2025 Edition

GOAL PROGRAMME INNOVATION FUND

Rapid Nutrition Assessment

INNOVATING FOR A WORLD BEYOND HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

GOAL | UGANDA

Stage of innovation

Ideation and piloting

Validation

Scaling ✔

GOAL | PROGRAMME INNOVATION LAB

Irish Aid
An Roinn Gnóthaí Eachtracha agus Trádála
Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

BACKGROUND

In Northern Uganda, Agago District faces persistent malnutrition challenges within a predominantly rural population that relies heavily on subsistence agriculture. With over 280,000 people, including many children under five and women of reproductive age, the district experiences high levels of food insecurity, poverty, and limited access to essential services. Acute malnutrition rates vary widely, reaching up to 18% in some communities, and micronutrient deficiencies remain common yet underreported. Seasonal food shortages, exacerbated by droughts and unpredictable rainfall, further strain household resilience and nutrition. The district's health and nutrition systems are constrained by inadequate infrastructure, workforce shortages, and limited coverage of essential services.

This innovation is being developed in **Agago, Uganda**

WHAT IS THE INNOVATION ABOUT?

Conventional analyses often rely heavily on quantitative data, which can overlook the vital insights that come from people's lived experiences. The studies that are conducted using qualitative data vary in quality, often fail to capture local nuances, and rarely bring data together in a way that generates clear, actionable guidance for each community. Furthermore, existing tools created to overcome these challenges are resource-intensive, time-consuming, and impractical in fragile or resource-constrained settings.

The Rapid Nutrition Determinants Assessment (RNDA) was developed by a Technical Working Group, of which GOAL is a member, under the Global Nutrition Cluster to fill this gap. It is a cost-effective, fully qualitative, and participatory approach that captures community knowledge through interviews, focus groups, participatory visual tools, and validation sessions. By placing lived experience at the centre, the RNDA delivers findings that are both context-specific and immediately actionable—supporting more effective nutrition programming tailored to local needs.

What makes the RNDA an innovation is its ability to combine participatory methods with a structured analytical framework that identifies the causal and systemic factors driving malnutrition—such as caregiving practices, gender roles, workload distribution, birth spacing, and seasonal changes in food access. The RNDA transforms complex, qualitative information into clear visual "pathways" that illustrate how social, behavioural, and environmental determinants interact. These pathways serve as practical guidance for programme design and advocacy, ensuring that community voices directly shape solutions.

Unlike traditional nutrition assessments that focus mainly on prevalence data, the RNDA provides actionable, context-specific evidence that informs both programme design and policy decisions at local, district, and national levels. Its speed, participatory process, and adaptability make it particularly suitable for humanitarian and development contexts, helping governments and partners identify the right interventions in real time.

KEY OUTCOMES OF THE INNOVATION

In Agago District Northen Uganda, GOAL Uganda engaged **498 community members** across four sub-counties in the Rapid NDA. Together with communities, the team developed nutrition pathways that illustrated how different local factors contribute to malnutrition.
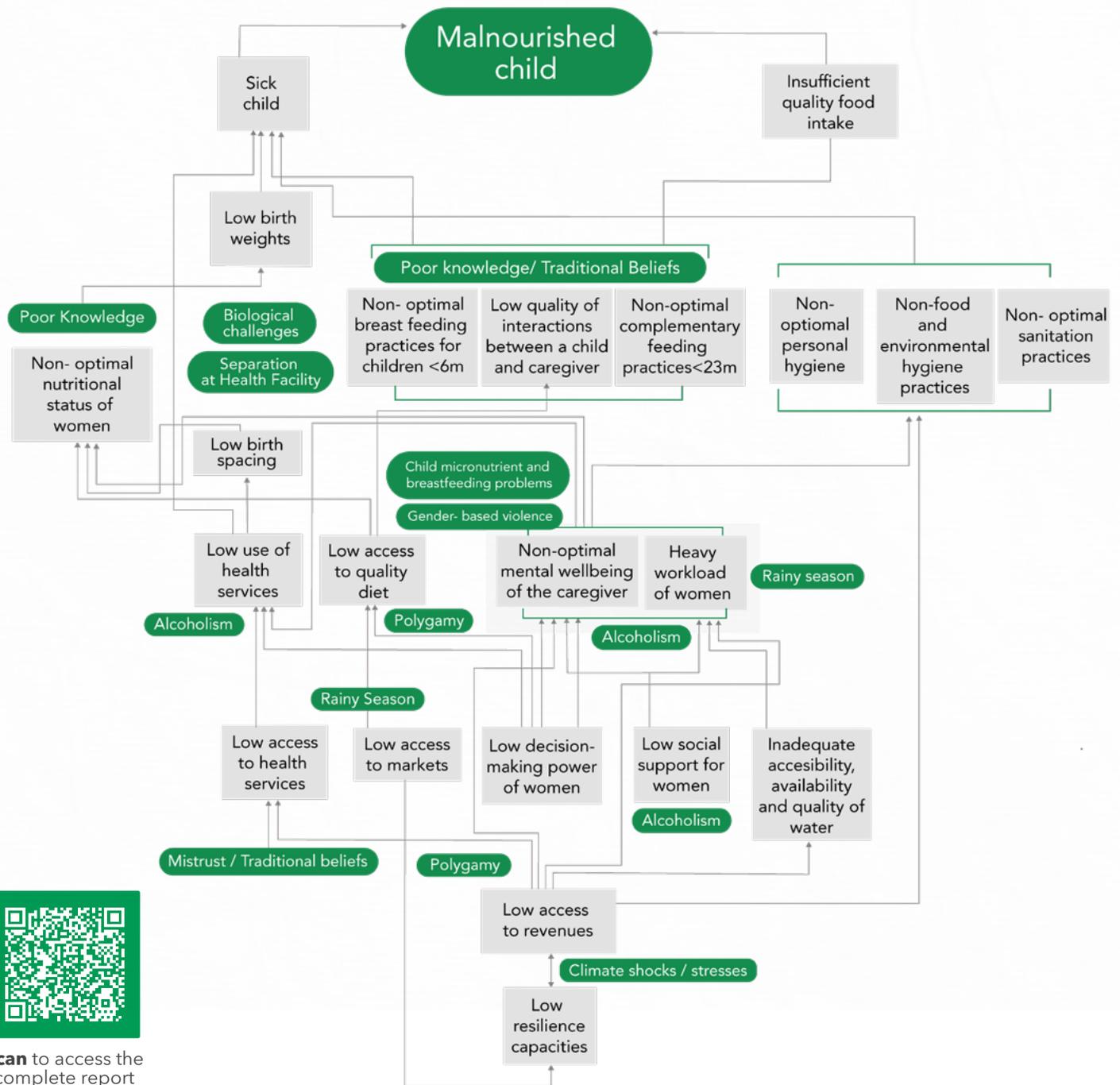
The findings challenged common assumptions: while food insecurity was present, it was not the main driver of malnutrition. Instead, a complex set of factors emerged, including:

