



**FOSTERING RESILIENCE AND ADAPTATION
TO DROUGHT:** Emerging Program Evidence and
Lessons from USAID Nawiri's Integrated Drought
Response



INTRODUCTION

Between 2020 and 2022, five consecutive failed rainy seasons led to an unprecedented drought across Kenya's arid and semi-arid lands (ASALs), ravaging pasture and crops, drying up water points, and decimating livelihoods. The war in Ukraine and the lingering economic effects of COVID-19 compounded the drought's impacts, sending food and fuel prices soaring. These interconnected threats ignited Northern Kenya's worst humanitarian crisis in decades. As of March 2022, an estimated 4.1 million people (27% of the population) across Kenya's 23 ASAL counties faced crisis levels of food insecurity—with more than 726,000 children younger than five-years-old and 129,000 pregnant and lactating women experiencing acute malnutrition and in need of immediate treatment. The two northern counties of Samburu and Turkana alone carried more than one-sixth of the ASALs' global acute malnutrition (GAM) burden.¹

In response to the growing humanitarian crisis, Mercy Corps leveraged its United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) funded, multi-year food security award, Nawiri, to meet immediate needs while addressing the drivers of cyclical, persistent acute malnutrition through long-term interventions focused on nutrition resilience. Specifically, Nawiri partnered with communities, local institutions, and market actors to pivot and adapt interventions through a comprehensive drought response: providing cash assistance that smoothed consumption, protected assets, and facilitated access to more nutritious foods, while also strengthening households' access to critical health and nutrition services and supporting communities in adapting production practices and livelihoods to the reality of climate change. The approach helped Nawiri's partner households and communities better assess risks now and in the future, increased their agency and choice in adapting and diversifying their income streams—all while advancing the program's overall goal of sustainably reducing persistent acute malnutrition, even in the face of unprecedented shocks and stresses.

This report provides an overview of Nawiri's drought response in Samburu and Turkana counties, highlighting how layering a targeted cash-based, emergency response into ongoing multi-year resilience investments can meet immediate needs while also supporting transitions into longer-term adaptation in contexts experiencing recurrent crises.

USAID Nawiri: A Business Unusual Solution to a Pernicious Challenge

Despite investing hundreds-of-millions of dollars in humanitarian assistance in Kenya's arid and semi-arid lands (ASALs) for over a decade, levels of acute malnutrition have remained at or above the globally recognized emergency threshold of 15%. Global acute malnutrition (GAM) levels are not only persistently high, but also highly variable—evidence that conventional assistance is not sufficiently building resilience to the intensifying and interconnected shocks and stresses disrupting pastoral communities' millennia-long fragile balance with nature. This is why the United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) invested in a novel program called Nawiri. Leveraging two years of research and ongoing learning, the program is designed to challenge the status quo and facilitate "business unusual" solutions to sustainably reduce persistent acute malnutrition in Samburu and Turkana counties—two of the counties most impacted by this pernicious challenge.

¹Integrated Food Security Phase Classification. (2022). (publication). *Kenya: Projection Update of the March to June 2022 Analysis*. Retrieved August 31, 2023, from https://www.ipcinfo.org/fileadmin/user_upload/ipcinfo/docs/IPC_Kenya_Acute_Food_Insecurity_Malnutrition_2022MarJun_Report.pdf.

STRATEGIC APPROACH

Overview

Drawing on extensive learning,² Nawiri designed and pre-positioned a **development response fund (DRF)**, a shock-responsive mechanism intended to address immediate needs and protect nutrition outcomes in the event participants experienced a major shock during program implementation. The DRF would be complemented by **social behavior change, livelihoods adaptation, and integrated health and nutrition** interventions. Through this combination, Nawiri aimed to support participants in meeting their immediate needs, prevent backsliding in nutrition gains, and enable continued participation in long-term activities focused on nutrition resilience.

USAID Nawiri: Building Nutrition Resilience in Kenya's ASALs

The Swahili word **Nawiri** translates into “thrive” in English, representing the program’s unwavering commitment to learning from the past and present to ensure communities can transform the underlying drivers of cyclical, persistent malnutrition.

At the onset of the fourth failed rainy season across East Africa’s ASALs, Nawiri activated its DRF in Turkana and Samburu while carefully integrating and adapting its multi-year resilience activities to maximize both immediate and long-term wellbeing outcomes. Recognizing the extent of need and potential new opportunities, Nawiri developed another cash transfer element, this one disbursed through its poverty graduation model, Rural Entrepreneurs Access Program for Nutrition (R4N). This new cash transfer reduced pressure on ultra-poor households enrolled in R4N to meet

daily food and nutrition needs, enabling them to invest in off-farm and non-farm livelihood diversification with the support of R4N mentors and strengthened market linkages. Program teams drew on community engagement mechanisms to tailor interventions, delivery modalities, and targeting, and to ensure the drought response was contextualized to household assets and needs. The approach leveraged coordination and collaboration across public, private, and civil society actors at multiple scales, centering local actors, longer-term systems strengthening, and climate change adaptation measures. The four core components of Nawiri’s drought response—**cash transfers, social behavior change, livelihood adaptation to climate change, and health systems strengthening**—are further detailed below.

Using Cash to Address Economic Barriers to Nutrition in Crisis

Through the DRF, Nawiri provided recurrent, unconditional cash transfers (UCTs) to 5,830 drought-affected households across 50 villages in Samburu and Turkana, directly benefiting 26,322 individuals in malnutrition hotspots, and injecting roughly USD 1.8 million into local economies between March 2022 and May 2023. The foundation of Nawiri’s drought emergency response, the cash component was implemented in three distinct phases, as illustrated in Figure 1. The program worked with the National Drought Management Authority (NDMA) under the County Steering Group to coordinate with other partners in the selection of villages, participants, and transfer amounts. The use of a single registry under NDMA ensured that the same participants were not targeted by multiple agencies.

In addition, when worsening drought conditions and price inflation threatened households who were beginning to engage in Nawiri’s R4N poverty graduation model, which included a business start-up

² Nawiri conducted two years of research and a longitudinal study as part of its inception phase, which examined acute malnutrition trends across livelihood zones in Samburu and Turkana. This research pinpointed how drought aggravates the complex, interconnected drivers of intergenerational persistent acute malnutrition, erodes development gains, and weakens sources of resilience.

component, the program pivoted and introduced monthly consumption stipends for R4N households, moving an additional USD 1.57 million into local economies, and ultimately reaching 41,380 girls, boys, women, and men from targeted households. An adaptation to the original design, monthly consumption stipends enabled ultra-poor households to afford diverse, nutritious foods despite worsening drought and food price inflation. This allowed R4N households to invest in the longer-term business start-up activities that would ultimately provide them sustainable income while increasing the wider community’s access to critical goods and services during drought (see livelihoods adaptation).

