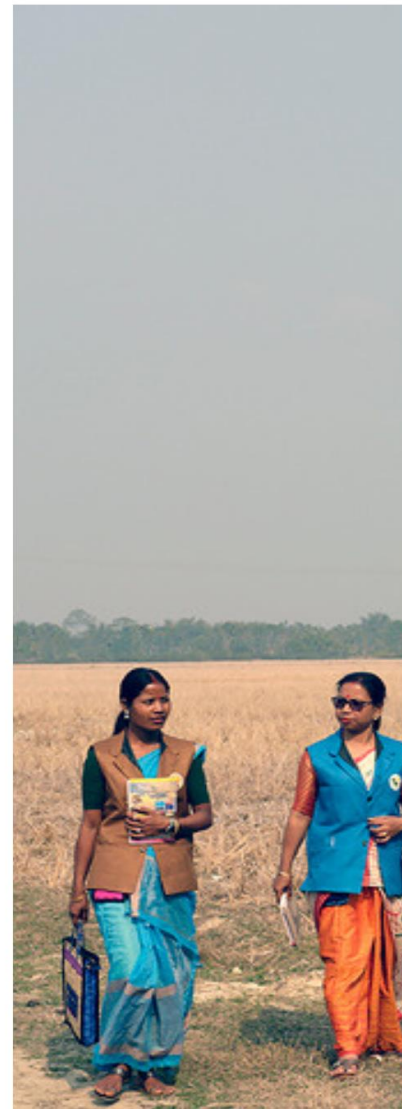


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The U.S. Government's Global Hunger & Food Security Initiative

India: USAID Advancing Nutrition Final Country Report

Fiscal Years 2021–2023



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

October 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

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Contents

- India: USAID Advancing Nutrition Final Country Report i
- Contents iii
- Acknowledgments iv
- Acronyms..... v
- Executive Summary vi
 - Background and Objectives..... vi
 - Major Accomplishments..... vi
 - Challenges..... vii
 - The Way Forward vii
- Overview I
 - 1. Project duration:..... I
 - 2. Starting date: I
 - 3. Geographic focus: I
 - 4. Project objectives:..... I
- Background..... 2
 - Country Context..... 2
 - Project Goal and Objectives 2
- Accomplishments..... 3
 - Objective 1: Strengthen women-led nutrition-sensitive agricultural practices and business opportunities 3
 - Objective 2: Strengthen partnerships among multi-sectoral and multi-interest nutrition stakeholders to implement nutrition-sensitive agricultural activities..... 6
 - Objective 3: Document lessons learned and best practices and disseminate through learning platform7
- Key Learnings 8
- Challenges..... 9
- The Way Forward 9
 - Lessons Learned..... 10
 - Sustainability..... 11
- References 12
- Annex 1. Performance Indicators 13
 - Life of Project Performance Indicators..... 14
- Annex 2: Environmental Mitigation and Monitoring Report 19
 - USAID Advancing Nutrition Environmental Monitoring and Mitigation Report, FY 23..... 19

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Acronyms

ASRLM	Assam State Rural Livelihood Mission
CoP	Community of Practice
EMMP	Environmental Monitoring and Mitigation Plan
IP	Implementing Partner
NFHS	National Family Health Survey
NGO	nongovernmental organization
MT	master trainer
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NGO	nongovernmental organization
PSE	private sector engagement
SBC	social and behavior change
SeSTA	Seven Sisters Development Assistance
SMC	School Management Committee
TG	Tea Garden
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WSHG	women's self-help group

Executive Summary

Background and Objectives

Nutrition and livelihood initiatives with a focus on nutrition have been going on in various states in India for decades. However, the focus on agriculture for nutrition outcomes—better known as nutrition-sensitive agriculture—is a very recent priority in the country, and that to negligible investment in the state of Assam. This is one of the reasons USAID Advancing Nutrition prioritized this concept for intervention and specifically decided to collaborate with the government of Assam so it can be efficiently integrated with various other flagship programs on agriculture and nutrition that are being implemented through various departments.

In addition to the emphasis on collaboration, the project also focused on a few other areas to maximize outcomes, such as building the project in and around the women’s self-help group (WSHG) platform, involving the community cadres who provide last-mile service delivery in the villages, using social and behavior change methods, like participatory research and implementation, and leveraging technology for efficiency.

After conducting an initial scoping study and the state, district and block launching events, USAID Advancing Nutrition India initiated its activities by signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Assam State Rural Livelihood Mission (ASRLM) to implement its project through its WSHG beneficiaries and also to train the community cadres as master trainers (MT) for this project. To execute objectives in the field as its implementing partner (IP), the project also engaged the local grassroots nongovernmental organization (NGO) Seven Sisters Development Assistance (SeSTA), which had existing presence in the community.

The project implemented activities under the following specific objectives:

- **Objective 1:** Strengthen women-led nutrition-sensitive agriculture practices and business opportunities.
- **Objective 2:** Strengthen partnerships among multi-sectoral and multi-interest nutrition stakeholders to implement nutrition-sensitive agriculture activities.
- **Objective 3:** Document lessons learned and best practices and disseminate through learning platforms.

Major Accomplishments

Objective 1

Under this objective, we engaged local stakeholders to support them in conducting training sessions on nutrition-sensitive agricultural practices. The project trained and supported 138 community cadres to become master trainers (MT). These MTs, through a cascading training plan, then build the knowledge and capacity of 24,598 WSHG members on horticulture and aquaculture practices. The project made sure to integrate social and behavior change (SBC) and gender approaches throughout its implementation. We made sure to tailor the training to the local context and also leveraged the external expertise of Krishi Vigyan Kendra and aquaculture officials. The project also successfully conducted an SBC study to understand community perceptions related to nutrition and agriculture practices, and priority behaviors were identified, using a human-centered design approach. Consultations were organized with various stakeholders to design training modules and identify challenges in the market, such as branding, packaging, and access to inputs. The project proposed strategies to engage the private sector, strengthen producer groups and improve access to finance for women’s businesses to government as well.

