

# LINK NCA TO INFORM A THEORY OF CHANGE

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Link NCA in Liberia was completed as part of a three assessment package of formative research. The objective of this formative research was to develop programming based on a better understanding of the context-specific causes of stunting and determinants of related behaviours. Conducting the three assessments under the direction of one consortium project, in overlapping study regions, ultimately informed a four year proposal tapping into learnings generated specifically for the project.

## INTRODUCTION

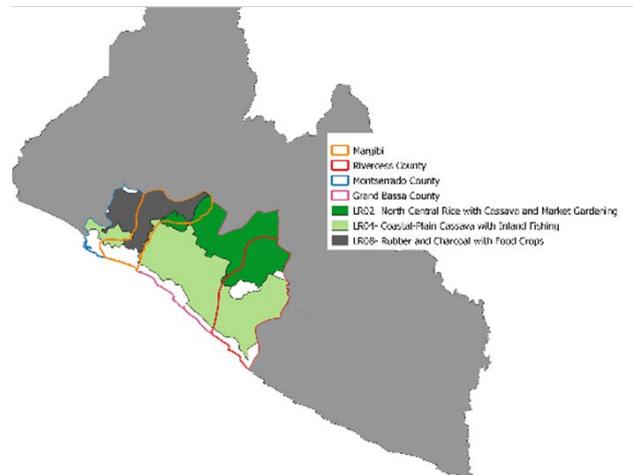
In October 2019- May 2020, the Liberian WASH Consortium (LWC) conducted the first of a three phase project that ultimately aims to reduce stunting in children under 5 years of age. In Phase One, three out of five consortium members, i.e. Action Against Hunger, Concern Worldwide and Water Aid, engaged in the delivery of assessments in five counties, namely the Link NCA Nutrition Causal Analysis (Link NCA), Barrier Analysis and Cost of Diet (CoD) Assessment, to build a solid evidence base for future interventions adapted to an in-depth understanding of the context and community priorities. **THE OBJECTIVE OF THIS FORMATIVE RESEARCH WAS TO DEVELOP PROGRAMMING BASED ON A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF THE CONTEXT-SPECIFIC CAUSES OF STUNTING AND DETERMINANTS OF RELATED BEHAVIOURS.** The Link NCA study was a critical part of this approach, allowing a better understanding of the underlying causes of stunting and the linkages between nutrition, food security and livelihoods, water, sanitation and hygiene, gender and other thematic areas.



FIGURE 1: Map of the study area [in blue]

## COST OF THE DIET ASSESSMENT, RAINY SEASON (OCT/NOV 2019) AND DRY SEASON (MARCH 2020)

The rainy and dry season Cost of the Diet (CoD) assessments explored the acceptability and economic feasibility of identified options on the market to improve the consumption of nutritiously diverse food. The first Liberian CoD assessment was undertaken in 3 livelihood zones<sup>1</sup> within Grand Bassa, Margibi,<sup>2</sup> Montserrado and Rivercess counties in October-November 2019, which is the tail end of the rainy season. A second CoD assessment was undertaken in March 2020 to provide a more thorough understanding of the seasonal availability, cost and economic feasibility of nutritious foods and diet options in the dry season. As it was not possible to visit all planned markets, data was collected in only two livelihood zones<sup>3</sup>. Detailed findings can be found in the full Cost of Diet reports<sup>4</sup>.



**FIGURE 2:** Cost of the Diet study counties and livelihood zones (LR)



**FIGURE 3:** Link NCA study area by region  
[Region 1- Green, Region 2- Blue, Region 3- Grey]

## LINK NCA STUDY, OCTOBER 2019- MAY 2020

A Link Nutrition Causal Analysis (Link NCA) is a method for analyzing the multi-causality of undernutrition, as a starting point for improving the relevance and effectiveness of multi-sectoral nutrition security programming in a given context. It is a structured, participatory and holistic study that builds on UNICEF's conceptual framework with an objective to build an evidence-based consensus on plausible causes of undernutrition in a local context<sup>5</sup>. The main objective of this Link NCA study was to identify the major risk factors and causal pathways leading to stunting in the five counties, which were grouped into three regions. Among the major risk factors, two were identified in the sector of water, sanitation and hygiene, **NAMELY LOW ACCESS TO WATER** and **NON-OPTIMAL SANITATION PRACTICES**, while the last major risk factor, **LOW ACCESS TO FOOD**, was identified in the sector of food security and livelihoods. [Full causal pathways for stunting and concurrent Wasting Stunting \(WaST\) are detailed in the Link NCA report.](#)

