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



**Unlocking the Power of Women Farmers and
Catalyzing Improved Nutrition in Assam**







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Unlocking the Power of Women Farmers and Catalyzing Improved Nutrition in Assam

Capturing USAID Advancing Nutrition's Impact in Assam Through
Inspiring Stories and Photos.







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Introduction

USAID Advancing Nutrition launched its two-year nutrition project to improve household diet diversity and create economic opportunities for women through community-led nutrition-sensitive agriculture in Assam state, India. The project focused on building women's capacity in nutrition-sensitive agriculture, increasing their access to business opportunities, and encouraging behavior change to improve nutrition and joint decision-making on agricultural assets in their households.

We formed strategic alliances with key partners from multiple sectors, including the Assam State Rural Livelihood Mission (ASRLM), Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, and the Directorate of Horticulture and Food Processing. We selected the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Seven Sisters Development Assistance (SeSTA) as the implementing partner (IP) to leverage the organization's prior experience working with the selected communities and expertise in agriculture interventions.

In two years, the project supported 19,004 women farmers to adopt improved horticulture practices in their homestead gardens, and 5,594 women are now equipped to implement improved fish farming techniques in their home ponds. With new skills and increased confidence, as well as more opportunities for stable income and shared decision-making, these women can better encourage their families to eat more diverse diets, leading to healthier lives.

Assam at a Glance



31.2 million
estimated population



85.9 %
live in rural areas



14.1%
live in urban areas



72.58%
population engaged
in agriculture



2.74 million
agriculture
families





35%

of children under five are stunted {too short for their age}



22%

of children under five are wasted {too thin for their height}



33%

of children under five are underweight



54.2%

of pregnant women are anaemic {aged 15-49}



65.9%

of women are anaemic {aged 15-49}

Sources: State Profile of Assam, Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of Assam | Assam State Rural Livelihood Mission | The National Family Health Survey 5 | <https://www.outlookindia.com/national/climate-change-fertility-loss-population-rise-challenges-to-assam-s-agri-sector-minister-news-270339>



Highlights

Map of India



Map of Assam state



The geographic scope of the project includes six blocks in three districts:

Barpeta

- Pakabetbari
- Rupsi

Goalpara

- Kushdhowa
- Rongjuli

Tinsukia

- Kakopathar
- Itakhuli

24,598

women

trained on nutrition-sensitive
horticulture and aquaculture



70

master trainers
trained in horticulture

68

master trainers
trained in aquaculture



59

people from local NGOs
attended sensitization sessions
on nutrition, nutrition-sensitive
agriculture, and social and
gender norms

51

nutrition sensitization sessions
provided for school children
and their parents and village
heads



Milestones



A scoping study to inform project planning

The scoping study, conducted in October 2021, revealed a strong mandate for nutrition-focused livelihood approaches. Behavior change is critical and offers an opportunity to improve nutrition. Partnerships and technical inputs are required to support existing structures and organizations.



USAID Advancing Nutrition official launch

The project held a state-level launch event in Assam in July 2022 to share the project objectives and obtain support from government officials, NGO representatives, academic institutions, research organizations, and other stakeholders.



Initiating partnerships and collaborations

USAID Advancing Nutrition signed memoranda of understanding with ASRLM to leverage their organizational structure as an implementation platform and with WorldFish for technical guidance and training support on aquaculture practices.



Formative research and gender assessment

Using a human-centered approach, the project carried out social and behavior change formative research to better understand priority behaviors that could positively affect household nutrition and improve household productivity and incomes. The gender analysis showed how gender dynamics and social norms impact women's abilities to participate in nutrition-sensitive agriculture activities.



Training of master trainers and beneficiaries

Using a cascade training model, master trainers received training on nutrition-sensitive horticulture and aquaculture practices from SeSTA, and the master trainers then trained women from self-help groups.