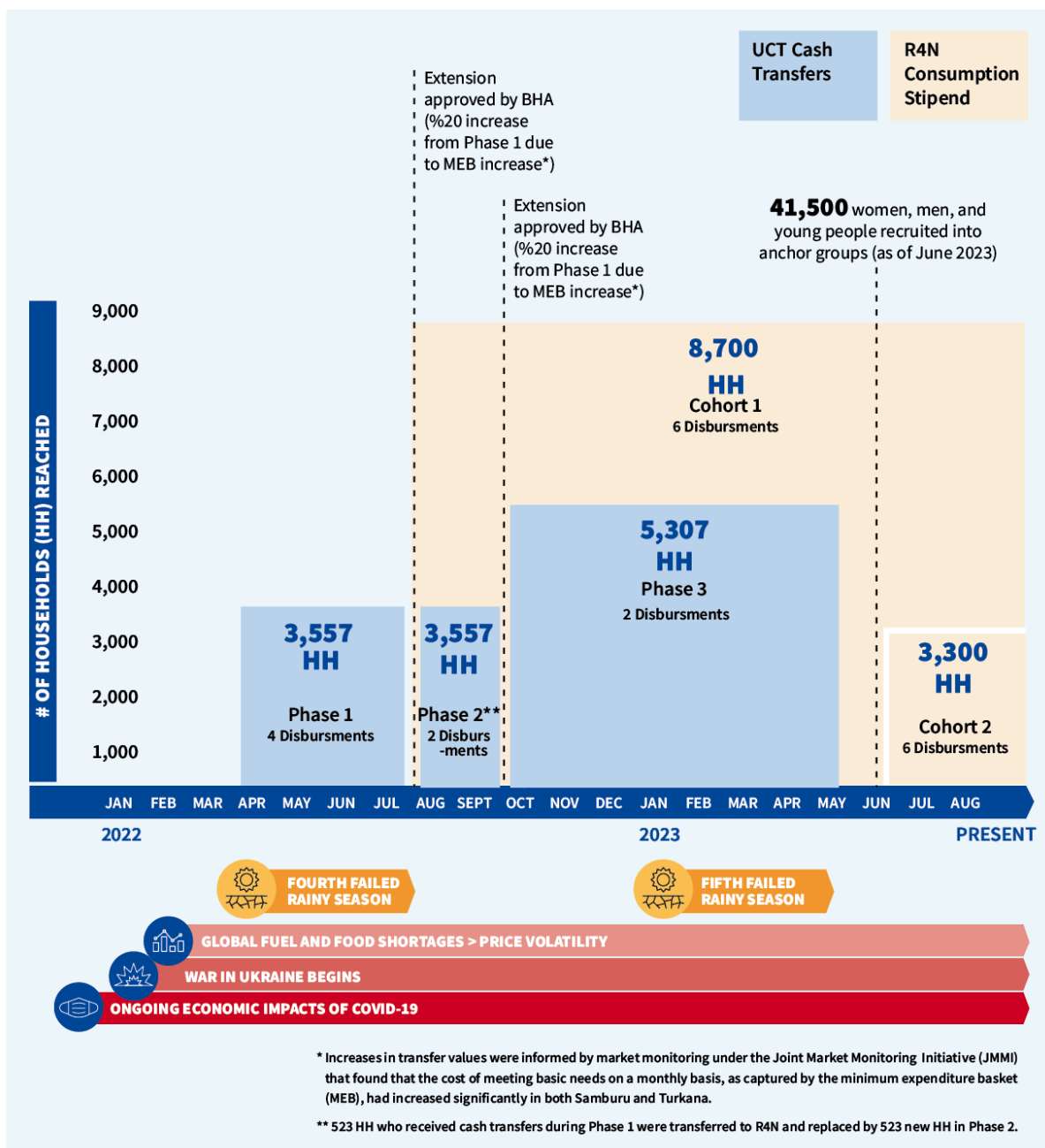


Figure 1: Cash Transfer Timeline for USAID Nawiri

The cash component was designed to increase purchasing power, helping address demand-side barriers to nutrition identified in Nawiri’s longitudinal study, food market assessment, cost-of-diet (COD) study, and household economy analysis (HEA). Among these barriers were the high cost of

nutritious diets, hygiene items, and transportation to markets and health facilities, as well as the high economic opportunity costs of: 1) optimal feeding and care, and 2) seeking health and nutrition services. The cash also eased stress and smoothed consumption in the household in the midst of shocks, allowing households to simultaneously participate in livelihood adaptation activities aimed at securing long-term nutrition resilience.

Nawiri used post-distribution monitoring (PDM) surveys; context monitoring, including through the joint market monitoring initiative (JMMI) of the Kenya Cash Working Group (KCWG); and ongoing community conversations to ensure the cash assistance to both DRF and R4N participants was having the intended effect on nutrition, asset protection, and livelihood adaptation from one phase to the next. Example adaptations included a 40% increase in the transfer amount (from roughly USD 51 to roughly USD 71) due to rising food prices, increased coverage of affected households within target villages, and improved integration with interventions implemented by Nawiri and other actors.

Household Targeting

In close collaboration with members of the County Steering Group (CSG), Nawiri identified and targeted poor households (within target villages) with pregnant and lactating women and malnourished and at-risk children under five. Understanding that using malnutrition as a criterion for economic relief could create adverse incentives, the program instead used a multifaceted targeting strategy that combined participatory vulnerability assessments with mass screening and health facility data. Community engagement strategies helped inform and foster support for these targeting methods.

Gender Lens

The decision to target households through women was informed by a growing body of evidence that cash assistance directed at women may be more likely to protect and promote the health and nutrition outcomes of women and children.³ By putting financial resources directly into the hands of women, the program also aimed to leverage the drought emergency as an entry point to more comprehensive financial inclusion interventions central to women's empowerment. To achieve this, the program complemented cash transfers with basic literacy and numeracy courses to provide women with the essential skills and confidence to access and manage the transfers using mobile devices without fear of exploitation, while fostering women's agency in controlling the financial resources critical to making nutrition-centric decisions that would benefit their families.