Objective 2

In pursuit of its objective to strengthen partnerships among multi-sectoral and multi-interest nutrition stakeholders, the project implemented a comprehensive strategy aimed at enhancing collaboration between the project's implementing partner (IP) and various local organizations to broaden the impact of nutrition interventions and promote sustainable improvements in diets and nutrition. Through sensitization events at the district level, the project engaged with 21 local NGOs and associations to communicate the project's objectives and disseminate key messages. These events extended the project's potential for positive impact within local communities. Notable achievements included the engagement of Tea Garden (TG) labor unions, tribes, and student unions, which showcased the project's commitment to raising awareness across diverse segments of the community. Furthermore, the project sensitized 51 School Management Committees (SMC) to educate their members about the importance of nutrition and dietary diversity for school children. These activities contributed to the expansion of the project's reach, knowledge dissemination, and the empowerment of local important players for improved nutrition practices.

Objective 3

The project has also effectively carried out strategies to document lessons learned and best practices from its initiatives. We conducted a pause-and-reflect activity with the internal staff and project partners to discuss and identify challenges and develop potential solutions for program adaptation. By addressing issues such as training effectiveness, community engagement, and collaboration with stakeholders, the project aimed to enhance its training components for better outcomes. The project also increased its visibility and garnered media coverage with regional newspapers that highlighted its objectives, approaches and achievements. These articles showcased the project's commitment to improving practices and building strong partnerships. Furthermore, in its endeavor to establish a Community of Practice (CoP), the project organized an initiation workshop with actors working in the nutrition and food systems space in Assam to understand their interest in the establishment of a CoP.

Challenges

Through its limited period of implementation, the project has gained valuable insights that highlight both **key learning and challenges** faced during the execution of its initiatives. We learned that timely and early engagement of public sector stakeholders helped us gain credibility and cultivate local ownership as well as foster support and collaboration. The partnership with SeSTA streamlined project execution because the organization's existing community ties and cultural understanding helped us focus on creating a scalable model for intervention. The project faced substantial challenges in terms of navigating through divergent stakeholder priorities. We also needed to continuously build capacity of local partners to improve the quality of their implementation, which was necessary but time and resources intensive.

The Way Forward

As recommendations toward sustainability and way ahead, the project suggests that similar projects emphasize the importance of collaboration with local stakeholders, patience in securing government support, and continuous training efforts. Integrating lessons learned and promoting them through local actors promotes knowledge transfer beyond the project scope and geography. The future efforts should look for aligning project objectives with existing government programs. These efforts can aim to create a lasting impact on Assam's communities by fostering positive change in livelihoods, nutrition, and women's empowerment.

Overview

1. Project duration:

Two years

2. Starting date:

October 1, 2021

3. Geographic focus:

State	District	Blocks	Communities	Aspirational Districts
Assam	Tinsukia	Kakopathar and Itakhuli	Adivasi, Assamese	No
	Goalpara	Rongjuli and Kucdhowa	Garos, Rabha, Boro, Koch Rajbongshi	Yes
	Barpeta	Pakabetbari and Rupsi	Muslims	Yes

4. Project objectives:

USAID Advancing Nutrition India provided technical assistance to government and public sector partners in Assam State to demonstrate the potential for community-led nutrition-sensitive agriculture to achieve our goal of improving diets, while engaging with potential private sector partners to identify partnership pathways for sustainable, scalable actions. We implemented activities under the following objectives:

- **Objective 1:** Strengthen women-led nutrition-sensitive agriculture practices and business opportunities.
- **Objective 2:** Strengthen partnerships among multi-sectoral and multi-interest nutrition stakeholders to implement nutrition-sensitive agriculture activities.
- **Objective 3:** Document lessons learned and best practices and disseminate through learning platforms.

Background

Country Context

Despite considerable economic progress in recent decades, 224.3 million people in India are undernourished (FAO 2022). The 2022 Global Hunger Index ranks the country as 107 among 121 countries, placing it at the level of “serious hunger” (von Grebmer et al. 2022). In 2020, findings from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) showed an increase in stunting among children under five years old in 13 of 22 states and union territories reported through December, as well as an increase in wasting in 12 of 22 states and union territories (Chatterjee 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic worsened food security and nutrition globally, even in countries such as India that have made considerable economic progress (FAO, 2022). India’s Ministry of Women & Child Development estimated 927,606 children from six months to six years were “severely acute malnourished” across the country, up to November 2020 (NDTV 2021). Plausible reasons for the declines in progress include worsening economic and socioeconomic conditions, which likely impact livelihoods (Chatterjee 2021).

Among Indian states, Assam is one of the poorest. It is home to 34 million people, one-third living in poverty (NITI Aayog 2021). While poverty levels in Assam declined between 1994 and 2015–2016, the incidence of poverty remains higher than the national average, with poverty levels being very high in some parts of the state, ranging from 11 percent to 51 percent across districts (NITI Aayog 2021). Assam’s population is largely rural, with 86 percent of the population living in rural areas (Census info India 2011) and primarily engaged in agriculture. At the state level, undernutrition persists with 36 percent of children under five years stunted (NFHS-5). Among children in the same age group, wasting increased between the fourth and fifth NFHS (17 to 22 percent). Only 8 percent of children 6–23 months in Assam are fed a minimally acceptable diet, ranking next to last for this indicator of recommended dietary intake among all states (CFNS 2020). Anemia is prevalent among children and non-pregnant women in Assam, with more than 60 percent anemia reported in both groups (CFNS 2020).

USAID Advancing Nutrition in Assam engaged diverse local stakeholders including government, nongovernmental organizations (NGO), community, and civil society organizations to address the above-mentioned nutritional challenges. Despite facing complexities during its limited implementation period, the project achieved significant success. From the initiation, the project worked on establishing a viable model by engaging the influential local cadres, including the training of the community cadres that became instrumental in creating a cascading training approach for the community to promote the concept of dietary diversity in the household and explore economic opportunities for rural women.

