



Transform Nutrition West Africa: Looking Back to Move Forward

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Transform Nutrition West Africa



Four years ago, a group of senior scientists from the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), along with representatives from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) and the African Nutrition Leadership Programme (ANLP), came together to address malnutrition in West Africa through the [Transform Nutrition West Africa](#) (TNWA) project. When the project was initiated in 2017, the region had made only limited and uneven progress in reducing high levels of malnutrition: wasting and stunting were prevalent among children and half of the women of reproductive age were anemic, even as maternal overweight and obesity were becoming increasingly common. In response, TNWA was developed as a bilingual regional knowledge platform for informing and supporting decision-making on maternal, infant, and young child nutrition (MIYCN).

TNWA has supported effective policy and programmatic decisions and actions by encouraging an inclusive and collaborative process of knowledge generation and mobilization to improve maternal and child nutrition. The project has assessed and analyzed nutrition-relevant data, programs, and policies to

generate knowledge on optimal approaches, and has mobilized this knowledge to strengthen enabling environments and inform nutrition-relevant decision-making. As a regional platform for West Africa, TNWA has been anchored in four focal countries: Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal, and Burkina Faso.

A holistic approach called the “5PD Cycle” was used to translate knowledge into action across the whole spectrum of malnutrition. The 5PD Cycle assumes that, to improve MIYCN, nutrition issues are best understood as a cycle of interacting domains: problem, policy, program, people, priorities, and data and knowledge. Across these domains, nutrition topics were prioritized through stakeholder engagements (demand-driven) and assessment of emerging regional issues (supply-driven); a variety of methods was then used to build knowledge on the priority topics.



The heart of TNWA’s activities lies in the interconnectedness of three different workstreams: **knowledge generation** and **mobilization** that is conducted while simultaneously fostering a strong **enabling environment** for policy and program action. This multipronged approach has been crucial to achieving the project’s objectives of generating and mobilizing knowledge that supports action. We reflect here on TNWA’s key achievements and on the factors that allowed them to be realized.

Engagement

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engagements were built, of which 7 were strategic institutional partnerships and 12 were long-term engagements at the country or regional level.

In its first year, TNWA laid down strong regional foundations for the platform's work. Through an inception phase, we synthesized and mobilized regional knowledge and engaged with stakeholders to set priorities for the remainder of the project. The flexibility to respond to regional stakeholders' demands in developing the delivery phase was built into the project by the donors; this flexibility made it possible to ground the project in its local context, ensuring that local challenges and priorities were addressed by "homegrown" solutions. Contacts with local stakeholders were crucial in the initial stage of TNWA, allowing us, over time and with patience, to build up **trustworthy relationships and partnerships**. As a result of the feedback loop between knowledge generation and engagement with stakeholders, momentum was generated to improve the use and usability of knowledge in decision-making for nutrition.

The original partnerships expanded over time. Memorandums of understanding (MOUs) were signed with UNICEF, Alive & Thrive, and the West African Health Organization (WAHO), and a joint action plan was drawn up with Action Against Hunger. Close collaborative partnerships

were also established with DataDENT and Countdown to 2030. The "glue" of these successful partnerships was the alignment of vision and values and the commitment to achieving common goals; their success also reflects the trust, integrity, and inclusiveness embedded in the relationships, and the value created as a result of the partnerships, which made the whole greater than the sum of its parts.

"The strategic and synergistic partnerships TNWA built, reinforced the mobilizing and advocating for action around nutrition."

Beyond these partnerships, engagements throughout the project took many forms, including consultations, identification of synergistic opportunities, linking to ongoing work in [Stories of Change countries](#), novel types of regional involvement, and new ways of bringing stakeholders together. These formal and informal engagements and relationships happened at the national, regional, or global level; through them, TNWA succeeded in doing more than it had set out to do and was able to influence and achieve changes in how knowledge for nutrition policy and programs was being used.

AT LEAST 400 DECISIONMAKERS

in the West Africa region were reached directly through events, webinars, and short courses, and were sensitized to use knowledge to inform decision-making.