Distribution Modalities

The program tailored its distribution modality (e.g., agent-based distributions, mobile-money digital payments) by context, assessing factors such as network coverage, distance to M-PESA⁴ mobile money cashout points or agents, and mobile phone ownership. While M-PESA was the preferred modality due to its easy-to-use administrative platform, financial controls, and lower transfer fees in comparison to agent-based distributions, agent-based distribution points proved more practical in many last-mile locations where connectivity was limited, transportation costs were prohibitive, or participants did not have mobile phones or were not registered with M-PESA. To address this, Nawiri directly engaged M-PESA agents from county headquarters who would accompany staff and pay participants on the distribution list directly, but take a commission. Later, the team engaged Safaricom agents to help register the participants with M-PESA while supporting local traders, typically wholesalers, to register as M-PESA agents, allowing the program to move away from more centralized commission-based agents.

³ [Evidence and Guidance Note on the Use of Cash and Voucher Assistance for Nutrition Outcomes in Emergencies](#) (August 2020)

⁴ Launched by Vodafone and Safaricom (two cellular telephone networks in Kenya), M-PESA is the most widely used mobile money service in the country.

Supporting and Strengthening Coordination Systems

Humanitarian and development partners exhibited a notable commitment to align and coordinate their efforts during the drought response, with the CSG, KCWG, USAID's Partnership for Resilience and Economic Growth (PREG), and other platforms providing a strong framework for collective action. A decade after the devolution process, the proactive leadership and involvement of county government in partner coordination during the drought response signifies its maturing role, increasing capacity, and growing dedication to collaborative success. Nawiri utilized these platforms to share key findings of its longitudinal study and other research initiatives, facilitating discussions that helped allied partners use evidence to align priorities and synchronize strategies.

This alignment fostered an efficient and targeted response, helping reduce gaps and duplication while enhancing overall synergies. In Turkana, for instance, coordination with NDMA's Hunger Safety Net Program (HSNP) involved careful planning to avoid targeting the same household with cash transfers, as Nawiri intentionally layered market facilitation activities in locations targeted by HSNP cash transfers to enhance the government's investment in social protection for drought relief and food security. Joint monitoring visits and assessments, periodic reviews, and continuous dialogue among stakeholders helped ensure that the commitment to collaboration remained agile and adaptive.

Integrating Context-Specific Social Behavior Change Actions

Given the growing body of evidence indicating that coupling cash assistance with social and behavior change (SBC) helps households achieve better nutrition outcomes during a crisis than they could with either activity alone, Nawiri intentionally integrated SBC with cash assistance.⁵ Through community health volunteers (CHVs), mentors, and other frontline resource persons, the program focused on shifting behaviors and norms important to nutrition resilience. Example targeted behaviors include selection of healthy diets, appropriate complementary feeding of young children, sick-child feeding and care, hygiene and sanitation, and seeking timely healthcare services, especially for at-risk groups. Nawiri used a variety of approaches and channels in an effort to maximize the number and frequency of contacts (including but not limited to cash-recipient households) and accelerate the tipping point for broader social change while minimizing time poverty. These included family dialogues linked to promotion of family-led nutrition screening using mid-upper-arm circumference (FL-MUAC), community dialogue and interactive nutrition and hygiene promotion sessions, anchor group-based nutrition education, and cooking demonstrations.

SBC Strategies for Nutrition Resilience: FL-MUAC and CHV-Led Family Dialogues

Coupling FL-MUAC with CHV-led family dialogues was among the key SBC strategies the program scaled during the drought response to empower families as active participants in monitoring and maintaining their nutrition and wellbeing. By training families on how to conduct MUAC measurements, malnutrition could be identified and addressed promptly, reducing the potential severity and associated risks. CHVs used results of these measurements as a departure point for facilitated dialogue with families to understand their specific barriers and needs related to health and nutrition during drought, and provided tailored counseling and support accordingly. The strategy employed a simple "family meeting" tool and approach that were rapidly tested and refined with CHVs and healthcare workers during the COVID-19 emergency and ultimately adopted by the Samburu County Government as part of its community health strategy. Nawiri is using learning from Samburu to engage the Turkana County community health technical working group in reviewing, adapting, and ultimately adopting the tool.

⁵ UNICEF. (2020). (rep.). [Evidence and Guidance Note on the Use of Cash and Voucher Assistance for Nutrition Outcomes in Emergencies](#).

Enhancing Food Availability, Access, and Livelihood Adaptation During Drought

Nawiri complemented demand-side cash interventions with activities that stimulated the supply of diverse, nutritious foods through livelihood adaptation and diversification opportunities that are resilient to climate shocks and stresses. In addition to increasing the access and availability of nutritious foods during drought, these livelihood opportunities were also designed to increase incomes and therefore purchasing power, further stimulating demand for nutritious foods and nutrition commodities. The cash smoothed consumption, enabling households to participate in these longer-term activities, even in the midst of crisis.

The program's livelihood adaptation approach engages individuals from drought-affected communities through peer-based support groups or "anchor groups," formed based on shared characteristics, assets, needs, and goals. Outlined in Figure 2, these anchor groups provide a gateway into the program's longer term interventions but focus strongly on climate-adapted, resilient livelihood activities. To date, one member from nearly 60% of all UCT-recipient households has joined an anchor group, and women from all R4N households are automatically engaged in R4N specific anchor groups.

Figure 2: USAID Nawiri's Anchor Group Model

USAID NAWIRI'S ANCHOR GROUP MODEL

Community-based peer-to-peer support groups, or "anchor groups," served as a bridge between crisis and opportunity, "anchoring" the program within households and providing a platform for sequencing, layering, and integrating program interventions. One member from nearly 60% of all UCT-recipient households has joined an anchor group, creating an on-ramp into the longer term development interventions—from health and nutrition to financial services to resilient livelihoods activities—fundamental to addressing the differential, multi-dimensional, and interconnected vulnerabilities of community members and building sustained nutrition resilience.



ADAPTED MOTHER TO MOTHER SUPPORT GROUPS (AM2MSG)

Who: Pregnant women and mothers not participating in R4N

"That we are strong. Nawiri has opened our minds to what we can accomplish when we are given the chance and we work hard. Look how far we have come in this short time with Nawiri. We have even started teaching other people what we have learned."

Arukudi



(REAP) FOR NUTRITION (R4N)

Who: Ultra-poor households, represented by adult women

"...at the onset of drought we started experiencing the impact ...my youngest child got sick and I took [them] to hospital. When I got the first two month money, I was able to buy a variety of food stuffs and oil and was able to share with even with the rest of the family members, some could I use to buy soap and even pay for the hospital bills. What really matters in Nawiri is your hard work, if you are hardworking, you will make it."