Project Goal and Objectives

USAID India provided a scope of work to USAID Advancing Nutrition to begin a two-year, \$1,350,357 project in Assam State. The period of performance for the project is October 1, 2021–November 30, 2023. The project aims, through nutrition-sensitive approaches, to directly benefit at least 50,000 women, adolescent girls, and children from socioeconomically disadvantaged families that have been negatively impacted by COVID-19.

USAID Advancing Nutrition India provides technical assistance to government and public sector partners in Assam State to demonstrate the potential for community-led nutrition-sensitive



Figure 1. India map and Assam state

agriculture to achieve our goal of improving diets, while engaging with potential private sector partners to identify partnership pathways for sustainable, scalable actions.

We implement activities under the following specific objectives:

- Strengthen women-led nutrition-sensitive agricultural practices and business opportunities.
- Strengthen partnerships among multi-sectoral and multi-interest nutrition stakeholders to implement nutrition-sensitive agricultural activities.
- Document lessons learned and best practices and disseminate through a learning platform.

Accomplishments

Objective 1: Strengthen women-led nutrition-sensitive agricultural practices and business opportunities

Our 2022 scoping study provided us with two crucial recommendations for implementing nutrition-sensitive agriculture activities to drive increased consumption of healthy diets for women and children. The first was to implement the project through the WSHG platform, which plays a pivotal role in women's lives in rural Assam. The second was to integrate and focus on the institutionalization of efforts with various initiatives of the government of Assam and local NGOs focusing on women's empowerment, nutrition, and livelihoods. These two approaches were supported by multiple departments, including ASRLM, the Department of Fisheries, the Directorate of Horticulture and Food Processing, and the Department of Agriculture.

Under this objective, our activities have aimed not only to enhance dietary diversity in the community but also to empower WSHG members through training and by exploring income generation opportunities in the aquaculture and horticulture value chains. We ensured that our interventions complemented existing initiatives. Notably, we forged essential partnerships, signing an MoU with ASRLM and WorldFish, leveraging their existing platforms and expertise.

Under this objective, we trained 138 master trainers (MT) drawn from ASRLM's community cadres. These trainers in turn imparted knowledge to 24,598 beneficiaries through cascaded training approach. Additionally, by facilitating these achievements through local actors, most notably ASRLM and SeSTA, we strengthened the capacity of local actors to continue the work.

Facilitating the adoption of nutrition-sensitive agriculture behaviors via trainings and SBC activities

One of the key approaches of the project was to deliver trainings to WSHG members to increase the adoption of nutrition-sensitive agriculture and nutrition behaviors at the household. The training content was developed in 2022 and 2023 and leveraged expertise from our implementing partner (IP), SeSTA, with additional input from subject experts from the government, such as Krishi Vigyan Kendra and the district aquaculture department. For aquaculture, the project also collaborated with WorldFish to develop the training content. Further, the training modules were informed by social and behavior change

Key Training Topics:

- Concepts of nutrition-sensitive agriculture
- Role of women in nutrition-sensitive agriculture activities
- Package of Practices on horticulture and aquaculture practices
- Natural farming practices
- Integrating gender and SBC research findings through role play
- Roles and responsibilities of community cadres under the project
- Modalities for conducting women self-help group training

(SBC) formative research, which unearthed factors motivating or inhibiting adoption of target agriculture and nutrition behaviors.

The trainings were implemented through a cascaded approach. Specifically, the project trained 138 community cadres, known as Krishi Sakhis and Pashu Sakhis, who then trained 24,598 WSHG members. These cadres belong to the same community and serve on behalf of the government as local extension workers. The cadres also conducted home visits to reinforce training content and provide additional support to WSHG members and their families to adopt the target behaviors. Additionally, USAID Advancing Nutrition implemented exposure visits with select WSHG members to provide them with an opportunity to see a female farmer using the promoted practices. Based on pre- and post-training data, overall knowledge on nutrition and agriculture improved by 15%. Sixty-three percent of WSHG participants demonstrated increased knowledge on key agriculture and nutrition topics through the trainings. The project also organized exposure visits on aquaculture practices to empower the beneficiaries through knowledge transfer, behavior change, and practical training that is crucial for enhancing their roles in agriculture practices.

Participant Testimonial:

“This training has given me the confidence to stand in front of my whole community and teach in detail how to develop a year-round vegetable garden for meeting the household vegetable needs and earn[ing] some income.” — Krishi Sakhi, Barpeta district

“I feel motivated now, and there is a sense of responsibility toward my group’s women. I will try to arrange for loans and inputs for them to practice vegetable cultivation by employing improved and natural practices.” — Krishi Sakhi, Tinsukia district

“From this training, I have learned of [the] specific nutritional importance of food items [that] I wasn’t aware of. I feel that now I can even guide my family and neighbors, and they will listen to me.” — WSHG member, Tinsukia

After the initial first quarter of trainings, the project gathered feedback from MTs and the IP on the quality of training and the challenges. As a result of this feedback, indicators related to access to economic resources were excluded to reduce the time burden on the trainer and enhance training quality by focusing more on content. The project also revised the target reach of women from 50,000 to 35,000 so trainings could be smaller and better manageable. Furthermore, community sensitization efforts were initiated to generate interest and involvement from both community influencers and family members of the beneficiaries. This adaptation strategy aimed to improve the overall effectiveness of the training program.

Driving nutrition-sensitive agriculture activities with public sector actors

USAID Advancing Nutrition prioritized building strong partnerships with local actors and providing technical assistance to strengthen existing structures and organizations within Assam. Strong commitment was cemented in July 2022 at the project’s official launch, involving government officials, civil society organizations, and NGOs. USAID Advancing Nutrition facilitated consultations with ASRLM and the agriculture and fisheries departments to prioritize the activities and use the government’s technical expertise and human resources. From these consultations, ASRLM and the agriculture and fisheries department stakeholders prioritized the use of the WSHG platform and committed the time of their community cadre network, the Krishi Sakhis and Pashu Sakhis. Additionally, USAID Advancing Nutrition leveraged agricultural inputs for over 1,000 WSHG members to increase their agricultural productivity.