- Gaps in caregiving practices
- Heavy workloads for women and poor maternal well-being
- Unequal decision-making
- Poor birth spacing
- Limited household resilience
- Seasonal changes in food and income availability

The Rapid NDA highlighted the power of community voices in identifying the fundamental drivers of malnutrition. It proved a practical, cost-effective tool that not only strengthens programme design but also empowers communities to shape solutions that are locally appropriate and sustainable.

Omiya Pacwa Community perceptions of causal mechanisms of wasting

Malnourished child

Sick child

Insufficient quality food intake

Low birth weights

Poor knowledge/ Traditional Beliefs

Poor Knowledge

Biological challenges

Separation at Health Facility

Non- optimal nutritional status of women

Non- optimal breast feeding practices for children <6m

Low quality of interactions between a child and caregiver

Non-optimal complementary feeding practices<23m

Non-optimal personal hygiene

Non-food and environmental hygiene practices

Non- optimal sanitation practices

Low birth spacing

Child micronutrient and breastfeeding problems

Gender- based violence

Low use of health services

Low access to quality diet

Non-optimal mental wellbeing of the caregiver

Heavy workload of women

Rainy season

Alcoholism

Polygamy

Alcoholism

Rainy Season

Low access to health services

Low access to markets

Low decision-making power of women

Low social support for women

Inadequate accesibility, availability and quality of water

Alcoholism

Mistrust / Traditional beliefs

Polygamy

Low access to revenues

Climate shocks / stresses

Low resilience capacities

Scan to access the complete report

IMPACT

The Rapid NDA broadened the understanding of malnutrition in Agago by unpacking the context-specific drivers of malnutrition in the selected communities. This insight strengthens programming by ensuring that interventions address underlying vulnerabilities. By engaging communities directly, the approach also builds local ownership and increases the likelihood of sustained change. At a systemic level, the Rapid NDA provides decision-makers with timely, actionable evidence to guide resource allocation, strengthen health and nutrition systems, and integrate seasonal preparedness into planning.

POTENTIAL TO SCALE

The methodology is less time-consuming than alternative approaches, participatory, and adaptable, making it suitable for resource-constrained or fragile contexts beyond Agago. It offers a practical alternative to more complex assessments where timely insights are needed to inform action. The approach aligns with Uganda's National Nutrition Action Plan and global goals such as SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) and SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being). Its simplicity and scalability make it a valuable tool for other regions facing similar challenges, enabling multisectoral programming that is responsive to local realities.

NEXT STEPS

Building on lessons from Agago, the Rapid NDA will continue to guide nutrition programming in the district and beyond. GOAL and partners are working to embed the findings into multi-sectoral strategies that address the persistent challenge of malnutrition.

The methodology is also being refined into a globally relevant toolkit, enabling humanitarian and development actors to design context-specific interventions and generate stronger evidence for more effective programmes and improved nutrition outcomes.

To further increase its impact, GOAL is exploring the use of artificial intelligence (AI) to support teams in complex settings or with limited experience in qualitative research. An AI-powered assistant is being explored to enhance data collection, while AI tools are also being tested to simplify the analysis of complex findings. By combining community insights with cutting-edge technology, these innovations will make the Rapid NDA more practical, scalable, and effective, helping communities move from crisis to resilience.

PROGRAMME INNOVATION LAB

Join us in advancing health and nutrition resilience in Uganda and beyond. Whether you are a stakeholder, funder, or technical expert, your support can help scale this impactful initiative, ensuring that communities have access to timely and reliable health and nutrition even in times of crises. Together, we can build stronger, more responsive systems that saves lives and supports lasting resilience.

For more information or to get involved, contact us at:

✉ **innovationlab@goal.ie**

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Innovating to Overcome Humanitarian Crisis

The GOAL Programme Innovation Lab is a dynamic and collaborative unit established by GOAL to foster innovation within GOAL's programmes and to promote this work both internally and externally with the wider development and humanitarian community.

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GOAL Ireland
Carnegie House, Library Road, Dun Laoghaire Co. Dublin