Elizabeth Esinyen Lotira



GIRL-H GROUPS

Who: Girls and young women

"Thanks to Nawiri's support, our quality of life as girls has improved. We are now able to enjoy a well-balanced diet within the comfort of our home, combining nourishing foods. For instance, for now we can prepare and enjoy a combination of ugali, vegetables, and meat."

Sarah Ikimat Amani



BOY GROUPS

Who: Boys and young men

"My wife and my [2-year-old] daughter were both malnourished before Nawiri and now they are healthy and even putting on clothes. We spent some of the cash on food, and the rest we saved so my daughter can go to school in the future and we can also open a business...Some of us [young men] came back from the bush when we learned Nawiri was forming groups for young men. Soon we will reach our goal of opening a business. We want to show other young men here that even if they didn't go to school they can leave things like raiding behind."

Ewesit Ewe Ekaru

All anchor group engagements begin with critical development such as basic literacy and numeracy, financial literacy, nutrition literacy, and life skills. CHVs and program-sponsored, trained mentors facilitate “participatory learning-action cycles” or dialogues aimed at developing critical problem-solving skills, building confidence, and fostering a sense of agency among group members. Following foundational skill-building, anchor groups receive support to form a village savings and loan association (VSLA) to increase their access to financial services critical to meeting immediate needs and adapting their livelihoods to drought. Here again, cash assistance enabled participation in VSLAs, and provided an additional stimulus for saving.

Through these efforts to build confidence, prerequisite skills, and a strong, peer support environment, the anchor group model is designed to lay the groundwork for members to assess, invest in, and actively manage livelihood diversification based on emerging and dynamic risks and opportunities, such as the cyclicity, recurrence, and intensity of drought; seasonality; or a novel economic venture in one of the counties. Central to the DRF cash assistance, complementary livelihoods adaptation activities aim to support households in diversifying income opportunities, including: 1) promoting diverse off-farm and non-farm entrepreneurship opportunities, and 2) promoting nutrition-centered local food systems. The latter includes improved drought-resilient production practices, stimulating aggregation and trade, and increasing points of sale of affordable, safe, nutritious food—from vegetables and fruits to milk and meat—in last mile communities.

Ujuzi Mashinani: Linking Youth to Non-Farm Livelihood Opportunities to Build Household and Community Resilience to Drought

Through its GIRL-H and BOY anchor groups, Nawiri’s Ujuzi Mashinani intervention is bringing vocational training directly to young people, including expectant and parenting adolescent girls, in remote communities connecting them to labor-market opportunities for salaried or self-employment. In addition to training in their chosen craft, young people receive health and nutrition education and life skills training, encouraging them to allocate income nutritious meals, healthcare needs, and other priorities critical for coping and adapting to drought and building the nutrition resilience of themselves, their families, and their communities.



“We had about 100 cows before the recent long drought. We only have 3 now. I decided to come join this [Ujuzi Mashinani] training when I heard of it instead of following the three cows. And I dedicated myself to learn... I have been trained to construct this chicken coop, something that I didn’t know. I urge my fellow morans [young warriors] not to ignore these skills because they are very important... I will share these skills with other morans at home so they can help themselves too. I never really knew the importance of chicken, but I have seen the need to keep them in secure coops like this for safety. We have learnt that chicken are important and resistant to drought because, every time there is drought, our cows die but chickens survive, so we have decided to continue with chicken rearing as a business now.”

Losieku Leuria, BOY Group Member and Ujuzi Mashinani Participant, Lorubae Village (Samburu East)

By fostering socio-economic interdependencies between communities who have experienced increased tension and conflict exacerbated by drought, Nawiri is empowering youth as agents of peace while increasing last-mile access to goods and services such as poultry housing, plumbing, masonry, hairdressing, and electrical services. Nurturing resilience and self-sufficiency among Samburu and Turkana’s youth is critical to transforming intergenerational cycles of poverty and undernutrition through healthy, skilled, stable, safe, and inspired transitions to adulthood.

Promoting Diverse Off and Non-Farm Entrepreneurship Opportunities for Nutrition

Nawiri layered and sequenced its nutrition-sensitive poverty graduation model, R4N, with emergency cash assistance as a strategy to stimulate local economies and address both demand and supply-side barriers to nutrition security for the benefit of entire communities. In the midst of drought, Nawiri leveraged R4N to provide training, mentorship, and approximately USD 1.45 million in working capital to 2,900 three-person groups (comprising women from ultra-poor households), each of which was focused on establishing a small business. Many of these businesses began to sell diverse nutritious foods, trade in livestock, or provide access to other nutrition related commodities and services.

Across target communities, the program supported R4N and other small businesses to form umbrella business groups to bulk orders and negotiate with suppliers and transporters for better prices that they could then pass on to their customers. Working closely with the Department of Trade, the program organized business-to-business (B2B) forums and other experiences that brought together market actors—including wholesale suppliers, transporters, and last-mile vendors—to forge connections, discuss their respective roles and challenges in supporting nutrition security, and ideate market-based solutions for improving the food environment in favor of nutritious foods and healthy diets.



Last mile traders engaged in bulk ordering in Nesesiai.

As part of its larger SBC strategy, the program sought to equip market actors with knowledge and skills related to nutrition, empowering them to play a pivotal role in promoting nutrition through retail. For many last mile communities, R4N businesses became a gateway to nutritious, diverse foods and nutrition commodities. And, where conflict and insecurity posed significant barriers to consistent food availability and access, often in these same last mile communities, the program used intercommunity dialogue and leveraged elders' shared interest in improving the food and nutrition security to secure the safety of traders and their goods along local trade routes.

Promoting Nutrition-Centered Local Food Production

Poor market integration and high food-price inflation meant that cash and efforts to increase food access through strategies detailed above, such as off-farm and non-farm livelihoods diversification and trade, would be insufficient alone to improve households' access to nutritious diets. For many Nawiri communities, supply-side barriers to accessing nutritious diets—such as insufficient availability of affordable, nutritious foods in local markets and insufficient food production—are structural and systemic, having long preceded the recent drought. Nawiri leveraged the drought response to catalyze sustainable improvements in local food production, seeking to transform production systems to increase local food availability and promote nutrition security under changing climatic conditions.

In partnership with the county government and communities, Nawiri identified high-potential production areas, where water remained available, if underdeveloped, even during the unprecedented drought. In these areas, Nawiri worked through its anchor groups to train and support participants—including cash recipients and other drought-impacted households—in establishing community farms and home gardens for the production of nutrient-dense, diverse foods for household consumption and sale. In addition, the program promoted the use of organic waste from the gardens as fodder to support the recovery and productivity of small ruminants (goats) at the homestead.