The project also successfully increased the capacity of the government’s community cadres in gender and social and behavior change. Specifically, the project trained community cadres on women’s empowerment and opportunities to address barriers affecting the adoption of nutrition-sensitive

agriculture behaviors. This training enabled the community cadres to be more sensitive to the challenges and opportunities to drive women’s participation in livelihood development activities and participate in decisions related to nutrition in the household. Additionally, the project developed an online curriculum for the community cadres to access continued training. One-hundred thirty-eight community cadres accessed the training online curriculum in 2023. USAID Advancing Nutrition discussed opportunities for ASRLM to continue hosting the online curriculum and to expand training access to community cadres in Assam that are outside the three USAID Advancing Nutrition districts.

In the last six months of the project, USAID Advancing Nutrition prioritized documentation of lessons learned, best practices, and challenges to inform future programming, including the government’s activities in Assam. Specifically, the project developed a gender strategy—informed by a rapid gender assessment and community consultations—to recommend how nutrition-sensitive agriculture activities can be more accessible and impactful to rural, female farmers. USAID Advancing Nutrition reviewed the findings and recommendations from these studies with ASRLM during the September 2023 close out meetings.

Building local capacity to implement nutrition-sensitive agriculture activities

From the initiation, the project emphasized a locally driven model, as a result, it prioritized collaboration with communities to enhance the effectiveness of the activities. Recognizing the importance of engaging an organization that has presence and acceptance in the community, a partnership was made with Seven Sisters Development Assistance (SeSTA). This collaboration aimed to capitalize on SeSTA’s existing community presence, knowledge of participatory training, and community mobilization expertise. SeSTA’s role included introducing the project to district level stakeholders and targeted communities, sensitizing local influencers, and training the community cadres as master trainers.

USAID Advancing Nutrition trained SeSTA in key technical topics: the concept of nutrition-sensitive agriculture, SBC, and gender and social inclusion. We also provided mentoring and coaching on monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) and data collection through regular phone calls and meetings. Lastly, we facilitated a pause and reflect after six months where we encouraged the SeSTA team to consider which activities were most important to drive increased productivity and improved diets and how these activities needed to be adapted to be more effective. Through this process, SeSTA learned concepts and approaches in CLA (collaboration, learning, and adaptation) and the importance of continuously reflecting on the project activities.

Spotlight activity – Engaging SeSTA to conduct SBC research: The project supported SeSTA by conducting an SBC focus group study to understand local perceptions and preferences as well as prioritize nutrition-sensitive agriculture behaviors. The two behaviors prioritized under the project were–

- men and women (or households) make joint decisions about household assets.
- women grow nutrient-dense vegetables, fruits, or fish for household consumption and sales, employing improved practices.

This human centered design approach helped identify key behaviors and barriers that needed to be addressed. An SBC strategy laid out the steps to achieve behavior change through specific activities. The training of the IP on the same ensured effective execution. The creation of instructional videos and GIFs involving project beneficiaries further enriched the project’s communication and outreach efforts, shifting attitudes and norms within communities.

Identifying opportunities for women-led business opportunities for improved diets

To increase WSHG member incomes, which can improve household nutrition, the project sought to identify opportunities for women to increase their productivity and sell surplus agricultural production. With this objective in mind, we held district-level consultations with producer groups (PG) and Farmer Producer Cooperatives to discuss critical market challenges including branding, packaging, storage, input

quality, and marketing issues. These consultations, alongside a state-level gathering, provided insights and potential solutions to promote increased competitiveness of female farmers in rural Assam.

Based on these discussions, USAID Advancing Nutrition developed *Technical Brief: Promoting Improved Nutrition through Private Sector Engagement in Assam, India*, which outlines opportunities to enhance productivity and growth in horticulture and aquaculture, particularly for female farmers. We identified that strengthening PGs' capacity, providing technical assistance for input manufacturers and retailers, supporting financial service providers, facilitating business-to-business interactions, improving packaging and branding, and establishing rural seed banks could increase female farmers' success in agriculture. USAID Advancing Nutrition deprioritized implementing these activities in FY23 to better focus on the nutrition-sensitive agriculture trainings. However, we shared the findings from our work with government partners to inform their future programming.

Spotlight finding from USAID Advancing Nutrition's *Technical Brief: Promoting Improved Nutrition through Private Sector Engagement in Assam, India*: Facilitating access to finances for WSHGs to establish businesses was another vital aspect of the project's efforts. Key informant interviews revealed barriers such as complex documentation and lengthy processes that deter beneficiaries from accessing credit. The beneficiaries also lack awareness of how to obtain the documents to apply for these loans. These findings were shared with ASRLM officials, advocating for solutions like the Bank Sakhi concept to increase awareness and facilitate access to credit. Through these initiatives, the project adopted a holistic approach to engage the private sector to enhance women's economic participation.

Objective 2: Strengthen partnerships among multi-sectoral and multi-interest nutrition stakeholders to implement nutrition-sensitive agricultural activities

Despite growing interest in nutrition in Assam, these efforts often lacked effective relationships among stakeholders, hindering the dissemination of best practices, technical expertise, and the mobilization of vital resources. Our activities under this objective were strategically designed to bridge these gaps and foster a more inclusive and locally driven approach. Under this objective, one important achievement has been the sensitization events aimed at local organizations including NGOs, associations and School Management Committees (SMCs). We also explored opportunities to better engage local private sector actors like seed suppliers, technology service providers, and aggregators to improve the livelihood opportunities of small-scale women farmers in Assam. The project's focus on strengthening partnerships among multi-sectoral and multi-interest stakeholders has yielded substantial results as evidenced by the collaborations forged in this short implementation duration, all of which have strengthened the local ownership of nutrition-sensitive agricultural activities in the state.