- 1 LR02- North-Central Rice with Cassava and Market Gardening, LR04- Coastal Plain Cassava with Rice and Inland Fishing, LR08- Rubber and Charcoal with Food Crops
- 2 Margibi County was included by CWW for programming information, but was not part of the LWC proposal area.
- 3 The plan was to survey the same markets visited during the 2019 assessment over 14 working days, however, the assessment was cut short due to arrival of Coronavirus-19 in Liberia and subsequent government action to restrict non-essential travel, with approximately 62% of data collection completion.
- 4 Concern Worldwide, Liberia
- 5 For more information about the methodology, please refer to [www.linknca.org](http://www.linknca.org).

## BARRIER ANALYSIS, FEBRUARY- MARCH 2020

The Barrier Analysis (BA) study sought to identify the factors preventing the priority groups (people who are supposed to practice the behaviour) from adopting six key behaviours, as well as identifying the enablers facilitating the adoption of those behaviours. Selection of the behaviours was based on key themes during the Link NCA and agreed with the Consortium partners. The six priority behaviours were (1) exclusive breastfeeding, (2) minimum dietary diversity (3) handwashing (4) use of modern family planning (5) use of latrines and (6) safe water storage. All six behaviours were studied in Grand Cape Mount County, while only three were investigated in the remaining four counties.

Full findings are detailed in the Barrier Analysis report<sup>4</sup>.

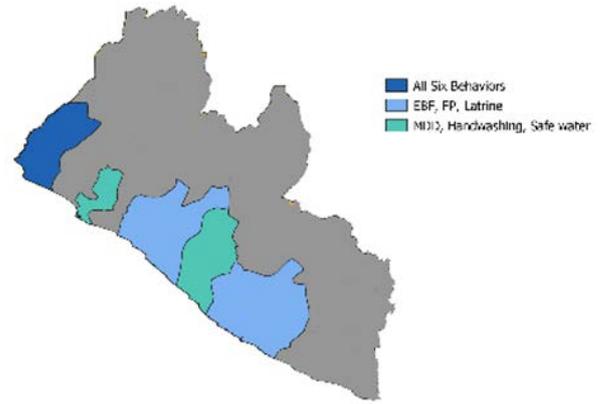


FIGURE 4: Barrier Analysis counties and studied behaviors

## TIMING

The formative research was conducted from the months of October 2019- March 2020, with some overlap in implementation dates. As the first CoD was conducted before the Link NCA, the CoD Analyst provided critical insights regarding accessibility of hard-to-reach parts of the study counties, ensuring that the most difficult to reach sites for qualitative inquiry were planned toward the beginning of the dry season. The Link NCA Analyst also gleaned critical, timely information regarding market accessibility and availability from the findings of the rainy season CoD. As the Link NCA qualitative inquiry took place before the Barrier Analysis, the Analysts coordinated on suggested behaviors to study.

	2019			2020											
	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	March	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
<b>Formative Research: Phase One</b>															
CoD	Rainy season			Dry season*											
Link NCA		Qualitative		Quantitative											
Barrier Analysis															
<b>Intervention: Phase One</b>															
Proposal Development															

TABLE 1: Phase I and Phase II timeline

## PROPOSAL DEVELOPMENT

As all three assessments took place prior to Proposal Development, respective assessment leads also had the opportunity to review and provide comments on colleagues' reports, ultimately strengthening findings and recommendations. The recommendations from each assessment were used to inform a proposal development in Phase Two of the project, which will aim to contribute to a sustainable reduction of chronic malnutrition by addressing key drivers of undernutrition in the zone. An emphasis was placed on a robust Monitoring, Evaluation, Assessment, and Learning (MEAL) framework sensitive to learnings gleaned during the Link NCA regarding community preferences for their own involvement in programs. Thus, a pillar of the proposal is community engagement strategies that advance access to basic sanitation, nutrition security, and maternal health, including those of adolescents.