Nawiri also worked closely with the county government to identify and launch larger scale, irrigated farms for crop production in select sites, with a total of 2,000 hectares under production in both counties, benefiting an estimated 17,436 households. The program collaborated with community business councils and existing networks to identify and facilitate linkages between target communities, to maximize mutual benefit around local food systems, for example, connecting surplus-harvesting producer groups in one village to R4N businesses in a neighboring village facing resource or ecological constraints to local production. (See [Establishing Roots of Resilience During Drought in Samburu North](#)).

“When we manage our rangelands, our rangelands manage our livestock, and our livestock take care of us and our children for a healthy community.”

Mama Gravy, Hybrid Committee Member, Remot (Samburu East)

Foundational to life and culture in Samburu and Turkana, livestock remain the most climate adapted livelihood option in the ASALs and a critical component of ensuring access to and availability of nutritious foods. For this reason, Nawiri designed its complementary resilient livelihoods strategy to center livestock systems strengthening as a critical part of the drought response. In anticipation of a favorable 2023 long-rains season, Nawiri invested in rangeland rehabilitation and fodder production activities designed to support the recovery of pastoral livelihoods and accelerate improvements in milk production. Building on prior USAID and other donor investments, the program worked with local committees to develop and implement plans for the improved and sustainable management of approximately 47,000 hectares of rangeland across 14 drought-affected wards. Nawiri also trained these committees on simple, low-cost water and soil conservation techniques and oversaw the community-led preparation of nearly 150 hectares of land for fodder production.

Given the devastating impacts of the drought on animal health, the program additionally trained and equipped nearly 200 community disease reporters (CDRs) and supported campaigns to improve access to quality veterinary services among drought-affected households. Combined, these efforts sought to facilitate a positive cycle of sustainable grazing practices, animal health, and milk and meat production, sale, and consumption capable of catalyzing recovery of drought-affected communities for whom livestock have been central for millennia.

Supporting & Strengthening Community Health Systems

The combined effects of drought and fuel inflation severely aggravated both demand-side and supply-side barriers to healthcare utilization, especially for remote, already underserved communities. Increased hunger and malnutrition meant increased susceptibility to disease, elevating the importance of healthcare access as a nutrition resilience capacity. When county governments requested support for essential services, Nawiri was well-positioned to leverage partnerships to scale health, nutrition, and WASH services for drought-affected populations because the program had already supported community health programming as a first responder during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This ensured the program was able to layer onto existing infrastructure and relationships, pivoting quickly from a COVID-19 response to focus health services on malnutrition among the most vulnerable populations, including in the 50 villages targeted with UCTs and through R4N. Among the health and nutrition services supported initially during the COVID-19 response was strengthening the community health system to provide integrated community case management (iCCM), community management of acute malnutrition (CMAM), and family MUAC. These high impact health and nutrition services enabled continued uninterrupted service delivery despite the COVID-19 lockdown. Consequently, USAID Nawiri

had the opportunity to scale and expand services to mitigate the compounded effect of the ensuing drought.

These expanded services included mass screenings, family-led MUAC and routine screening for malnutrition at the community and health facilities, integrated management of acute malnutrition (IMAM),⁶ health and hygiene promotion, and the rehabilitation of water points to improve access to safe water supply for domestic and productive use. For drought-affected communities where distance presented a formidable barrier to healthcare access, the program supported government-run integrated outreach services to help close the gap between those in need and resources available. Nawiri provided technical support to the County Nutrition Technical Forum (CNTF) to effectively coordinate service and resource delivery among the many partners dedicated to improving health outcomes during the drought response, ensuring collective efforts maximized both reach and impact.⁷

Meanwhile, Nawiri combined support for expanded delivery of essential health and nutrition services with capacity-strengthening of the health workforce, including CHVs, ideally who will be employed by county governments long after the program ends. The program trained and equipped more than 540 CHVs across 102 community units to provide iCCM of common illness, significantly advancing efforts towards reducing reliance on expensive outreach services and improving reliable, sustainable access to healthcare services for last-mile communities. In addition, Nawiri continued to draw on program learning to advocate with the national government to allow CHVs in Kenya's ASALs to manage uncomplicated cases of acute malnutrition at the community level (e.g., CMAM). In anticipation of a favorable outcome, the program trained CHVs on CMAM, linking them with health facility staff as "associates" to support the follow-up, monitoring, and reporting of acute malnutrition cases during drought. In advance of the latest government expansion of the CMAM pilot, Nawiri successfully advocated for the inclusion of Samburu County, ensuring Samburu and Turkana are among the first counties to manage cases of acute malnutrition at the community level.

EVIDENCE OF IMPACT

Nawiri teams analyzed qualitative data from site visits, direct feedback from participants and stakeholders, routine program monitoring data, and data from four PDM surveys to generate valuable evidence and insights into the effectiveness of the program's layered response to the drought emergency. This section presents evidence of impact, continued challenges to nutrition resilience, and potential opportunities for adaptation.

Effects on Nutrition Outcomes

Nearly all respondents (99%) of the fourth PDM survey conducted in February 2023 reported that cash assistance received from Nawiri had increased their households' ability to meet basic needs. The most commonly reported uses of cash included food (70%); soap, hygiene, and other sanitation items (33%); transport (29%); other non-food items (24%); medical costs (13%); school fees (13%); and debt repayments (10%). A subset of 68 children under five-years-old, identified as acutely malnourished during the first PDM survey, was followed in subsequent waves, and 98.5% (all but one) experienced full recovery, suggesting that cash and layered activities positively influenced nutrition.⁸

⁶ IMAM included the use of high-density nutrition commodities such as ready to use supplementary foods (RUSF) and corn-soy blends, supplied by partners such as WFP and the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and supplemented through commodity procurement by program partners.

⁷ Nawiri's participation in the CNTF allowed the program to layer activities with the Kenya Red Cross (through UNICEF Funding), Concern Worldwide, World Vision, the International Rescue Committee, Save the Children, and Amref (Afya Imarisha program).

⁸ Nawiri did not maintain a time-series record of the nutritional status of all PLW and CU5s in households targeted with drought relief, limiting our ability to make a direct, quantitative correlation between the emergency response and nutritional outcomes

Testaments from program participants corroborate PDM survey results, providing evidence that Nawiri’s drought response supported improved treatment outcomes and contributed to improvements in the immediate determinants of maternal and child nutrition (dietary intake and health). For instance, during a group discussion in Turkana, a woman participant noted, “Before Nawiri, hunger and malnutrition were everywhere. And we were losing hope, but Nawiri came at the right time and things changed. Children became healthy and active.”