Engaging grassroots groups in nutrition-sensitive agriculture activities

By establishing connections with various stakeholders, we successfully enhanced participation ensuring timely and relevant dissemination of knowledge. Through these collaborations, the project not only shared its goals and insights but also garnered essential support from every stakeholder—from the government to the private sector to the communities.

Another notable achievement of the project was the organization of sensitization events for the local grassroots NGOs, unions, societies, and tea garden associations. These events served as a vital platform for disseminating critical messages related to nutrition. With a keen focus on enhancing awareness of nutritional needs among children, adolescent girls, and women, the project effectively reached out to 21 organizations and engaged 59 participants. The participation of block ASRLM in all these events further extended the project's reach, ensuring the broad dissemination of acquired knowledge within local communities.

Further, the project assisted SeSTA to better engage with various School Management Committees (SMC) across districts to equip members with fundamental knowledge about nutrition and dietary diversity for school children. These events emphasized the sources of micronutrients and highlighted the importance of balanced diets enriched with fruits, vegetables, and small fish. Additionally, the potential of the establishment of nutrition gardens within school premises and their integration into mid-day meal programs was encouraged. Through six events, a total of 176 SMC members from 51 SMCs were sensitized. This effort created a cohort of informed advocates capable of championing improved nutrition practices and dietary habits within schools, reinforcing the project's role in fostering local ownership of nutrition-sensitive agriculture activities.

The project also organized district and state-level private sector engagement (PSE) consultations involving the local market players leveraging our IP's network including input manufacturers and suppliers, producer groups and retailers to discuss on possible solutions to improve the quality of local products including branding, packaging and how to assist small scale women farmers to establish and flourish their businesses.

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Objective 3: Document lessons learned and best practices and disseminate through learning platform

The project aimed to document lessons learned and best practices through strategic process and disseminate them via various learning platforms. The project's commitment to learning was evident in its 'Pause and Reflect' activity on its training component. It resulted in refinement encompassing areas such as training capacity, beneficiary engagement and collaboration with stakeholders. Also, the project developed a Community of Practice (CoP) charter and organized an initiation workshop to gather inputs and interests from the participants to continue such initiatives in the future.

Reflecting on challenges and opportunities to improve programming

The project prioritized a culture of learning and reflection to enhance its implementation and outcomes. A manifestation of this commitment was the pause-and-reflect activity conducted with SeSTA. This activity was a vital forum for discussion, analysis, and adaptation of our training implementation process as well as the training modules. It unfolded in two distinct phases, commencing with an online survey administered to staff followed by an in-person event to deliberate on the findings, prioritize challenges, and collaborate on plausible solutions and adaptation strategies. The crucial questions posed during the process sparked group discussions aimed at shaping future adaptation strategies. These questions underscored the project's commitment to refinement and enhancement, touching upon critical areas such as cadre training and support, beneficiary participation and adoption of practices, training preparation and implementation, and collaboration with various stakeholders for advocating the training purpose to ensure better participation and retention. The outcome of this reflective exercise identified several challenges that demanded attention. These included the multifaceted role of cadres adding time burden on them, the duration and content of training and the requirement of community's involvement to get support in terms of attendance and participation. This commitment to learning and adaptation was underpinned by the project's aspiration to develop a sustainable model that could be embraced and replicated beyond the project's scope by government.

Community of Practice

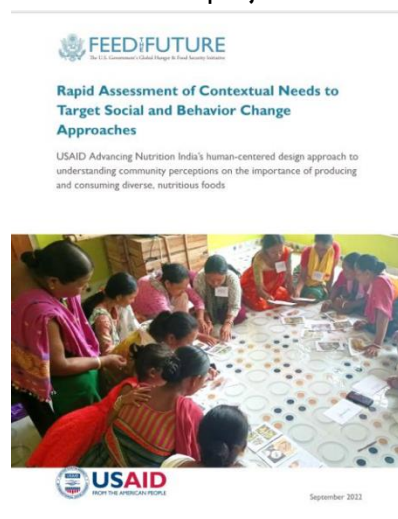
USAID Advancing Nutrition explored the potential to establish a CoP in Assam to facilitate collaboration and knowledge exchange among diverse stakeholders. To this end, the project invested its effort in developing a comprehensive CoP charter, outlining its purpose, mission, goals, membership criteria, roles and responsibilities, discussion areas, operational guidelines, and a code of conduct. A preliminary workshop was organized, firstly, to aim to gauge stakeholders' interests and expectations,

seeking to inform the establishment of a CoP in Assam pertaining to nutrition-sensitive agriculture and food systems. Furthermore, the workshop served as a platform to gather valuable feedback from stakeholders. This feedback encompassed their desired outcomes from participating in a CoP, identification of perceived challenges and risks, and insights into preferred logistics for running such a collaborative platform. The idea was to establish a platform to engage a wide array of stakeholders invested in enhancing food systems and nutrition in Assam. It aimed to serve as a platform for connecting organizations confronting similar challenges, enabling the exchange of best practices, resources, and lessons learned. To the project's credit, the event gathered participants' interest in a range of topics including government initiatives and community-based processes to improve nutrition, nutrition's linkage with livelihood, creation of an online platform with thematic experts, advanced scientific management training, gender roles in nutrition among others. Importantly, stakeholders envisioned the CoP as a means to coordinate with like-minded organizations. Through its limited time, the project made a successful effort to develop a collective vision for a platform that could drive positive change, foster coordination and contribute to more effective program implementation in the region.

Key Learnings

USAID Advancing Nutrition undertook several learning activities over the course of implementation, including research and/or information gathering on social and behavior change, gender and social norms, and opportunities to engage private sector actors in Assam, India.

