



Technical Note 8

Assessing Capacity: The Need to Invest in Nutrition Capacity Development in the West Africa Region

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The nutrition landscape in West Africa has been evolving since 2010, following new initiatives aimed at enhancing food and nutrition security. Important efforts have been made to raise the profile of nutrition to a high priority. Momentum is now strong to scale up nutrition interventions and accelerate progress toward improved nutrition outcomes in the West Africa region. Despite these positive developments, sufficient attention has not been paid to nutrition capacity development. The common misconception that capacity development is synonymous with the training of individuals or provision of tools to do the job has greatly contributed to this lack of attention (1). While important efforts have been made by development partners to strengthen human capacity for nutrition (for example, the provision of training to nutrition service providers to manage acute malnutrition cases), little has been done to develop capacity for nutrition at organizational and systemic levels. Recent evidence has shown that nutrition programs in West Africa are characterized by a critical shortage of skilled human resources, high dependency on donor resources as a result of low government investments, weak logistic and infrastructure systems, and lack of supervision as well as coordination of nutrition activities at lower levels. Other challenges include a limited training capacity to support the expansion of the nutrition workforce and a lack of clarity in the roles and responsibilities of nutrition service providers (2–4).

The need to invest in nutrition capacity development cannot be overemphasized. Effective nutrition interventions could be improved with increased capacity on the ground to deliver or scale them up. Capacity development can also help to improve overall program design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation and lead to greater accountability and efficient use of resources (5). Capacity gaps assessment is generally a preliminary step in the capacity development process. As capacity is the combination of many interrelated factors at individual, organizational, and systemic levels (1,5), a systemic assessment of capacity gaps is needed. A thorough capacity gap analysis would provide the basis for the development of a comprehensive framework to strengthen the implementation and scale-up of nutrition interventions. A multilayer approach to capacity assessment, based on a list of optimal capacities, is required in order to strategize efforts to strengthen institutional and human capacities for nutrition. In addition, a targeted, focused approach to capacity assessment is key to enable nutrition programs to build on existing capacities and develop only those that are needed (6).

Several authors have provided clear indications to guide the measurement of capacity gaps for nutrition in a systematic manner (5,7). However, very few attempts have been made to link these proposed frameworks to concrete case studies in countries or regions with high burden of undernutrition. The World Health Organization (WHO) has conducted a landscape analysis, which has enriched our understanding of the challenges to scale up nutrition actions in some high-burden countries in West Africa (8). The West African Nutrition Capacity Development

Initiative, implemented in partnership with Helen Keller International (HKI), United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), West Africa Health Organization (WAHO), and other partners, has also recently undertaken a systematic assessment of the current capacity to act in nutrition in West Africa, which hopefully will pave the way to the implementation of a comprehensive nutrition capacity development strategy across the region (2–4). The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) is also assisting countries in the region to develop the capacity for mainstreaming nutrition into their agriculture and food security programs (9). Cornell University has been contributing to the regional efforts to strengthen strategic capacity and develop a multisectoral approach to nutrition within the framework of a partnership with UNICEF. It is hoped that all these actions will shape future nutrition actions and contribute to build the needed capacity to accelerate progress for nutrition across the West Africa region.

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