“Food has been distributed in this village for so many years, but it has not solved our problems. In fact, it has created more problems because of dependency. Nawiri’s approach of giving cash assistance to help the most needy to cope with drought as they train and educate the community on balanced diet, how to produce vegetables, and on how to manage natural resources like rangelands, while helping us connect with markets–this is the way to go. This way is sustainable. It will take time, but, in the end, the community will be able to depend on themselves.”

Mr. Francis Lenasalon, Area Chief, Ntaletiani, Samburu North

Effects on Household Livelihoods



Recipients of cash assistance reported that the knowledge they gained on nutrition and the importance of milk to young children’s diets influenced how they decided to spend their cash transfers. “The cash meant we didn’t have to sell our remaining goats to buy food. We used the cash to buy food for the family and also for the goats so the goats could recover and soon give milk to the children,” a father of six shared during a community conversation in Samburu East.

Cash support, whether in the form of cash or consumption stipends, played a crucial role in helping households avert further maladaptive behaviors that could have jeopardized the nutrition of women and children both immediately and over the long run. In Samburu, for instance, families noted that households that received cash benefited from reduced reliance on harmful, time-consuming, and low-return activities such as charcoal burning or harvesting of aloe vera from far-away locations, allowing them the time and presence to invest in adapted and diversified income opportunities through Nawiri’s anchor groups.

By protecting critical livestock assets at the homestead (preventing suboptimal sale or death), and, in some cases, helping them purchase goats and poultry, cash assistance linked to VSLAs and financial literacy training also empowered households to manage their livelihood assets strategically. Cash recipients in Samburu East reflected, “Before Nawiri, people were selling off their goats to feed their families. The cash assistance helped protect their future by saving their animals.” Because livestock are used as collateral in pastoralist communities, having goats on hand means access to credit to smooth consumption and

improve uninterrupted access to nutritious diets. “We only give food on credit to someone that we know has at least one goat so that we are sure they will pay their debt,” members of an R4N business group in Loonjirin Village (Samburu North) shared. “If they don’t pay, we can go and get that goat and sell it.”

Anchor group enrollment has provided opportunities for members and their families to develop practical knowledge and skills in food production, business and entrepreneurship, and/or vocational

and technical trades, while learning about health and nutrition and developing critical life skills. Those who joined anchor groups were linked to existing, modified, and new VSLAs and other savings and lending mechanisms. As of June 2023, VSLAs had compiled savings nearing \$350,000 and issued more than \$107,000 in loans, allowing members to invest in their families' nutrition and their future, including by starting or expanding businesses, sending children to school, and purchasing livestock to rebuild their herds. Groups have also amassed more than \$27,500 in their social funds—a communal safety net that is helping ensure unexpected hardships faced by group members do not derail their progress towards financial security and nutrition resilience.

Qualitative findings suggest that targeting recipients of emergency cash assistance with enrollment in peer-based community groups, such as anchor groups, was important for building confidence in the future and protecting drought-affected households and communities from backsliding once the cash assistance ended. In Samburu North, for instance, a family shared, “When the cash ended, it was a set-back of course, but because we now have the garden and the VSLA, and also because the goats we bought [with the cash] are about to give birth. We won't go back to where we were.”

While many households are hopeful, some are less optimistic, concerned that the cash assistance ended before they were able to consolidate sufficient social and financial gains from layered livelihood activities to support their recovery and journeys to nutrition resilience. Meanwhile, a number of factors (e.g., migration, insecurity, illness, large household size, and inflation) prevented approximately 40% of UCT households from enrolling in peer-support or livelihood groups. Nawiri is actively monitoring the end of the cash response, troubleshooting barriers former UCT recipients are facing in enrolling in groups, and actively transitioning those who have joined anchor groups (and their households) into expanded opportunities for building resilient livelihoods.

Effects on Markets & the Local Economy

Cash assistance combined with support for new business generation, business-to-business forums, and other market strengthening measures stimulated the local economy. Small shops either opened or expanded during drought to sell more diverse and nutritious foods, housewares, and other essential commodities, providing residents of many last mile communities newfound connectivity to larger markets. The influx of cash and market-based activities also improved access to airtime and mobile

Program Update: The First Good Rainy Season in Three Years Comes to Much of Samburu and Turkana

Above-average rainfall during the March-to-May 2023 season brought a mix of challenges and relief to communities across Samburu and Turkana. Rain revitalized pasture, replenished water resources reducing travel time and time poverty, and triggered migration of herds to homesteads long separated by the historic drought. Yet, heavy rains also led to flooding and increased water-borne disease outbreaks, a resurgence of crop-based pests, and death of livestock weakened by drought. Access to milk has improved but remains constrained due to low herd sizes and below-average livestock births over the last two years.

Households interviewed by Nawiri in Samburu and Turkana in June 2023 echoed a common sentiment, “We are happy for the rains, but we cannot eat grass.” While the rains may have brought much-needed relief from catastrophic drought conditions, these benefits and any associated gains are fragile and promise to be short-lived without a clear transition into long-term, multi-sector interventions aimed at addressing the underlying drivers of vulnerability to malnutrition. It is for this reason that USAID Nawiri is both committed to monitoring the end of the cash response and supporting a seamless transition for drought response participants into anchor groups so that they can connect as soon as possible to deeper health and nutrition, financial services, and resilient livelihoods interventions, among others.

banking services, strengthening an enabling environment for larger-scale business development and fostering income diversity. Layering cash distribution to women with basic literacy and numeracy courses helped leverage the emergency response to advance goals of women’s economic empowerment.

There is evidence that new businesses run by women through R4N were especially instrumental in enabling a shift in dietary habits—not only by facilitating access to nutritious foods, but by drawing on



Business growth in rural and last-mile communities has connected residents not just to nutritious foods, but to other vital non-food items that support income diversity and quality of life. “I realized that people had phones but everyone was always looking for airtime,” a UCT participant in Lchakwai (Samburu Central) shared during a community conversation. “The cash from Nawiri helped me to save KES 5000, and I used the money to open a small business selling airtime. This income is helping me feed my family now that the cash has ended.”

their new-found knowledge and leveraging their interactions with customers to promote behavior change. Community conversations also suggest that R4N businesses may have fared better and demonstrated greater adaptive capacity in the face of compounding shocks than other small businesses, many of which had emerged spontaneously during the drought period, aided by the market stimulating effect of the UCTs. The consumption stipends and ongoing mentorship, combined with the capacity of R4N entrepreneurs to forge networks and negotiate effectively with customers and suppliers—skills nurtured by Nawiri as part of the R4N model—were identified as critical determinants of their adaptability.

