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# Strengthening the Capacity of Local Organizations Working in Nutrition

## Learning, Implications for Localization, and Recommendations

Local organizations play a crucial role in improving development outcomes, including nutrition, due to their context-specific knowledge and skills, resources, and networks. Emphasis has been well placed on supporting the organizational and technical development of these potential partners to amplify their role in locally-led development via USAID's New Partnerships Initiative (NPI) and *Local Capacity Strengthening Policy* (2022a).

USAID Advancing Nutrition is the Agency's flagship multi-sectoral nutrition project, led by JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc., and a diverse group of experienced partners. We strengthen the enabling environment for and support country-led scale-up of effective, integrated, and sustainable multi-sectoral nutrition programs, interventions and food and health systems. We pursued a learning agenda to collect lessons learned from the capacity strengthening support provided to local organizations working in nutrition to help close evidence gaps around what strategies work best to deliver on local priorities.

This brief synthesizes findings from two years of USAID Advancing Nutrition's work with the NPI partners implementing nutrition programming (hereafter NPI partners) in Kenya and Burkina Faso<sup>1</sup> and with local civil society organizations (CSOs) in Kenya. The lessons and recommendations presented here are based on USAID Advancing Nutrition's experience working with local partners from 2020 to 2023. A learning agenda centered on the following questions guided this work:

1. To what extent did the capacity strengthening support provided meet the **local organization's top technical and organizational capacity strengthening priorities** to help achieve their goals in providing quality nutrition services?
  - a. How did USAID Advancing Nutrition seek to understand their priorities? What was effective or not about that approach?
  - b. What components of the capacity strengthening support did they find most effective at meeting their capacity strengthening priorities? Why? Which were least effective and why?
2. To what extent has capacity strengthening support contributed to **changes in organizational or staff capacity** to provide quality nutrition services?
  - a. What changes in organization or staff capacity were reported?
  - b. How did capacity strengthening support influence implementation and management of the organization's nutrition project?
3. Which of USAID Advancing Nutrition's capacity strengthening strategies and approaches were effective in **enhancing performance**? Which were not? Why?
  - a. Which strategies and approaches worked especially well? What was challenging?
  - b. What were the supporting and inhibiting factors that contributed to the application of the learning from the capacity strengthening support (e.g., perceived relevance, time, resources)?

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<sup>1</sup> USAID Advancing Nutrition only worked with four nutrition NPI partners. There are other NPI partners in other sectors that we did not engage with.

4. How can capacity strengthening providers, such as USAID Advancing Nutrition, provide **more effective and collaborative support to local organizations** that aligns with the partners' priorities in delivering quality nutrition services, given constraints on time, funding, and staff?
  - a. Which strategies used by USAID Advancing Nutrition in providing remote support to partners have the greatest potential for replication and scale-up?
  - b. What common constraints do local organizations face in strengthening their capacity to deliver quality nutrition programming? What has worked well?
  - c. What are key implications of this learning on the design, implementation, budgeting, and monitoring of capacity strengthening programs for USAID, providers such as USAID Advancing Nutrition, and local partners?

We used five main learning and data collection approaches to answer the learning questions—organizational capacity assessments (OCAs), online feedback surveys, a pause-and-reflect meetings, semi-structured interviews, and document review, although we did not use all approaches with all organizations.

At baseline and endline, we administered **organizational capacity assessments** with the local organizations so they could reflect on and rate their organizational and staff capacity and areas for improvement. We conducted a review of OCA tools commonly used in development work and blended elements from several different sources, recognizing that those adapted from the [OCA Tool for USAID-Funded Organizations](#) reflects organizational capacities prioritized by USAID. Based on that review, we prioritized organizational domains most relevant to the partners' work and where we provided capacity strengthening support. As a last step, we adapted the tools for the local partners. We added reflection questions to the endline OCA for the NPI partners on how our support did or did not contribute to improvements that they observed in each domain. The USAID Advancing Nutrition consultants who facilitated the OCAs also held debrief sessions with the NPI partners to gather their feedback on the OCA process. The CSOs used a rapid OCA (ROCA) and we did not add reflection questions.

With the NPI partners, we used an **online survey** to solicit feedback at midline and endline on whether our support aligned with their priorities and needs, types of support we provided, how useful our support was, changes observed from our support, constraints, and recommendations for improvements. At midline, we sent the survey to NPI partners to share among their staff and received 20 responses. At endline, we asked OCA participants to respond to the survey and 30 completed it. At midline and endline, a mix of leadership and program staff completed the surveys. The survey asked for the NPI partner but not the individual respondents' names. The survey questions were somewhat different between the two rounds, and the midline included mostly open-ended questions, so we were not able to directly compare answers between the two time periods.

At endline, we held a **pause-and-reflect meeting** with United States (US)-based USAID Advancing Nutrition capacity strengthening providers to gather their reflections on the main types of support provided, successes and challenges when providing this support, perceived organizational and staff capacity changes, lessons learned, and recommendations for improvements. At endline, we used **semi-structured interviews** with three local consultants and three USAID Advancing Nutrition Kenya staff who provided capacity strengthening support to explore the same topics as the pause and reflect. We **reviewed documents** related to the capacity strengthening support we provided, which were capacity strengthening plans, USAID Advancing Nutrition consultant reports, and NPI partner reports. Throughout, we gathered information in French for NPI partners and local consultants in Burkina Faso and in English for others.