In FY22, USAID Advancing Nutrition conducted human-centered design SBC formative research to identify behaviors that the community felt were important for the project to focus on and the factors affecting the adoption of those behaviors. The study prioritized two behaviors that the project should work on to promote a nutritious diverse diet in the household and encourage women's participation: 1) men and women (or households) make joint decisions about household assets and 2) women grow nutrient-dense vegetables, fruits, or fish for household consumption and sales, employing improved practices. The factors affecting the adoption of these behaviors included pervasive gender and social norms such as perceptions about women's ability to make decisions related to production and marketing related to agriculture, as well as time burdens because of household chores. Other barriers for women included perceived low levels of knowledge and self-efficacy for implementing good agricultural practices, less information, low access to quality inputs, limited availability of land, and financial constraints. There were also perceptions that women and adolescent girls require less food than men and boys, both in terms of quantity and quality, leading to unequitable distribution of food in the household.



Additionally, to devise a PSE strategy, the project interviewed relevant private actors such as input producers and suppliers, informal and formal market retailers, technology providers as well as financial institutions regarding their perceived challenges and opportunities in reaching small scale rural producers including women. They perceived limited market opportunities due to low input use, lack of awareness of improved farming practices, and fragmented, high-cost market catchment areas because of distance. They were concerned about profit guarantees, especially in the face of natural calamities, and they were reluctant to invest in formal intermediaries at the village level as it will incur extra cost. The respondents also cited gaps in their own knowledge and skills, including insufficient information and credit options, marketing skills, and tax compliance procedures as obstacles to adapting their business models. Overall, the interviews indicated a lack of a well-developed market system in the intervention areas. The focus of the respondents pointed more toward improving quality of their products, including shelf life, branding, and packaging, rather than on increasing reach. These learnings are important for future programs in Assam, India that aim to increase productivity of rural producers and their output market opportunities.

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USAID Advancing Nutrition India
 Technical Brief: Promoting Improved Nutrition through Private Sector Engagement in Assam, India



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Challenges

1. Navigating through stakeholders' divergent priorities was challenging in a short time frame. The time constraints demanded prioritization of activities and a strategic focus on the stakeholders most likely to contribute effectively, which limited comprehensive attention to all their requests.
2. We needed substantial time to educate certain public sector actors in Assam on the nutrition-sensitive agriculture concept because there were few previous international development initiatives on the subject in the state.
3. Local government and NGO partners in Assam often needed training and guidance to prepare them to take on activities and continue them beyond the project scope. For example, we realized that just two days of training for the community cadres was not enough for them to continue as master trainers (MT) beyond the project scope. They needed continuous support throughout the implementation period.
4. Despite the involvement of a reliable local NGO, securing community-level engagement proved challenging because of insufficient sensitization efforts, particularly toward gaining male support for women's participation in project activities.
5. We learned that we would have been more effective if there were time to pilot various activities, particularly the training modules, before implementing the training across the vast geographies.

The Way Forward

In light of the economic and nutritional challenges in Assam, the need for future USAID Advancing Nutrition programming in livelihood development, nutrition, and women's empowerment has become increasingly evident. Collaboration with local influential stakeholders is vital because of gender norms, linguistic diversity, and existing government programs. Securing buy-in from government authorities requires patience, and training for different stakeholders ensures long term impact. An inclusive approach with stakeholders fosters support and collaboration. Integration of lessons learned drives sustainable change, creating a lasting impact on Assam's communities' strides toward improving their well-being.

Lessons Learned

1. Engaging public sector stakeholders from the outset proved pivotal in garnering their support. The project's diligent efforts in soliciting input through extensive meetings, workshops, and cooperative endeavors with various government departments not only established clear project parameters but also fostered a sense of ownership and credibility. By genuinely incorporating recommendations, a robust rapport was established with ASRLM and the aquaculture and agriculture departments. The MoU with ASRLM facilitated seamless integration of community cadres and WSHG members. Community cadres disseminated project messages during household visits to WSHG members, effectively fostering behavior adoption by these women and their families.
2. Localized and community driven initiatives need dedicated time and resources beyond the implementation phase. Establishing sustainable practices required lengthy rapport-building with government and local influential leaders. Allowing ample time for meaningful engagement is crucial to fostering lasting impact.
3. Partnering with a community embedded NGO proved invaluable for streamlining project execution because they have community ties that facilitated swift engagement with local stakeholders, including government bodies. An NGO well versed in cultural norms, gender dynamics, food habits, taboos, and livelihood preferences is essential for building trust and fostering a stronger connection between the project and the communities it serves.
4. The project realized that it needs heightened dedication to engage with multiple partners, focusing on crafting a scalable model rather than an exhaustive intervention.
5. Maximizing efficiency and quality entails aligning the project concept with existing programs, rather than advocating separate objectives. Integrating project goals within established initiatives accelerates implementation and optimizes resources.
6. The community cadre approach adopted involves training and engaging individuals in the community who have a deep understanding of the local culture and context. and it helps program participants feel more comfortable and receptive to the information shared, as they are from the same community. The trust factor ensures greater participation and engagement in the training. As role models, they can inspire positive behavior change within the community, and WSHG members are more likely to adopt best practices. Using a cascading model ensures percolation of message to others, facilitates feedback driven enhancements, and amplifies positive change within communities.
7. SBC research at project commencement unveiled critical influencers of nutrition behaviors, shedding light on local attitudes and practices, and adoption barriers. This informed culturally tailored interventions that aligned communication strategies with audience preferences for evidence-based outcomes. Active community involvement in behavior selection during research fostered local ownership, collaboration, and heightened interventions.
8. Considering gender and social norms in the project's research activities ensured that



women's needs and voices were central to the project's design, which can help lead to more inclusive and effective outcomes. The research also helped identify the disparities in access to productive resources such as agricultural input and market access as well as areas to strengthen women's knowledge and skills for improving their dietary habits and practices.

