

Measuring Organizational Growth

Integrating Ownership and Validity for Better Measurement and Stronger Partnerships

Local organizations are critical partners in addressing undernutrition and obesity in low- and middle-income countries (WHO 2019; Gillespie et al. 2013; Kumaran 2018), given their effectiveness at introducing, delivering, scaling-up, and sustaining nutrition services within communities in contextually appropriate ways. Strategically designing and measuring multi-faceted and layered capacity strengthening programs based on the priorities of the local partner is essential for effective programming.

Sustained capacity strengthening depends on local ownership and reliable monitoring and evaluation of the process. Measuring success can be challenging, particularly when it comes to distinguishing between organizational *capacity* and organizational *performance*, locating appropriate sources of evidence, and agreeing on the right processes. Effective measurement practices facilitate ownership, resilience, sustainability, adaptive learning, and systems thinking (WHO 2019).

Over the last five years, USAID Advancing Nutrition has supported locally-led development through our [New Partnerships Initiative](#) (NPI) program, and country-funded activities in Kenya, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Mozambique, and the Kyrgyz Republic. This brief summarizes what we learned about effectively measuring organizational capacity and provides suggestions for supporting partners’ growth through our organizational development programming. This learning brief complements previous briefs on [designing and measuring effective capacity strengthening](#), [measuring training programs](#), what works with local partners, and approaches to systems-level capacity strengthening.

Our Approach to Organizational Capacity Measurement

In developing a monitoring framework, we turned to the New World Kirkpatrick Model, which is well-respected for monitoring individual learning in the field of education (Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick 2021). The Kirkpatrick model describes four dimensions of monitoring to assess results of training, which we adapted into an organizational capacity pathway to monitor our programs with local organizations. The table below compares the two frameworks:

Result
Behavior
Learning
Reaction

Table 1. Our Framework for Monitoring Progress

Kirkpatrick New World Model (2021)	Our Organizational Capacity Pathway
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reaction—degree to which participants found the technical assistance (TA) engaging and relevant • Learning—degree to which participants acquired the knowledge, skills, attitude, confidence, and commitment offered through the TA provided • Behavior—degree to which participants apply and fully incorporate what they learned into their work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reaction—feedback from partners on the quality and effectiveness of our support in helping them achieve their capacity priorities • Capacity output—ways in which our support translated into enhanced capacity in the form of stronger organizational skills, policies, and structures • Capacity outcome—changes in organizational performance, or the partner’s

Kirkpatrick New World Model (2021)	Our Organizational Capacity Pathway
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Results—degree to which larger development outcomes occur related to the TA provided 	<p>ability to design, implement, and measure quality nutrition programs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Results—impact of those nutrition programs in addressing malnutrition

We used a variety of tools to assess needs and report progress on our monitoring indicators.

Table 2. Tools to Assess Progress

Organizational Capacity Pathway	How to Assess Progress	Methods and Tools
Reaction to capacity strengthening (CS) support activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qualitative: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — interviews to gather feedback on reaction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Semi-annual pause and reflect meetings • End of project (EoP) survey • EoP focus group discussion
Capacity output as learning absorbed or retained	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quantitative: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — % change in Organizational Capacity Assessment (OCA) scores (baseline to endline) — % of partners with increased OCA scores • Qualitative: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — description and attribution of increase capacity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizational Capacity Assessment
Capacity outcome as enhanced performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qualitative: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — description of most significant change by organization — description of most significant change by consultants/staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EoP survey • EoP focus group discussion • Pause and reflect with consultants and project staff

Distinguishing between organizational *capacity* and organizational *performance* is key part of measuring organizational growth. To measure organizational *capacity* in USAID Advancing Nutrition’s programming, we engaged partners in a participatory capacity assessment, adapted to match the scope and context of the organization’s work. To gauge organizational *performance*, we relied upon qualitative data collected at the end of the project through “most significant change” focus group interviews with partners, local consultants, and staff. The interviews focused on notable improvements in partners’ effectiveness in promoting social and behavior change or understanding USAID compliance requirements. Triangulating data from these three sources provided a useful picture of changes that occurred related to program support.

Lessons Learned

After reviewing the available data and collecting reflections from partners, staff, and local consultants, we learned the following lessons:

1. Choose Capacity Measures Based on Partner Needs and Aspirations

Creating and monitoring measurement frameworks alongside partners is critical to designing effective programs. At the start of each program, we engaged partners to understand their organizational needs and aspirations as nutrition service providers in their communities. We led organizational capacity assessments to highlight the partner’s strengths and possible gaps. From there, we discussed and asked partners to prioritize areas of focus, within the scope described by our funder. This led to an agreed, formal capacity strengthening plan that clearly laid out agreements from both the partner and USAID Advancing Nutrition. Throughout implementation, we held monthly meetings and annual “pause and reflect” sessions to assess whether program inputs were meeting their needs. Finally, in determining the effectiveness of our capacity strengthening support, we engaged them in qualitative discussions on the most significant changes experienced during the project period and how the program contributed to those changes.