During the four week proposal development process, AAH-UK, led by the Link NCA Technical Advisor for the study, coordinated inputs from the Liberia WASH Consortium, which were gathered during several rounds of sectoral technical discussions with HQ advisors, regional sectoral experts, and sectoral program managers, as well as regular multisectoral coordination calls including operational team members. All contributions were maintained in a collaborative online platform, so that inputs could be routinely reviewed. Regular deadlines for intermediate review were set for validation by the future implementing partners. AAH-UK led revisions of the proposal narrative upon receipt of comments by the donor, which again followed an online consultative process with technical and operational team members of the consortium members.

## LESSONS LEARNT / RECOMMENDATIONS

It is an understandable critique that methodologies such as Link NCA, CoD, and Barrier Analysis sometimes generate knowledge primarily for its own sake, or in other words, reports sit underutilized on a shelf. The Phase One Formative Research in Liberia, and subsequent proposal development, is a promising example of spring boarding assessments into action. **CONDUCTING THE THREE ASSESSMENTS UNDER THE DIRECTION OF ONE CONSORTIUM PROJECT, IN OVERLAPPING STUDY REGIONS, ULTIMATELY INFORMED A FOUR YEAR PROPOSAL TAPPING INTO LEARNINGS GENERATED SPECIFICALLY FOR THE PROJECT.** Comparatively, many long term projects rely on national or regional data produced for surveillance purposes. Completing these assessments as a precursor for a proposal meant that all three were completed with the expectation of a next step. Furthermore, due to the multifaceted nature of findings, and facilitation of the proposal development by an external partner, partners were forced to design a novel project and not repeat status quo programming. In-depth community consultation during the Link NCA meant recommendations reflected community rankings, so that proposal activities could reflect those rankings and preferences. Furthermore, the Link NCA team members and focal points involved in the proposal process centered conversations and reviews on those rankings. The MEAL strategy adapted from learnings of the various assessments will allow for active development of indicators as the program progresses, so the project can remain dynamic and flexible.

While expectations remain high for the next years of implementation, which will prove far more consequential in reducing stunting than the findings of the three assessments, experience from Phase One can be further enhanced in the future. To maximize triangulation of findings from multiple assessments:

- Close coordination between assessment leads is recommended, from the planning stages through the final report validation. Each assessment lead had unique insights to the causality of stunting, which strengthened findings of the full reports.
- The assessments should utilize the same geographic strategy, if possible: i.e. county, region, or livelihood zone. Implementation of the CoD at livelihood zone level, the Link NCA at Regional level, and the Barrier Analysis at county level limits triangulation of findings.
- Furthermore, it would have been ideal to explore launching a joint recruitment strategy for assessments that did not have overlapping timelines, to capitalize on team members' expertise and experiences in the respective methodologies.

All Link NCA's should ideally be followed by a proposal development stage or an alternative response plan. For the proposal development stage, due to the considerable workload of technical and operational partners, it is important to:

- Have a dedicated team of writers and coordinators who were involved in the assessment to spearhead the process and hold partners accountable to deadlines;
- Designate means of communications that will work best for all consortium members and technical leads, i.e. Teams or Dropbox;
- The proposal development should launch with intensive planning on the overall project theory of change and vision for activities. This will allow the coordination team to make sure that proposed activities do not stray from the overall objectives of the project;
- Create intermediate deadlines for revisions, as additional time will be needed for streamlining organizational jargon/ terms (i.e. Mother's Groups vs. Care Groups).
- Furthermore, regular coordination calls by sector are encouraged to ensure that sectoral strategies continue to align throughout the proposal development process;
- Allocate more time than usual for budget alignment by the respective Finance departments, as Budgeting Templates may vary by partner.
- Proactively center community recommendations and priorities in proposal development. The proposal coordination team should continually check proposed interventions against community preferences.

To learn more go to [linknca.org](http://linknca.org)