Decision-makers testify to the impact of TNWA's engagement and support in their

countries and institutions and at the regional level. In their view, integrative thinking and the emphasis that TNWA gave to inclusivity, collaboration, and listening are what made the partnership unique (Box 1).

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regional events were organized to engage with stakeholders around key priorities for nutrition policy and programming.

TNWA served as a **convener**, bringing key stakeholders together at country- and regional-level events. In so doing, it was able to mobilize or facilitate the uptake of knowledge and, thus, to strengthen the enabling environment and to inform and improve nutrition-relevant policy and programming. Stakeholders were brought together both passively and actively through, for example, [blogs](#), [webinars](#), sharing learning on our [bilingual platform](#), and [key events](#).

"TNWA's convening role and mandate to engage across multiple organizations using evidence as a basis for joint, concerted and coordinated action were key factors contributing to TNWA's impact."

This convening role and TNWA's mandate to engage across the region were key factors contributing to the program's impact. One successful event was the [Together For Nutrition: West Africa Data Forum](#), a forum led by TNWA and cosponsored by nine key institutions and

programs that are active along the data value chain for nutrition. The Call to Action developed through this forum was [endorsed by the WAHO](#) and has been used in data initiatives to improve regional alignment of data and to stimulate regional collaboration and learning to improve all aspects of nutrition data.

Knowledge for Informed Policy and Program Decisions



By placing and using knowledge at the heart of the engagements and by making stakeholders part of this process, TNWA ensured that any research or knowledge generated was used to inform policy and program decision-making. Key syntheses carried out by TNWA brought together evidence on one or more domains in the 5PD Cycle, in response to stakeholder demand. Outputs included project evidence notes, databases, and journal manuscripts. Six activities were undertaken:

1) [Research on World Health Assembly \(WHA\) West Africa indicators was evaluated](#). TNWA

created guidelines for future primary research based on an assessment of methodological approaches, as well as existing capacity and leadership.

2) A quarterly tracking system was put in place to provide a digest of all nutrition-relevant research evidence and knowledge published in the West Africa region. This system has synthesized the best available evidence on nutrition in a rapid, timely, and systematic manner to facilitate informed decision-making and potentially improve policy and practice. Evidence summaries were published and disseminated among decision-makers in [a quarterly e-newsletter](#), and were [synthesized and visualized online](#) over the lifespan of the project.

3) Rapid review methodology approaches were applied to synthesize evidence on partner priorities and on current challenges and evidence gaps in the region. Topics covered included [breastfeeding practices](#), [programs to address child wasting](#), and [adolescent nutrition](#).

4) A secondary data analysis used Demographic Health Survey data to better understand how to address multiple malnutrition burdens. The analysis focused on where these burdens (co)occur (within communities and mother–child pairs and within single individuals) and what drives them. Results are available for our four focal countries and are summarized in an [evidence note](#) to inform decision-makers.

5) An assessment looked at the availability of [actionable nutrition data](#) for West African

countries (for both key nutrition outcomes and coverage indicators), and at countries' capacity to use this data to monitor and track progress. Results are summarized in [country data profiles](#). We also assessed [coherence across policy and programs](#) in Burkina Faso and Nigeria.

6) TNWA reviewed and summarized the current [landscape of nutrition-relevant policy](#), both for individual West African countries and regionally. We highlighted the strengths, weaknesses, and gaps in nutrition-relevant policy and assessed the level of coherence both within and across policies. We offered [actions and points for consideration](#) that could contribute to improvements in the development of nutrition policy in West Africa; we also shared the resulting database to inform the WAHO's Nutrition Observatory.

“The holistic approach to nutrition as well as the unique mix of demand- and supply-driven approach to knowledge generation were key strengths of TNWA.”