Private sector engagement and community of practice

The project conducted key informant interviews with market players to understand the gaps in production, sales, marketing of agricultural products, and access to credit and held a consultation workshop to understand stakeholders' interests, expectations, and challenges related to nutrition-sensitive agriculture. The community of practice will provide a platform for learning and collaboration around efforts to strengthen nutrition-sensitive agriculture programming beyond the end of the project.





Promoting Nutrition Through Nutrition-Sensitive Agriculture

Nutrition-sensitive agriculture focuses on ways to improve nutrition through agricultural activities, including increasing the productivity of nutritious foods, boosting incomes, and increasing women's participation in agriculture decisions and activities. USAID Advancing Nutrition in India promoted increased productivity in the horticulture and aquaculture value chains as a means of improving nutrition-sensitive agricultural practices.





The project supported rural women, who play a central role in their households' nutrition practices, to establish homestead vegetable gardens and ponds.

Training sessions aimed to position women as bearers of knowledge, allowing them to make informed decisions related to what to grow, consume, and sell. Training also addressed gender barriers to equip women with the skills and confidence to fully participate in joint household decision-making on agriculture inputs, land, and resources.

After receiving training from SeSTA, master trainers conducted participatory training for female farmers who were members of women's self-help groups (WSHG). The master trainers, known as Krishi Sakhi and Pashu Sakhi, took on responsibility for building capacity in agricultural and animal husbandry activities.







Bandita's New Identity

“I gained a new identity. I feel confident,” said 33-year-old Bandita sitting with her husband in their home in the Goalpara district of Assam State.

As a Krishi Sakhi (Community Agriculture Care Service Provider) with ASRLM, Bandita trains rural women in WHSG on agricultural activities, providing guidance on government schemes and encouraging them to pursue self-employment.

In 2021, she was chosen as a master trainer by ASRLM to attend a two-day instructional module on nutrition-sensitive horticulture practices, organised by USAID Advancing Nutrition in partnership with ASRLM and SeSTA.

“When our Block Project Manager from ASRLM mentioned the training, I felt it would be a great opportunity to increase the yield in my garden and improve our earnings. Also, as a trainer, I get to share my knowledge with other women in my community too,” said Bandita.

Applying the techniques learned from USAID Advancing Nutrition training, Bandita improved her garden's yield and, as a master trainer, she has conducted 13 trainings for 390 women in her community.



Bandita's husband, Biswajit feels proud of the woman Bandita has become—a role model for other women in the community.

“It was good to see how women respect her. A few people even visit our house to clarify their doubts. She has become more courageous and confident,” said Biswajit.

An important module component focused on women's role in making decisions related to household and agricultural assets to increase their participation in agricultural activities. Facilitators use locally-relevant stories to engage the participants in reasoning and influence their attitudes and perceptions on making decisions together at home and taking ownership and responsibilities in households/communities.

“I gained a new identity. I feel more confident. My husband respects my knowledge and suggestions. I am being seen and heard,” Bandita said, her eyes lit up with pride.



Momentum for Collaborative Action

Addressing malnutrition requires collaboration across a multi-sectoral spectrum of actors. USAID Advancing Nutrition established formal partnerships with the ASRLM to identify beneficiaries and trainers and implement activities in communities and with WorldFish to provide training support on aquaculture practices along with the Department of Fisheries.

The project team also conducted workshops and consultations with the Department of Agriculture, Directorate of Horticulture and Food Processing, civil society organizations, the private sector, academic institutions, and NGOs.





Partnering for Success: Shared Goals and Collective Commitment

“The most important thing about the USAID Advancing Nutrition project was that the project not only focused on creating livelihood opportunities but also on nutrition,” said Jayanta Tairai, Block Project Manager, ASRLM.

ASRLM’s mission is to improve the social and economic opportunities for people living in the rural areas of the Assam by providing skill development training and promoting self-employment.