Insights gleaned through qualitative monitoring activities suggest that integrating emergency cash assistance with SBC activities that targeted households in tandem with market actors, was particularly important for strengthening an enabling environment for improved food security. In Samburu North, for instance, an elderly shop owner emphasized that although Nawiri had not targeted her family for emergency cash assistance, the knowledge, ideas, and contacts she developed through business-to-business forums had empowered her as an agent of change in her family and wider community. “I

realized that by linking with suppliers of fruits and vegetables to sell in my shop, I could help those with cash transfers access better and more diverse food. When Nawiri brought nutrition education to families, we started seeing changes... Now [customers] come asking for greens, fruits.”

Despite this and many other positive experiences in coordinating activities during drought, the direct-delivery of in-kind food assistance by humanitarian actors in certain areas disrupted local commerce, with the unintended consequence of potentially stunting nascent market growth supported by Nawiri. During community conversations in Turkana South and Samburu East, owners of food retail businesses in communities that were targeted (by other organizations) for in-kind assistance reported decreased sales and even closure of businesses, as the free distribution of commodities curbed local demand for purchased food. During a group discussion in Samburu East, a participant recounted, “When [names of organizations redacted] distribute food like rice and maize flour, it interferes with our sales. They recently distributed and our sales went down and we lost many customers.” Qualitative monitoring activities uncovered examples of remarkable resilience in the face of these challenges, with shop owners interviewed speaking of how they had learned to diversify their inventory and stock food and non-food commodities not typically offered by in-kind assistance.

Facing Challenge Together

Community conversations with members of both AM2MSGs and R4N business groups reinforced the role community groups have played in building solidarity and social cohesion—two factors critical for communities facing intense and interconnected shocks and stresses.

“The best part of being in a group is the unity,” group members during a recent conversation in Samburu shared. “We talk, we share our problems and challenges, together come up with solutions, and then take action with the money we have saved.”

Effects on the Social & Care Environment

The cash assistance played an important role in strengthening the social capital of vulnerable households and repairing the social fabric strained by the historic drought and compounding shocks and stresses. Community interviews revealed that cash recipients regularly shared cash and/or food purchased with neighbors or relatives who were not targeted with cash. Since cash transfers ended, UCT recipients have been drawing on these social capital investments to prevent backsliding. Ntiilua Lesuwaro, a cash recipient from Ndonyo Wasin in Samburu East told us that each of the nine times she received money from Nawiri, she would share it with one of her relatives. “At that time [my relative] had little and couldn’t feed her family. After the rains started, her cows returned and she sold a couple and started a small business selling food,” she recalled. “Ever since the cash transfers ended, that same relative is now helping me feed my family.”

According to the fourth and final PDM survey, more than 61% of individuals who received cash assistance from Nawiri reported that women had assumed a more significant role in making decisions about household expenses and savings. According to community conversations, women, empowered by their involvement in financial decision-making at home and bolstered by their participation in anchor groups, have also assumed a greater role in community leadership, including as members of resource management committees. These are encouraging signs that women are gaining confidence and beginning to harness their collective power to bring about positive change for the nutrition resilience of their families and communities. Moreover, nearly 89% of UCT-recipients surveyed in the last PDM exercise reported that the cash assistance had a positive effect on household dynamics and relationships within the household. Respondents reported being less worried about where to get food and having fewer arguments over money, more respect for women, and happier families. Community conversations corroborate PDM survey findings suggesting that unconditional cash assistance helped improve interpersonal relations and may have reduced gender-based violence (GBV), thereby bolstering the capacity of women, girls, and children to cope and adapt with drought.

Finally, both men and women, including frontline resource persons such as village chiefs, local administrators, healthcare workers, CHVs, and mentors, have requested increased male engagement in Nawiri. They acknowledge that when men are actively involved and informed, they can foster and facilitate nutrition-centric planning and decision-making. Fathers, having returned from tending livestock in distant fields during the drought, expressed appreciation for Nawiri's support to women and children in their absence. Now back, they are eager to participate in Nawiri activities not merely as change agents, but as direct participants in their own right. In response to this feedback, the program is forming men-to-men groups to further facilitate and encourage male engagement in catalyzing pathways to nutrition resilience.

Effects on Access and Utilization of Health Services

Nawiri's layering of cash assistance with SBC activities, livelihoods actions, and efforts to improve availability and access to healthcare services seemed to have a positive effect on families' health. Nearly 70% of households surveyed during the last PDM exercise reported that cash assistance had contributed to improved health among household members. Between February 2022 and June 2023, more than 13,106 pregnant and lactating women and 41,508 children under five received essential

services through Nawiri-supported integrated outreaches to remote areas, including 17,894 children under five who were identified and treated for acute malnutrition.

These outreaches were essential to identifying SAM and MAM cases that likely would have been missed. A CHV named Anne in Kaapus Village, who is trained in both iCCM and CMAM, which is 34 km from the nearest health facility, shared, “I manage 12 SAM cases and 14 MAM cases. Without my services, these patients would have been missed by mainstream IMAM services.” Trust built between CHVs and community members during outreaches helped foster acceptance of and demand for the longer-term health services and systems Nawiri is helping strengthen now.

Moreover, targeting CHVs with cash, linking them to VSLAs and income-generating opportunities, and providing them with ongoing training and support has been key to bolstering their motivation for improved, uninterrupted access to essential services in drought-affected communities. Backed by community conversations, there are encouraging signs that by prioritizing long-term objectives such as the capacity building of the CHS during the drought emergency, Nawiri has helped cushion communities from other emergent shocks, driven by or coinciding with, the resumption of rains, such the withdrawal or reduction of humanitarian assistance, return of livestock herds and competition over water, the destruction of farms and gardens by pests, increase in common yet potentially life-threatening illnesses, and, in Samburu, a government moratorium on outreach services since March 2023.



“Nawiri is unique because they don’t just give us cash. They also ensure that we have knowledge, which sticks in our minds forever. For CHVs and mentors, they give us the tools of trade which we are using to help the community.”

Felister Leokoe, UCT Recipient, CHV, & GIRL-H Mentor Ntaletiani (Samburu North)

LESSONS LEARNED AND IMPLICATIONS

As a multi-year RFSA with a mandate to reduce persistent acute malnutrition sustainably, Nawiri understood that a comprehensive drought response must leverage opportunity in crisis—translating short-term humanitarian assistance into entry points for longer-term, sustainable pathways to nutrition resilience. This section synthesizes the approach and findings into suggested lessons learned and related recommendations for program participants, teams, partners, and donors.