In addition to producing these knowledge and synthesis products, TNWA developed readily usable materials to support the application of these approaches not only in West Africa but also in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) in other regions. These materials include a [resource bank](#) that compiles the procedures to follow, the necessary templates, and the relevant resources for producing rapid, quality evidence reviews in a timely manner in LMIC settings. A toolkit for using the 5PD Cycle allows stakeholders to identify and address persistent

nutrition problems in various contexts. These tools have played an important role in building regional capacity.

A key strength of the project's approach has been the **interconnectedness** of its activities. The capacity of researchers, policymakers, and other stakeholders was strengthened by generation and mobilization of knowledge that was both fit for purpose and responded to identified and prioritized local needs. Leadership- and capacity-building, in turn, helped ensure that knowledge generation responded to identified needs and that it fostered a stronger enabling environment for policy and program action.

"The unique mix of leadership building, knowledge generation, and mobilization allowed country- and regional-level voices to express their needs and enabled TNWA to tailor knowledge generation to these needs."

Flexibility was another of the project's strengths that enabled this approach; flexibility in the delivery phase allowed us the time and opportunity to listen and respond to needs.

A Network Built through Leadership and Capacity Strengthening for Informed Policy and Program Decisions

The capacity and leaderships skills of **112 WEST AFRICAN NUTRITION PROFESSIONALS** (53 females and 58 males) were strengthened in four short courses, two of which were francophone and two anglophone.

TNWA contributed to **building in-country capacity and leadership** for conducting and uptake of nutrition policy and programs through two short complementary [courses](#) offered in French and English. The first of these focused on the skills needed to *lead change in nutrition*; the second course focused on the *evidence for nutrition policy and programming*, and looked more closely at the nutrition-related knowledge necessary to lead that change. Leadership- and capacity-building has improved understanding of the knowledge needed for effective, fit-for-purpose decision-making, and thus has improved decision-makers' responsiveness within the local context.

"In providing the opportunity to meet nutrition experts with diverse backgrounds from different countries, **TNWA built a nutrition network** in the region."

A **regional nutrition network** was built through long-term engagements, short courses, events, and outputs, and leadership opportunities were provided for young professionals. TNWA also facilitated national-level nutrition professionals in playing important convening roles and building strong links with regional-level key players, especially with the WAHO.

Box 1. Better Together: Multiplying Impact and Reducing Duplication



Anne-Sophie Le Dain, UNICEF WCARO

Today, the need for optimal nutrition has never been greater in the West African region. The path to nutritious diets, essential nutrition services and positive nutrition practices demands a shared purpose, with adequate and strategic investments from all. More than ever, harnessing the strengths and resources of all key stakeholders is critical if we want to address persisting nutrition challenges in the region. Recognizing that a "do-it-alone" approach is not the best strategy for efficient and sustainable impact, UNICEF West and Central Africa Regional Office as part of the RISING partnership, A&T, TNWA and WAHO engaged in collaborative action in 2019. The partnership was successful in fostering greater complementarity; it provided an innovative framework to leverage on our respective experiences and create synergies to enhance knowledge management to support the further scaling up of programs on MIYCN in the region. We benefited from the strengths each organization brought to the table and became more successful together, organizing joint events and missions and developing joint initiatives and products. With the end of this partnership, our next challenge is to sustain engagements and ensure that the knowledge generated continues to be used to inform and accelerate the scaling-up of effective nutrition interventions in the region.



Manisha Tharaney, Alive & Thrive

The partnership between Alive & Thrive, UNICEF, TNWA and the WAHO has had an important impact on nutrition programming in West Africa. These impacts have three main aspects: capacity building of countries on nutrition data analysis and its interpretation for programs and policies, advocating and mobilizing action around adolescent nutrition, and building momentum and accelerating knowledge of nutrition programs and policies, particularly for breastfeeding. Furthermore, the partnership was successful in using each partner's unique strengths and in expending resources efficiently to improve health and nutrition outcomes in the region. Going forward, this progress can be maintained through informed dialogue of the evidence-base in West Africa and continuous reflection on how to use knowledge generation and partnerships in supporting countries to accelerate improvements in nutrition programs and services.