2. Participatory Self-Assessments Build Ownership, but at a Cost

Assessments can be helpful for reflecting on performance and building a shared understanding between the organization and the local consultant providing technical assistance. Done as participatory self-assessments, facilitated organizational-level reflection (typically taking place over three days) can create a powerful environment for learning and change. Partners described the exercise as important for relationship building with the facilitating local consultant and also for increasing their own awareness of strengths, weaknesses and progress throughout the project. Partners found the reflection process so valuable that they requested a midline assessment to check interim progress and implement course corrections.

However, we found that assessment processes are very demanding for staff of small nongovernmental organizations. Many USAID-funded organizations use OCAs (or similar tools) for grant funding, as part of a needs assessment followed by TA, or as part of a programmatic exercise (Kingham and Levinger 2021). For example, at the outset, three of our four NPI grantees had already undertaken at least one OCA in the past six months. In Kenya, one partner had participated in similar exercises four times in the previous six months, while in Mozambique, our partner completed a similar OCA three months prior. Where possible, we leveraged the results from previous assessments to avoid repetition, but this was challenging. When we ask local organizations to conduct OCAs repeatedly, the process loses value for them and distracts from other priorities and programming. This “assessment fatigue” ultimately undermines ownership of results at the beginning of a program, when ownership and trust are most critical.

3. Self-Assessments Yield Important But Not Objective Results

Partners found significant value in the self-assessment process and benefited greatly from the organization-wide reflection and relationship building that took place. However, OCA results are measures of staff *perceptions* of organizational capacity, not actual capacity. While this is an important indicator of learning absorption and retention, it presents validity risks when measuring change.¹ Since baseline assessments are typically conducted before establishing a foundation of trust, partners unfamiliar with assessments may overestimate their capacity to create a positive impression. Endline scores proved more accurate, as partners recognized the value in discussing the organization’s challenges with each other and they had an established relationship with the technical assistance provider. We learned the true value in the OCA is not in the scoring, but in the discussion that happens around it.

¹ Some popular OCA tools, such as USAID’s, use an evidence-based rubric framework. These tools prescribe one view of mature organizational capacity and one growth pathway for getting there, both of which are subject to the views of the tool developer. Furthermore, the emphasis on standard evidence in the form of manuals, strategies, and templates, can skew capacity strengthening support toward developing products instead of organizational behavior which leads to performance improvement.

4. Quantitative and Qualitative Measures are Both Valuable

Many of the USAID Advancing Nutrition programs had short durations, spanning one to two years. This timeframe hindered the ability to accurately measure capacity strengthening results, which require a longer time horizon to validate. As a result, we were not able to fully report quantitative results.

Additionally, we found that quantitative OCA scores themselves did not tell the full story of partner capacity change. For example, OCA baseline scores for more established partners in NPI were quite high (e.g., 3.8/4), suggesting that there would be little room for advancement through the program. Yet, at endline qualitative discussion revealed significant advances. These respondent insights helped us interpret the data, where minimal changes in the OCA scores told an incomplete story of capacity development. The qualitative data told a more nuanced story of what changed and how the program contributed.

5. Link Capacity Measures to Project Performance and System Performance

Based on our experience with the Kirkpatrick model and discussions with partners, consultants, and staff, we realized other opportunities to monitor organizational performance. For example, the NPI program combined grants with technical assistance to help partners better design, implement, and measure nutrition programs. Effective indicators focused on the degree to which the partner achieved targets, completed work plans, maintained budget burn rates, and submitted timely and accurate reports throughout the grant period. However, additional monitoring tools such as the [Organizational Performance Index](#) (Pact 2017) or [Capacity Mapping and Monitoring System](#) (Levinger and Kinghorn 2022) might have been useful.

Measures of how organizations function within local systems would also have been beneficial for our NPI program. In Kenya, USAID Advancing Nutrition used social network analysis to understand patterns of interaction between actors in the nutrition space to understand outcomes from our work with 10 community service organizations. Repeating this exercise for NPI could show how the program was contributing to changes in collaboration patterns and attitudes.

Conclusion

Measuring organizational growth involves crafting performance improvement plans and measures with local partners that are focused *their* development priorities.^{2,3} This requires the international development community to align its capacity measurement approaches with partner learning journeys. This means adopting measurement methods and indicators that facilitate partner learning on what is needed to effectively design, implement, and monitor nutrition programs.

Measuring organizational capacity strengthening interventions can be challenging, but is not impossible. Implementers can adapt models, such as Kirkpatrick's, to reflect program results chains. We hope these lessons learned contribute to that growing body of knowledge and experience.

² USAID's [Local Capacity Strengthening Policy](#)—principle #3 advocates for planning for and measuring performance improvement in collaboration with local partners (USAID 2022).

³ Directly reflected in [USAID's Capacity Building for Local Development \(CBLD-9\)](#) indicator

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USAID ADVANCING NUTRITION

Implemented by:
JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc.
2733 Crystal Drive
4th Floor
Arlington, VA 22202

Phone: 703–528–7474
Email: info@advancingnutrition.org
Web: advancingnutrition.org

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