Directly layering emergency cash assistance into long-term, multi-year programs can facilitate improved outcomes, protecting lives and livelihoods while advancing future development goals.

Nawiri was able to leverage existing community-based participatory planning processes, a long-standing presence in last mile communities, and a collective focus (across communities, government, and the private sector) on sustainably reducing PAM to build a more agile, comprehensive, targeted, and impactful emergency drought response. Nawiri was able to design and layer actions across sectors that responded to the drought emergency while laying the foundation for early recovery and longer-term adaptations. **Recommendation:** Donors should identify every opportunity to directly link existing or new emergency funds to ongoing multi-year programming to maximize resources and impact.

Contingency planning, tied to flexible financing, facilitates multi-year programs to respond to disasters effectively, meeting immediate needs while advancing long-term goals. To pivot

effectively between its multi-year actions and emergency response, Nawiri leveraged its pre-positioned disaster response fund; strong, longitudinal data sets on malnutrition trends at the ward, village, and household levels; and pre-positioned and identified actions (i.e., social behavior change, livelihood systems strengthening and adaptation, and health systems strengthening). Planning, flexible funding, and a commitment to ongoing learning and adaptation all allowed Nawiri to employ these tools for multiple uses—in this case pivoting both into and providing a bridge out of emergency response, despite being a multi-year development program. Nawiri’s experience suggests that RFSA would benefit from increasingly stronger contingency planning mechanisms with increased pre-positioned fund allocation for adaptation and rapid emergency responses that meet communities’ immediate needs while continuing to advance the program’s long term goals. **Recommendation:** Donors should attach contingency planning requirements to the design and work planning processes of multi-year programs, including in the inception phase and as part of annual program lifecycles, as well as allocate flexible funding such as crisis modifiers to ensure large-scale shocks and stresses do not fundamentally derail progress toward long-term wellbeing goals.

Emergency cash assistance paired with market-based livelihood interventions has additional dividends for adaptation and resilience in the midst of a drought crisis. Nawiri’s emergency cash assistance was, in large part, transferred to households that were also intensely supported by long-term development activities focused on mentorship, business skill development, financial inclusion, and asset transfers. The continued focus on livelihood development in the midst of drought, coupled with funds for consumption smoothing outside of business investments, allowed households to better meet dietary needs enabling them to invest in income-generating activities inherently adapted to the drought context. This includes greater investments in off-farm income, improved household-level herd management, and improvements in local, nutritious food trade across higher-yield vegetable zones and food deserts. **Recommendation:** Donors and implementing partners should pair cash assistance programming with intensive, market-based livelihood support interventions, supporting households to both smooth consumption and choose climate-adaptive, sustainable livelihood transitions.

Encouraging recipients of emergency aid to join peer-based community groups improves psycho-social outcomes and may accelerate improved adaptation. Cash recipient households with at least one family member who had been enrolled in a Nawiri group expressed greater confidence in the future, and peer group members frequently cited material and psycho-social support from peers as reasons for their motivation and increasing success. Peer-based community groups provided members with strong social networks, access to information, and mentorship, and the program saw group members adopt and maintain new behaviors, including use of cash for nutrition and towards savings. Peer groups also invested in drought-resilient food production opportunities and other off and non-farm income-generating activities. Nawiri’s experience suggests that timing matters, and layering group enrollment with cash assistance early in an emergency response may help maximize potential synergies between the interventions to the benefit of both immediate needs and longer-term goals. **Recommendation:** Emergency assistance measures should include peer-to-peer support mechanisms that improve social capital, provide psycho-social support, and foster economic connectivity.

Donor-level leadership and coordination are critical for maximizing collective impact to sustainably reduce humanitarian need. Through well-intentioned attempts to alleviate food insecurity, short-term humanitarian actors were funded to supply in-kind food assistance. Yet these food commodities inadvertently threaten the survival of nascent Nawiri-supported R4N businesses working to bolster and diversify local markets for affordable nutritious foods and other nutrition commodities. The situation underscores the critical need for bridging the divide between different implementing partners to maximize collective impact and reduce future humanitarian needs. Donors

should leverage their convening power to go beyond “layering” and facilitate harmonized, mutually reinforcing actions that alleviate suffering and save lives, while supporting and strengthening the social, economic, and ecological foundations required for long-term resilience and self-reliance.

Recommendation: Donors should invest in meaningful coordination among implementing partners and facilitate processes for them to map and implement harmonized emergency response and development strategies.

Integrating context-specific SBC activities with cash assistance can improve outcomes for women and at-risk groups during emergencies. The drought response allowed for practical insights into the intricate connection between drought-induced economic stress, domestic dynamics, and violence against women, adolescent girls, and children. The economic pressures of drought, particularly the onus on men to meet familial needs, can intensify instances of gender-based violence and child abuse. In addition, healthcare workers consistently report that families that lack adequate food often resort to sharing nutrition commodities intended for the treatment of acute malnutrition among children aged 6-59 months and pregnant and lactating women. Experiential learning from the drought response suggests that linking cash and livelihood diversification with SBC focused on nutrition practices and gender social norms may empower caregivers to prevent new and relapse cases of acute malnutrition during drought emergencies, better nourish the most at-risk household



members, and remain free from violence. **Recommendations:** All cash assistance programs should

integrate context-specific behavior change activities around gender and nutrition to support improved nutrition and women's empowerment outcomes, and to avoid harmful unintended consequences.

CONCLUSION

Nawiri's response to the drought emergency offers a practical example and important lessons on the comparative advantage of different types of assistance to maximize collective, cumulative impact. By using a nutrition resilience framework to link emergency funding to the long-term goal of sustainably reducing persistent acute malnutrition, and operationalizing the response through strategically layered programming and a commitment to collaboration, learning, and adaptation, Nawiri has been able to reduce suffering and restore hope while simultaneously supporting communities in building resilience to ongoing and future shocks, and accelerating progress in transforming social, economic, and ecological drivers of malnutrition. However, the fight against persistent acute malnutrition is far from over, and the gains we have achieved—while significant—must be nurtured into transformative change.

CONTACT

HUSSEIN NOOR ABDILLE
Chief of Party (CoP), USAID Nawiri
habdille@mercycorps.org

MERCY CORPS
+254 721 497 543
The Almont Park Church Rd.
Westlands – Nairobi, Kenya



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