## Key Findings

### Identifying Local Priorities to Drive Capacity Strengthening Support

Local partners reported the organizational capacity assessment process and joint capacity strengthening plan development at the start of the project were relevant and useful for helping organizations reflect and identify priorities for change. In addition, the midpoint review and endline OCA helped organizations understand the pace of change and which areas needed more attention. However, several partners indicated that they needed more frequent opportunities to formally reflect on their performance and identify problems early. Overall, the NPI grants were a catalyst for accelerating the achievement of a number of the organizations' priority goals. Partners said our technical assistance and support provided by local consultants "opened our eyes" to the need for intentionality regarding their organization's structure, planning, and follow through, increasing ownership over their work and future growth.

### Changes in Organizational Capacity

NPI data suggests that the local organizations made clear progress and that USAID Advancing Nutrition's capacity strengthening support contributed to these changes. All NPI partners implementing nutrition programming in Kenya and Burkina Faso reported improved performance (capacity building for local development [CBLD]-9; USAID 2022c), on average OCA scores increased 15 percent from baseline to endline, and they improved on an average of 3.5 out of 5 capacity areas. The CSOs saw improvements in four out of five capacity areas between the baseline and endline ROCAs.

NPI partners reported that they had advanced the most in the areas of strategic planning, resource mobilization, communications, and knowledge management. Notably, NPI partners said they had a better understanding of U.S. Government rules and regulations, and which policies align with donor requirements and national regulations. The [Prioritizing Multi-Sectoral Nutrition Behaviors](#) tool (USAID Advancing Nutrition 2021) was immediately useful in enhancing their social and behavior change (SBC) strategy implementation.

### Effective Capacity Strengthening Strategies and Common Challenges

Of the variety of strategies and approaches offered to partners, USAID Advancing Nutrition and the local organizations found a combination of approaches to be effective and thought the following strategies were most effective:

- **Mentoring and coaching:** USAID Advancing Nutrition provided mentoring and coaching, including as follow-up support after training. Local consultants were able to provide this support effectively and efficiently, and local organizations are increasingly interested in the accompaniment and feedback they can provide rather than the direction and expert input typically provided by international consultants.
- **Document and policy review:** Local consultants provided beneficial feedback through policy and document review and/or development, particularly in light of USAID regulations. SBC document review was also key to partners' SBC capacity strengthening efforts.
- **Connecting with others in the local context:** One powerful but underutilized strategy was linking partners to other organizations and stakeholders in their region. For example, USAID Advancing Nutrition Kenya connected CSOs with community stakeholders (e.g., other CSOs working in nutrition), peer networks (e.g., Scaling Up Nutrition), government policymakers, and academic institutions, describing the approach as "a game changer".

Challenges to capacity strengthening centered on time. Having small teams made bringing organizational and technical systems up to USAID standards a heavy lift, taxing their ability to change systems and

processes, while also meeting their program implementation commitments with donors. USAID Advancing Nutrition implemented the NPI program over a two-year period, which partners indicated was really too short for fully implementing organizational change that is sustainable.

## Insights into Providing More Effective and Collaborative Capacity Strengthening Support

Our learning reflects and helps provide insights on the principles in USAID's *Local Capacity Strengthening Policy*:

- **Diversity of local capacities, expectations, and priorities:** While the nascent organizations made greater progress, those with existing systems and previous exposure to USAID regulations were able to benefit the most from NPI.
- **Diversity of capacity strengthening strategies and approaches:** When we used strategies in combination with practical application, learning accelerated.
- **Learning from local strengths:** A strengths-based approach to capacity strengthening develops trust with the service provider and builds ownership over the development process.
- **Setting common goals and benchmarks:** The OCA process was helpful for reflecting on progress and challenges, but more could be done to develop rapid feedback loops for facilitating systemic change.
- **Systems lens of capacity strengthening:** Focusing on organizational systems development, rather than individual skill building, and connecting stakeholders builds respectful, collaborative relationships to elevate the level of nutrition services for the population.
- **Unintended consequences of short-term grants with local partners:** The short duration of NPI placed partners under immense pressure. A more graduated approach would better sequence tasks and increase capacity strengthening support in the beginning, with gradual handover of responsibilities as the capacity strengthening support progresses.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Despite their significant knowledge and expertise in implementing programs to fit the needs of local contexts, local organizations benefit from organizational support to increase their influence as part of an overall strategy toward locally-led development. Donors such as USAID must provide support to potential partners at a pace and scale that they can manage that does not overwhelm their systems.

USAID Advancing Nutrition offers the following recommendations to enhance capacity strengthening support to local organizations, and contribute to USAID's learning question on locally-led development (2022b) and emphasis on local capacity strengthening (2022a):

- Adopt a graduated NPI model over 3–5 years to allow the partner to grow at a pace and scale that prepares them for success and develop a transition plan to support this.
- Customize capacity strengthening support to more nascent local organizations that do not have the organizational systems in place to be compliant with a U.S. Government grant.
- Use a combination of capacity strengthening strategies (e.g., mentoring, coaching, fostering network linkages) to support applying learning rather than focusing on building knowledge through training events.
- Expand the use of local consultants as capacity strengthening providers to build mentoring relationships that are truly local. Strengthening relationships that grantees can continue after the

program has finished can support longer-term change. Local consultants also are sensitive to the context and well-placed to understand challenges and opportunities.

- Increase local organizations' ownership of capacity strengthening goals and plans through a strengths-based partnership approach that is highly participatory, led by the local organizations, and builds on their existing expertise and experience. Build trust from the beginning by communicating clearly that the program is guided by partner priorities.
- At the outset, collaboratively establish a path to donor funding that is based on organizational maturity and growth. Support organizational sustainability with clear goals, outcomes, and milestones, with a specific focus on securing ongoing funding.
- Adopt a systems lens to capacity strengthening to address broader constraints that local organizations face including by facilitating linkages with funders and government decision makers and fostering networks with peer organizations.

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