Jayanta has been working with ASLRM for the past six and a half years and is involved in implementing different livelihood projects for the tea garden community in the Tinsukia district.

“These people work for long hours in the tea garden so they can provide food for their families. They hardly pay attention to whether the food is nutritious enough. If the food is not nutritious, people are more likely to become sick and all the hard-earned money is spent on treatment,” explained Jayanta.



The training supported by USAID Advancing Nutrition leveraged digital technology and social and behavior change strategies to address communities' specific needs.

“Educational videos with local people as actors piqued people’s interest. Having information easily accessible in their mobile phones made it easy for them to refer to and implement the newly learned techniques,” mentioned Jayanta.



Jayanta was directly involved in organizing training, guiding community cadres, and encouraging communities throughout the project, and he noted a number of challenges.

“The challenge of working among tea garden workers was that most of their time would be spent at work. Mobilizing them for training has been tough. Having SeSTA to gather people was a huge support and conducting trainings in late evenings and weekends worked well,” said Jayanta.

Working with USAID Advancing Nutrition has been a learning journey for Jayanta as well.

“Adapting to the needs of communities is crucial. I have noticed that certain families became conscious about what they eat and more aware about nutrition,” said Jayanta.





Women are Central to the Solution

In Assam, more than 80% of women rely on agriculture for their income. However, they face significant challenges in participating in livelihood development activities and household decision-making because of various gender and social norms.

To ensure all voices are heard, particularly women farmers in rural areas, USAID Advancing Nutrition asked them about their needs to inform the project's social and behavior change* strategy. We found that increasing women's knowledge, self-confidence, skills in agriculture, and access to resources is critical to increasing their agricultural productivity. The women also emphasized the importance of joint household decision-making for better decisions on the purchasing of inputs, what to plant, when to sell their products, and what the family should eat.



* Social and behavior change focuses on changing key behaviors in individuals and in communities. A behavior is a specific action that a person takes; for example, caregivers feeding children nutrient-dense foods or pregnant women consuming nutrient-rich foods.



USAID Advancing Nutrition revised its horticulture, aquaculture, and nutrition training curriculum to better center women's needs and challenges and to address behaviors and norms in their specific context.

Women received training on horticulture and aquaculture practices and visited agricultural sites to see how best practices are implemented. Krishi Sakhis and Pashu Sakhis, the community cadres, made household visits to counsel men and women on the adoption of best agricultural practices, the important of making decisions together at home and how to management time and available resources.

Producer groups are an informal group of women who provide each other with sustainable, reliable, and affordable access to livelihood support services, capacity building, guidance, financial support, and market linkages. With support from USAID Advancing Nutrition and partners, these groups learned to address structural barriers that prevent women from adopting improved agriculture and marketing practices.

Improving women's access to income opportunities and decision-making often improves the health and well-being of their families.



Flourishing Fish Farming

Anjima's teenage daughter loves Mwita jwng naa, a spicy-sweet-tangy flavoured dish cooked with fish and roselle leaves and a staple food of the Bodo tribe living in Assam.

“My daughter loves fish, but buying it in the market is expensive. I farmed fish in our small pond for consumption at home but produced very little,” Anjima said.

In early 2023, Anjima attended the USAID Advancing Nutrition nutrition-sensitive aquaculture and nutrition training. She learned new skills including how to dewater a pond and clear aquatic weeds as well as how to test the pH levels of pond water and improve water quality with banana leaves and proper liming techniques.







Anjima was quick to share what she learned with her husband and mother-in-law. Though they were initially hesitant, they agreed to implement the new methods in their pond as well as cultivate new varieties of fish like mola (Indian carplet) for increased market value.

“Mola fish has a high nutritional value. I can feed my whole family and sell the excess in the market. Also mola fish is small and we can eat it completely, including the head which has the most nutrients,” Anjima explained.





Around the pond, Anjima and her family also cultivate vegetables for consumption at home.