Sustainability

From its inception, the project focused on co-creating activities with local actors and piloting a model that they could potentially scale up beyond the closure of the project. The project piloted the cascaded training module that uses the community cadres under the ASRLM as MTs. The community cadres effectively disseminated project messages on aquaculture, horticulture, nutrition, and women's empowerment to WSHG members and their communities. USAID Advancing Nutrition developed the training module content with local stakeholders, including the ASRLM and the fisheries and horticulture departments, and handed over these training modules to the relevant actors in September 2023. ASRLM now has the content needed to conduct the training of trainers with the community cadres, as well as the facilitator's guide for the community cadres to train WSGH members on horticulture, aquaculture, nutrition, and women's empowerment. ASRLM has shown excitement about the community cadre cascaded model and intent to explore opportunities to scale the model up across the state. However, additional support to the Government of Assam, particularly the ASRLM, is likely required to maintain momentum and facilitate scale-up.

In addition to supporting the identification of a replicable model, USAID Advancing Nutrition aimed to build the capacity of local actors to better carry out nutrition-sensitive agriculture activities in the future. Engagement of local grassroots-level NGOs, Tea Garden labor unions, and societies through sensitization helped extend the project's knowledge and impact well beyond its immediate scope and geographical boundaries. Leveraging these pre-existing networks and partnerships significantly amplified the potential for sustainable impact and knowledge transfer. Entrusting the implementation responsibility to a local NGO was a crucial decision. It already had a well-established presence in the project districts and a strong rapport with government entities and other stakeholders. This collaborative approach expedited the implementation process and heightened the long-term prospects of maintaining the project's outcomes.

Overall, these strategies collectively formed the pillars of sustainability. By extensively investing in local capacity, aligning with government initiatives, and fostering community engagement, the project aimed not only to achieve its successes but also make a lasting impact in its target population and areas.

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Annex I. Performance Indicators

For indicator IN-1: Number of female participants in US government assisted programs designed to increase access to productive economic resources, the project conducted a survey with 19,943 participants out of 20,975 women who came for our training program. However, it was gradually realized that the activity adds to significant time burden for the community cadres who had to single-handedly conduct the training as well to complete the survey with each one of the participants. So, in Q3 after a formal consent was obtained from USAID, this indicator was dropped.

In relation to the indicators 1.1.18, 1.2.20, 1.49, 2.1.27, 2.4.35 and 2.4.55, the project has consistently supported two organizations, ASRLM and SeSTA, from the initiation of the project. ASRLM was the prime partner of the project with whom MoU was signed to train its community cadres as MTs. It supported SeSTA to implement project activities in the intervention districts.

For indicator 1.3.22, SeSTA has used the SBC study tool to gather data from the intervention districts to help prepare program SBC strategy. It also used and incorporated the SBC-related learnings throughout its training component. We expect ASRLM to adopt and replicate the same in its future programming.

For indicator 3.3.42: Number of technologies and tools under development, the project developed, finalized, and delivered community videos and GIFs as well as an online training module for the community cadres. Additionally, it prepared and used the economic survey tool for the training participants to measure their access to economic resources.

For indicator 1.2.21, from the beginning of the project a contract was signed with SeSTA to onboard it as the project IP. Additionally, MoUs were signed with ASRLM and WorldFish. The initial target was 10 partnerships, but SeSTA revised the work plan, they modified the previous clause of establishing formal relationship and providing training to NGOs to just sensitization activities.

Under indicator 2.1.25, the project trained a total of 24,760 participants. It consisted of 24,598 WSHG women, 138 community cadres and 24 IP members. The participants scored an Average 15% percentage-point change in score between pre- and post-tests of participants of trainings.

For indicator 3.3.44, Number of documents developed/revised with support from the project, three press briefs were published in different state newspapers as well as a six-pager brief and a photo story book were developed.

In relation to indicator 3.3.45, a total of 19 events were organized over the length of the project which included various launching events, government consultation workshops, PSE and CoP workshops across intervention districts.

Life of Project Performance Indicators

Indicator	FY22			FY23			LOP		
	Target	Achievement	% Achievement	Target	Achievement	% Achievement	Target	Achievement	% Achievement
<p>Number of female participants in U.S. Government-assisted programs designed to increase access to productive economic resources.</p> <p><i>Source: Feed the Future GNDR-2; GFSS CCIR 3</i></p>	0	0	0	20,975	19,943	95%	20,975	19,943	95%
<p>Number of organizations supported by USAID Advancing Nutrition to improve the delivery of nutrition-sensitive interventions, including food systems, food safety, nutrition-sensitive agriculture; water, sanitation, and hygiene and ECD.</p> <p><i>Source: USAID Advancing Nutrition Global PMP Indicator; IR 1.2.20</i></p>	2	2	100%	2	2	100%	2	2	100%

Indicator	FY22			FY23			LOP		
	Target	Achievement	% Achievement	Target	Achievement	% Achievement	Target	Achievement	% Achievement
<p>Number of organizations that are using SBC tools, approaches, or strategies that were developed with input from USAID Advancing Nutrition.</p> <p><i>Source: USAID Advancing Nutrition Global PMP Indicator; IR 1.3.22</i></p>	1	1	100%	2	1	50%	2	1	50%
<p>Number of technologies and tools under development.</p> <p><i>Source: USAID Advancing Nutrition Global PMP Indicator; IR3.2.42</i></p>	0	0	0	4	4	100%	4	4	100%
<p>Number of partnerships established or maintained with academic and education institutions, research institutions, private sector, and/or civil society organizations for nutrition-sensitive-related activities.</p> <p><i>Source: USAID Advancing Nutrition Global PMP Indicator; IR 1.2.21</i></p>	2	2	100%	10	1	10%	12	3	30%

