



Africa Catalyzing Action for Nutrition

<http://african-network.org>

Summary Report

“Good Nutrition Starts With Me” Youth initiative Pilot: Phase 1 (2023-2024)

Background

“Nutrition security exists when all people at all times consume food of sufficient quantity and quality in terms of variety, diversity, nutrient content and safety to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life, coupled with a sanitary environment, adequate health, education and care.” (FAO, 2012).

The “Good Nutrition Starts With Me” Youth Initiative is one of three flagship initiatives¹ of AfriCAN, launched in 2023 in partnership with national nutrition coordinating bodies in Cameroon, Gambia and Ghana, and with funding from the Rockefeller Foundation. Africa has the advantage of being the region with the most youthful population and the youth² were therefore targeted as an under-utilized resource in the fight against hunger and malnutrition and as the foundation for achieving AfriCAN’s goal of “nutrition literate” communities, and its vision of a healthy and well-nourished Africa.

The main activity of the Initiative which took place in the first and second quarters of 2024, was the training of primarily the youth, but also media practitioners under AfriCAN’s “Capacity Enhancement” Strategic Pillar³. The AfriCAN Commitment Card (Annex 1) was introduced to participants with the request to voluntarily commit to actions they would undertake at the end of their training, and that would contribute to AfriCAN’s vision, mission⁴ and goal.

In targeting the youth and media practitioners, the Initiative sought to create a ripple effect by enabling them to not only adopt healthier nutritional practices themselves, but to also advocate for and influence positive change within their households and broader communities.

The Initiative further represented a pilot effort to generate evidence and learning on the justification for targeting the youth as the foundation for nutrition literate communities, and the feasibility of AfriCAN’s approach which centers on informing, educating, advocating, and inspiring action to achieve better nutrition outcomes at the community level.

Surveys were conducted, led by an independent expert and supported by research assistants in the target countries, using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies including pre- and post-training assessments, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and Key Informant Interviews (KIs) to generate this evidence and learning.

¹ “Good Nutrition Starts with Me” Youth Initiative; “Nutrition Literate”; Community Initiative; “Under The AfriCAN Baobab Tree” Platform

² The African Union defines youth or young persons in the African Youth Charter, as those between the ages of 15 – 35 years

³ AfriCAN has 5 Strategic Pillars: Capacity enhancement; Community Engagement; Partnership and Networking; Resource Mobilization and Management; Advocacy

⁴ The AfriCAN mission is to mobilize and harness the continent’s underutilized and untapped resources towards improving nutrition sustainably. These underutilized and untapped resources include but are not limited to, an estimated 60% of the global uncultivated arable land; an innovative youth population; indigenous food crops; local and traditional knowledge and practices; diverse technical capacities and skills both within the continent and in the diaspora; media including traditional media; academia and research institutions at regional and national levels; a growing vibrant local private sector; with the Education sector identified as an underutilized sector in addressing malnutrition, even with the success of the homegrown school feeding program

Key Results

1. Establishment of a Working Group/Task Force to review and adapt training materials, develop a training plan and identify trainers

A multisectoral task force, coordinated by the respective national nutrition bodies, was formed in each of the focus countries and comprised representatives from various sectors including health, agriculture, education, academia and civil society. The inclusion of reference groups from both the youth and media networks in the Task Force, ensured that the training content was relevant, accessible, and culturally appropriate. A youth participant reflected thus: *"Having youth and media representatives as part of the Task Force ensured that our perspectives were heard and the training was tailored to what would work best in our communities."*

2. Two hundred youth and media practitioners are trained and certified, representing 90% of the targeted two hundred and twenty-two.

Table 2.1: Participants by group and sex

Groups	Gambia			Ghana			Cameroon		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Youth	20	30	50	18	33	51	14	28	42
Media	12	11	23	17	8	25	7	2	9
Total	32	41	73	33	41	76	21	30	51

The topics introduced during the training include: Basic Nutrition Concepts; Promotion of Healthy diets; Malnutrition (types, causes, prevention and consequences; Nutrition Throughout the Lifecycle; Prevention and Management of Diet-Related Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs); Water, Sanitation and Hygiene(WASH) Food Production, Processing and Preservation as well as Food Systems, Climate Change and Nutrition with a focus on indigenous food crops.

Participants across the three countries showed significant improvements in their understanding of key nutrition concepts. Based on the pre- and post-training test assessments, the media practitioners scored higher in comparison to the youth participants, suggesting a lower level of knowledge among media practitioners prior to the training. While knowledge retention was also significantly high for the youth participants, being relatively lower than that of the media practitioners possibly reflects a higher initial level of awareness and understanding of the subject matter among this group prior to the training. They indicated that the training materials and methods were well-tailored to meet their learning needs and internalization of critical nutrition concepts. A participant from The Gambia noted, *"Before the training, I didn't realize how much my diet was affecting my health. Now, I understand the importance of a balanced diet and can share this knowledge with my community."*