Dr Namoudou Keita, WAHO

WAHO as a key stakeholder in the UNICEF-IFPRI-A&T tripartite agreement, appreciated the crucial role played by the TNWA project. We are grateful for their convening role and support in the Nutrition Forum and in priority areas such as strengthening national and regional capacities in nutrition program leadership and management of the nutrition data value chain. The content of this report will serve as a "memoire" for WAHO to take ownership of the achievements of this project. We dare to hope that there will be a favorable follow-up to this project and partnership for the well-being of West African populations.

Challenges

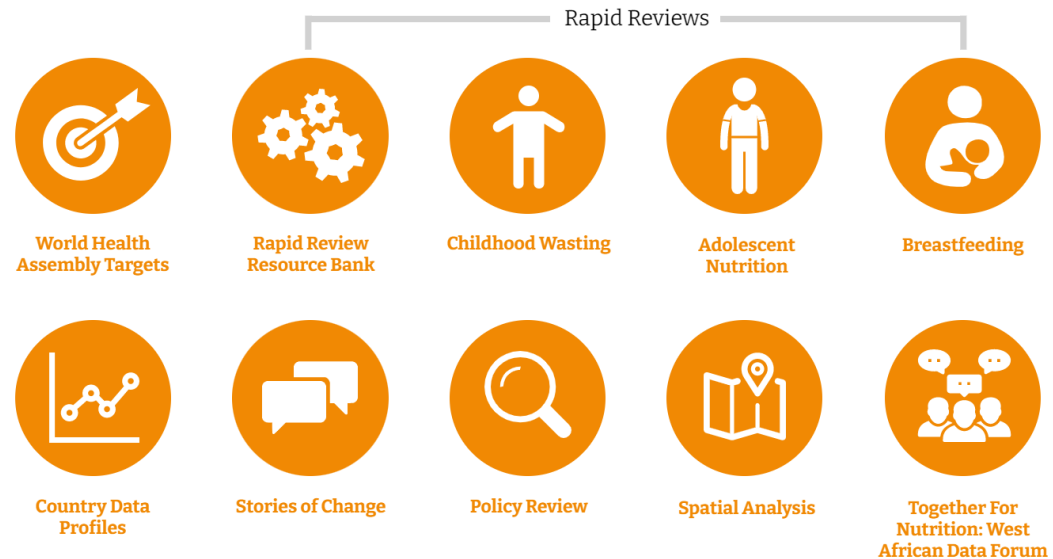
The TNWA project faced its share of challenges. Facilitating across multiple organizations and levels and across different agendas has not been straightforward, as country, regional, and global agendas do not always align. Building credibility and trustworthy relationships is time-consuming; more time would have allowed us to achieve a greater impact. Because we were acting in four focal countries as well as at the regional level, outputs were not always applicable to the whole region. The lack of physical presence in each of these countries was also a limitation, though the leadership in each of the focal countries has been key to bringing the project to fruition.

Imagining a new agenda: Building on the momentum

TNWA's achievements were driven by a blend of supply- and demand-driven knowledge generation and mobilization; they were embedded in, and driven by, the priorities of key stakeholders. We were able to contribute to the demand for knowledge to inform regional policy and program action, and to support its effective use in conducting and uptake of nutrition policy and program research. A key strength was TNWA's

use of country and regional voices for identifying priority topics. Overall, we are hopeful that the project has built a foundation that others can use to continue building more effective collaboration on crucial nutrition issues. Learning from TNWA's approach will be key to continued progress and central to moving the agenda forward in West Africa. In this [interactive page](#), we reflect on the project's key achievements, the approach taken, methods applied, and results achieved. We offer this as an inspiration for other nutrition professionals and their organizations to continue investing in the use of knowledge for a new agenda for policy and program decisions.

A snapshot of key achievements



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*Regional
Nutrition
Working
Group*

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Transform Nutrition West Africa is a regional platform to enable effective policy and programmatic action on nutrition.
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