Indicator	FY22			FY23			LOP		
	Target	Achievement	% Achievement	Target	Achievement	% Achievement	Target	Achievement	% Achievement
<p>Number of individuals receiving nutrition-related professional training through U.S. Government-supported programs, disaggregated by sex.</p> <p><i>Source: MSNS M&L IR 2.3; HL9-4; USAID Advancing Nutrition Global PMP Indicator, IR 2.1.25</i></p>	12	12	100%	35,150	24,748	70%	35,150	24,760	70%
<p>Average percentage-point change in score between pre- and post-tests of participants of trainings.</p> <p><i>Source: USAID Advancing Nutrition Global PMP (PY4) Indicator IR 2.1.59</i></p>	20%	2%	10%	20%	15%	75%	20%	15%	75%
<p>Average percentage post-test score compared with 80% benchmark score.</p> <p><i>Source: USAID Advancing Nutrition Global PMP (PY4) Indicator IR 2.1.60</i></p>	80%	77%	96%	80%	90%	112%	80%	90%	112%

Indicator	FY22			FY23			LOP		
	Target	Achievement	% Achievement	Target	Achievement	% Achievement	Target	Achievement	% Achievement
<p>Proportion of training participants who improved from pre- to post-test results.</p> <p><i>Source: USAID Advancing Nutrition Global PMP (PY4) Indicator IR 2.1.61</i></p>	80%	58%	73%	80%	63%	79%	80%	63%	79%
<p>Proportion of training participants ≥80% on the post-test result.</p> <p><i>Source: USAID Advancing Nutrition Global PMP (PY4) Indicator IR 2.1.62</i></p>	80%	58%	73%	80%	88%	110%	80%	88%	110%
<p>Number of documents developed/revised with support from USAID Advancing Nutrition, by intermediate results (IRs) and sub-IRs and type (e.g., peer-reviewed articles, guidance or tools, policy briefs).</p> <p><i>Source: USAID Advancing Nutrition Global PMP Indicator; IR 3.3.44</i></p>	0	0	0	5	6	120%	5	6	120%

Indicator	FY22			FY23			LOP		
	Target	Achievement	% Achievement	Target	Achievement	% Achievement	Target	Achievement	% Achievement
Number of evidence-sharing events hosted by USAID Advancing Nutrition, by type. <i>Source: USAID Advancing Nutrition Global PMP Indicator IR 3.3.45</i>	8	8	100%	11	11	100%	19	19	100%
Number of participants at evidence-sharing events hosted or supported by USAID Advancing Nutrition, by type. <i>Source: USAID Advancing Nutrition Global PMP Indicator IR 3.3.56</i>	320	319	100%	522	504	97%	842	823	98%

Annex 2: Environmental Mitigation and Monitoring Report

USAID Advancing Nutrition Environmental Monitoring and Mitigation Report, FY 23

Throughout the project tenure, USAID Advancing Nutrition followed a global Environmental Monitoring and Mitigation Plan (EMMP), which was adapted for each country and project needs. In the USAID Advancing Nutrition India project, our FY23 activities that have potential environmental implications included in-person events (e.g., in-person meetings, block launching events, private sector strategy workshops, CoP initiation workshop as well as training on nutrition-sensitive agriculture training for cadres and WSHG members) that included the use of paper and non-paper goods. The project aimed for minimum use of plastic items in the meetings, events, and workshops. During the training activities for the cadres and the WSHG members, plastic items were avoided.

Folders given during the events and training programs were made of biodegradable materials (e.g., cloth bags). Take-home materials given were writing pads, some printed materials, and pens. Food was served in reusable utensils and biodegradable plates. Individual serving water bottles were mostly made of glass except a few block events where plastic bottles couldn't be avoided.

Field activities such as gender-related discussions with the community were held in open well-ventilated spaces to avoid overcrowding.

Per Government of Assam State guidelines, in-person events were allowed and face mask use was flexible. However, adequate preventive measures were taken on behalf of the project.

List Each Mitigation Measure from Column 3 in the EMMP (EMMPT Part 2 of 3) *	Status of Mitigation Measures	List Any Outstanding Issues Relating to Required Conditions	Remarks
I. Education, Technical Assistance, Training	A lot of the events of FY23 were in-person, such as the launching events, PSE workshops and the CoP initiation workshop. Additionally, all the training programs for the cadres and the WSHGs were also in person. As mitigation measures, COVID-19 protocols as provided by the state were strictly observed. COVID-19 mitigation and single-use materials were provided for participants and necessary arrangements were made for	Minimum use of plastics. No use of packaged food items to reduce waste generation. Prior intimation was given to participants to bring face masks and hand sanitizers for the training during the launching events.	During the events and training programs, cloth folders were distributed to reduce the use of plastic. Paper writing pads, printed materials about the project, and ballpoint pens were given as take-home materials. This reduced the waste disposal. In the case of food, plastics/paper-wrapped items were not used. Food was distributed

List Each Mitigation Measure from Column 3 in the EMMP (EMMPT Part 2 of 3) *	Status of Mitigation Measures	List Any Outstanding Issues Relating to Required Conditions	Remarks
	proper disposal at the end of each event.		<p>in reusable plates., Mostly reusable glass bottles were used for drinking water except for a few events such as the block launching events and the trainings.</p> <p>As a part of COVID-19 preventive measures, provisions of hand sanitizers and single-use face masks were available during some of the events.</p> <p>Waste disposal bins were available within the training venue.</p> <p>Gender-related discussions were done at the community level in open well-ventilated spaces to avoid overcrowding.</p> <p>In all cases, USAID Advancing Nutrition followed the procedures and best practices for environmental mitigation and compliance per the environmental compliance guidance.</p> <p>All single-use items were disposed of appropriately and according to best practice.</p>

List Each Mitigation Measure from Column 3 in the EMMP (EMMPT Part 2 of 3) *	Status of Mitigation Measures	List Any Outstanding Issues Relating to Required Conditions	Remarks
2. Research and Development	No research and development commodities were purchased.	N/A	N/A
3. Public Health Commodities	No public health commodities were purchased.	N/A	N/A
4. Small-Scale Construction	N/A	N/A	N/A
5. Small-Scale Water and Sanitation	N/A	N/A	N/A
6. Nutrition	N/A	N/A	N/A
7. Vector Control	N/A	N/A	N/A
8. Emergency Response	N/A	N/A	N/A



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