3. A total of one hundred and ninety-eight signed the AfriCAN Commitment Card (Annex 1)

Table 3.1: Signing of the commitment cards (CD) in the three focus countries

Countries	Youth (trainees)	Media (trainees)	Total	Signed the CD (%)
Gambia	50	23	73	100
Ghana	49	25	74	97
Cameroon	42	9	51	100

Key actions committed across the three countries include: promotion of exclusive breastfeeding; nutrition advocacy to peers and communities; improving personal diets with local foods, supporting local food systems and practices etc. A media practitioner from Ghana said *"The Commitment Card initiative was brilliant. It pushed me to start making changes in my daily life. However, I believe continuous support and follow-up are critical to ensure these changes stick."*

4. Establishment of a Community of Practice (CoP)

Establishing a community of practice was proposed to promote sharing and learning throughout the project period and beyond. A survey was conducted among the youth to identify their preferred mode of communication and the results showed that the WhatsApp was preferred by the majority. CoPs were accordingly established, using the WhatsApp platform, with enthusiastic participation by both the youth and media practitioners, for interaction, learning and collaboration through discussions, sharing of experiences and ideas.

The platform was used to promote among others:

- Healthy eating with photos of meals posted inviting comments
- Home gardens with participants showing innovative garden patches using whatever space including recyclable materials that was available, to grow local vegetables for their consumption.
- Indigenous foods recalled from participants' childhood and discussions around their availability and consumption now.
- Urban agriculture with youth participation

5. Reflections from the Youth and Media Practitioners Post Training

Youth - Cameroon

The youth participants highlighted the impact of the training on their understanding of nutrition and the practical steps they have taken since the training. Many emphasized the importance of healthy eating, value of locally available foods, and need for a balanced diet. Several of them shared how the training changed their perspective on nutrition which include:

- Positive impact on daily habits: *"Before the training, I didn't understand the importance of eating balanced meals, but now I make sure to include more vegetables and fruits in my meals."*
- Advocacy and knowledge sharing: *"I have shared what I learned with my family and friends, especially about the importance of breastfeeding and reducing processed food."* stated another participant.
- Practical application of lessons: *"I organized a small workshop in my community to talk about the benefits of healthy eating and exercise. I am now more aware of how nutrition can change our lives."*

Media Practitioners - Cameroon

These reported that the training had a significant influence on their approach to covering nutrition and health topics. Many reflected on how the training expanded their understanding of the role they play in advocating for public health, particularly in spreading awareness about nutrition and advocating for healthier eating habits in their communities. They shared the following:

- Increased awareness of nutrition's importance: *"Before the training, I did not fully understand the impact of nutrition on health. Now, I feel more responsible as a media practitioner in raising awareness on the importance of a balanced diet."*
- Integration of nutrition topics into broadcasts: *"Since the training, I have incorporated nutrition and healthy living topics into my radio shows. It's a great way to reach a wider audience and inform them about better eating habits."*
- Advocacy through community outreach: *"I have been involved in organizing community outreach events where we discuss nutrition and healthy lifestyles. The training has empowered me to be more proactive in promoting healthier living."*

Youth - Gambia

The training was described as transformative, with many highlighting it as their first formal exposure to structured nutrition education. Several also emphasized their role as catalysts for change, identifying opportunities to influence nutrition education in schools and through wider community outreach. Below are further reflections:

- Enhanced Understanding of Nutrition: *"This training opened my eyes to how simple changes in diet can have a big impact on health."*
- Advocacy for Broader Impact: *"We are now better equipped to educate others and ensure that nutrition becomes a priority in our communities."*

Media Practitioners - Gambia

They valued the training for its depth and relevance as it made them understand and appreciate interconnected issues, including climate change, water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH).

- Media as gatekeepers of information: *"Media is everywhere to simplify messages and increase awareness."*

Youth - Ghana

These youth reflected on how the training positively impacted their understanding of nutrition and their commitment to promoting healthier lifestyles in their communities with some linking nutrition to holistic well-being.

- Empowered to Take Personal Responsibility: *"We now know that making small changes in our diet can lead to better health. It's about taking responsibility for what we eat and making mindful decisions every day."*
- Sustainable Nutrition Practices: *"We are now more committed to supporting local food systems and growing our own food as a way to promote healthier and more sustainable diets."*
- Understanding the Bigger Picture of Health: *"When we eat well, we feel better, have more energy, and can prevent many diseases. It affects both our bodies and minds"*.
- Advocacy for Continuous Learning: *"This training should continue regularly so that more people can learn about the importance of nutrition and take action to improve their health"*.

Media - Ghana

This group described how the training has equipped them to use their platforms to advocate for nutrition and foster positive change in their communities. They emphasized the need to practice healthy nutrition themselves while recognizing their role in spreading nutrition education.

- Setting a Standard through Media: *"As media professionals, we need to practice healthy nutrition ourselves so we can effectively inspire others to adopt healthier eating habits"*.
- Advocacy through Platforms: *"This training has given us the knowledge to be effective advocates for better nutrition. Now, we can use our platforms to educate others, especially the youth, about healthy eating"*.
- Promoting Sustainable Nutrition Choices: *"Promoting local food production and consumption is a key part of the message I'm now sharing with my audience,"*.