“Most of our fish dishes are cooked with vegetables and the training helped me understand the importance of balanced nutrition—the right mix of grains, legumes, fruits, and vegetables along with fish or other meat. We can now eat well with the amount of vegetables and fish we cultivate,” said Anjima.

With her newly acquired knowledge and newfound confidence, Anjima and her husband have decided to set up another pond.

“My husband and I have discussed the additional income that the new pond can bring in. Soon, you will see the new pond over there,” Anjima said pointing towards the empty plot near her house.



Producing Food for a Diverse Diet

A diverse diet includes vegetables, fruits, legumes, whole grains, and animal-source foods, and it is crucial to preventing all forms of malnutrition. However, erratic climatic conditions, environmental degradation, and poverty have made many foods disappear from many low-income families' farms and plates.

USAID Advancing Nutrition aimed to provide women farmers with the skills and knowledge to increase productivity and profitability of their agriculture practices for improved nutrition at home. Improved productivity allows farmers to sell the surplus, and the additional income supports purchasing more nutritious food so women and their families consume adequate nutrients for growth and development for active and healthy lives.









Sangita's Rich Harvest

Sangita pressed her palms together and greeted the project team with a gratitude-filled smile as she finished harvesting the bounty of vegetables—cabbage, brinjal, carrot, beetroot, tomato, ginger, capsicum, okra, and spinach—in her garden.

Sangita is an active member of the WSHG in her village and regularly attends the monthly meetings, which is where she learned about USAID Advancing Nutrition's training on nutrition and horticulture for local community women, conducted in partnership with ASLRM and SeSTA.

“Learning the right way to prepare jeevamrit (organic fertilizer) and agniastra (an organic pesticide) was tremendously helpful. I felt knowledgeable to grow vegetables organically and the change happened in front of my own eyes: the vegetables looked so fresh and healthy, and fertility of the soil has improved,” Sangita highlighted what she learned from the training.

By applying her new knowledge, Sangita reaps a rich harvest from her vegetable garden. It supports the family's balanced diet, and the surplus vegetables provide a stable income.



“People are ready to pay more for organic vegetables. For example, one kilogram of organic capsicum sells at INR 120 while inorganic sells at INR 70. That is INR 50 difference and the organic ones also stay fresh for a long time. Our income has considerably improved, and our food is healthier too,” said Sangita.

Sangita’s husband Bolanth also took away important messages on joint decision-making between a husband and wife for equitable participation in farming and closing the gender gap in agriculture.

“We shouldn’t only just talk about women’s empowerment, we need to do something about it. I am doing that at home. I am proud of my wife for how far she has come, and I am sure many women out there want to do something for their families. It is an equal share of roles in consulting on the discussions for the happy and healthy family,” Bolanth said.





The Road Ahead

As a result of USAID Advancing Nutrition's work with ASRLM, SeSTA, and other partners, 24,598 women farmers in Assam state are trained on new farming techniques so they can produce new varieties of crops and fish. Many of these women were already determined to provide healthy and diverse diets for their families, and now they have the skills and knowledge to do even more to protect their families from malnutrition.

The project's success stems from strong partnerships with ASRLM, SeSTA, WorldFish, the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Fisheries, and the Directorate of Horticulture and Food Processing as well as various civil society groups, NGOs, private sector participants, and research institutions. Our partners and stakeholders are deeply committed to promoting nutrition-sensitive agriculture practices, which will continue to benefit families and communities by strengthening collaborations across sectors with shared goals to support better nutrition outcomes.

Through transformative, participatory methods, USAID Advancing Nutrition empowered women farmers by amplifying their voices, enhancing access to safe and nutritious foods, and assisting them in creating resilient vegetable gardens and ponds for long-term income sustainability.

USAID Advancing Nutrition created a catalytic effect and we hope the time will determine how the increased productivity, improved earnings and enhanced joined decision-making worked to change the nutritional status in households.