6. Reported actions taken across the three countries post training:

Cameroon

Youth:

- Advocating for balanced diets and reducing processed food consumption within their families.
- Hosting family discussions on breastfeeding, hygiene, and nutrition, aimed at fostering healthier habits within households.
- Encouraging environmental health practices, such as reducing food waste and promoting sustainability.

Media Practitioners:

- Publishing articles on nutrition to raise awareness and educate the public on the importance of healthy eating.
- Hosting radio programs that focus on healthy lifestyles and nutrition, targeting a wide audience.
- Integrating nutrition topics into community-based discussions, including sports programs and other media initiatives.

Gambia

Youth:

- Advocating for balanced diets and reducing processed food consumption within families.
- Hosting family discussions on breastfeeding and sanitation practices to promote healthier habits.
- Encouraging environmental health practices, including reducing food waste.

Media Practitioners:

- Publishing nutrition-related articles to inform and educate the public.
- Hosting radio programs focused on promoting healthy lifestyles and improved nutrition habits.
- Integrating nutrition topics into broader community-focused discussions, such as sports programs, to reach diverse audiences.

Ghana

Youth:

- Advocating for balanced diets and reducing processed food consumption within families.
- Organizing community sensitization including peer education sessions, to share insights from the training.
- Starting home gardens to grow nutrient-rich vegetables and fruits, and reducing food waste, promoting sustainable local food systems.
- Promoting improved hygiene practices, particularly handwashing before meals.

Media Practitioner:

- Emphasizing importance of balanced diets, local food systems, and reduced consumption of processed foods through e.g. publishing articles and hosting radio shows.
- Integrating nutrition topics into e.g. sports broadcasts and panel discussions.
- Initiating campaigns to educate the public about the benefits of traditional foods, home gardening, and the connection between nutrition and overall health.

7. Recommendations

Several key insights and recommendations emerged across all the three target countries aimed at improving the impact, sustainability, and scalability of the initiative.

a. Extended training duration and modular format

Extend the duration of the training to enhance learning outcomes by allowing participants more time to absorb and apply the complex concepts of nutrition and food security. A modular format, with stages dedicated to specific topics, will help break down content into manageable portions, increasing comprehension and retention.

b. Strengthening stakeholder coordination

Regular task force meetings should be scheduled on a quarterly basis to ensure all stakeholders remain aligned with the program's objectives. These meetings will provide a platform to address challenges, refine implementation strategies, and foster stronger partnerships between the involved sectors — government, civil society, media, academia and the private sector.

c. Use of media and technology for broader influence

The program should continue to leverage both traditional media (radio, TV) and social media platforms for greater outreach. Media campaigns and multimedia resources (e.g. infographics) can be used to sustain awareness and engage new audiences, especially in remote areas.

d. Emphasis on community-centered solutions

Community involvement and ownership should continue to remain central to the program's design. Localized interventions that focus on youth, women, and families will ensure that the nutrition education resonates with the target population. Training peer educators and creating local networks could help sustain the momentum of nutrition advocacy at the grassroots level.

e. Focus on Sustainability

For long-term success, it is essential to integrate nutrition education into school curricula and promote sustainable agricultural practices. Partnerships with local and international stakeholders, including governments, should be strengthened to ensure that funding and resources are available for continued program activities.

Conclusion

Overall, there is evidence that the “Good Nutrition Starts With Me” Youth Initiative made significant strides toward its goal of fostering nutrition-literate communities. By leveraging the potential of youth and media practitioners, the Initiative demonstrates a scalable model for advancing nutrition literacy and advocacy across Africa, laying the groundwork for a more informed continent.

Participants in youth networks were enthusiastic about sharing their knowledge, advocating for community-centered nutrition education, and implementing practices like exclusive breastfeeding and improved dietary choices. Media practitioners were likewise enthusiastic about their increased capabilities to simplify complex nutrition messages, amplify advocacy efforts, and reach diverse audiences through various local languages and platforms.

Key drivers for this success included the establishment of multisectoral task forces, pre-training stakeholder engagement meetings, and the use of standardized training content and materials across all the three countries. Collaborative efforts with academia, government agencies and civil society further enhanced the Initiative's reach and impact. Despite these achievements, challenges such as short training durations and logistical difficulties were identified. Cameroon faced additional complexities due to bilingual training requirements and regional instability.

Several lessons therefore emerged from the Initiative, with recommendations including extending training durations, adopting modular formats to deepen understanding, and enhancing follow-up mechanisms to ensure adequate monitoring/evaluation and sustained impact. Additionally, country-specific recommendations include integrating nutrition education into school curricula, broadening geographic coverage, and engaging specific groups like pregnant and lactating women.

The “Good Nutrition Starts With Me” Youth Initiative has not only contributed to the improvement of nutrition knowledge and practices among youth and media practitioners but has also set the stage for long-term change by empowering individuals to become champions of nutrition in their communities.