

GOOD PRACTICES 75: November 2025



ENSURING NUTRITION SECURITY THROUGH NUTRITION CHANGE AGENTS



In this Good Practices Note, Salome, Anil, and Chejarla Narasimha explain how the Women Nutrition Change Agents (Poshan Vanithas) helped make nutritional security a reality.

CONTEXT

Despite large-scale food security programmes, malnutrition continues to affect both rural and urban families in Telangana. The reasons lie in limited dietary diversity, monocropping systems, lack of nutrition awareness, and weak linkages between food production and consumption. Farmers often grow commercial crops for markets rather than diverse and nutritious foods for their households, resulting in a disconnect between what is produced locally and what is consumed, which limits nutritional outcomes.

To address these gaps, WASSAN initiated the Malnutrition-Free Gram Panchayats programme in Vikarabad district, Telangana, in November 2022 with an integrated approach that combines sustainable agriculture, nutrition-sensitive farming, and capacity building for women and youth.



Community awareness Camps

The programme was aimed at ensuring nutritionally vulnerable families, especially women, children, and the elderly, access to adequate, safe, and nutritious food through building self-reliant, malnutrition-free communities through:

- promoting diverse food crops,
- engaging Self-Help Groups (SHGs),
- strengthening Farmer-Producer Organisations (FPOs), and
- linking with community institutions such as Anganwadi Centres, Gram Panchayats, and ASHA workers

The key element of this programme was the **Women Nutrition Change Agent (*Poshan Vanitha*)**, who is equipped with the knowledge and skills to become nutrition advocates and entrepreneurs.

GOOD PRACTICES

1. **Identification of target groups:** It involved a baseline survey that collected data on households, land, crop diversity, and health issues like hypertension and diabetes. Key beneficiaries — young children, adolescent girls, and women — were identified through dietary and anthropometric assessments conducted by village volunteers and project team members, with guidance from a nutritionist. Data for 90% of these groups was gathered across all villages. Anganwadi and ASHA workers supported the survey. The programme also includes persons with disabilities and those with chronic conditions like hypertension and diabetes.
2. **Village sensitisation:** To introduce the initiative, meetings were held involving Panchayati Raj institutions, SHGs, local leaders, and other village organisations across 50 villages in five districts of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. Of these, 12 villages were prioritised based on their willingness to adopt nutrition-sensitive practices. These meetings ensured maximum community participation.
3. **Stakeholder consultation and Resolution:** In selected villages, meetings were conducted with mothers of young children, adolescent girls, SHGs, persons with disabilities, and families affected by malnutrition to ensure broad participation. Each Gram Panchayat is encouraged to pass a **resolution declaring its commitment to become a “Malnutrition-Free Gram Panchayat”**, which is further endorsed in village Gram Sabhas where community members discuss and approve programme activities.
4. **Selection of *Poshana Vanitha*:** We selected community-focused women with strong communication skills, a passion for nutrition and health, and previous outreach or food-related experience — and trained them as Nutrition Change Agents. They promote nutrition awareness and encourage dietary changes within their communities, ensuring a lasting impact.
5. **Community Mobilisation and Support:** Engaging *Poshana Vanithas* to provide task-specific services aligned with programme needs, such as regular awareness meetings, food festivals, recipe demonstrations, and interaction sessions led by nutritionists and community health workers. *Poshana Vanithas* connect beneficiaries with local FPOs for inputs and collaborate with WASSAN and the Agriculture Department to provide technical support and capacity building, encouraging these practices.

Box 1: Services provided by the Nutrition Change Agent – Poshana Vanitha

Nutrition Change Agents are trained women community leaders who promote food, nutrition, cooking, and entrepreneurship at the village level. They lead awareness campaigns, conduct dietary demonstrations, and encourage diverse food practices within households and communities. Each pair of Nutrition Change Agents receives an honorarium of ₹3,000, which also covers the cost of ingredients used during food festivals and recipe preparations.

Launched with an orientation and hands-on recipe training by WASSAN, the initiative equips women to prepare nutritious and traditional dishes. The Nutrition Change Agents organise food festivals in Gram Panchayats to showcase the richness of local diets and spread nutritional awareness among communities. These festivals have become vibrant learning spaces, bringing people together to celebrate healthy eating and promote the message of “*One Millet Meal a Day.*” What began as a small training effort has now evolved into a movement where women are simultaneously advancing nutrition and generating livelihoods.

Nutrition Change Agents also improve access to nutritious foods, such as millets, uncultivated greens, and traditional snacks, through local shops, eateries, and direct community supply, often in collaboration with Farmer-Producer Organisations (FPOs) on credit. Awareness meetings with local influencers, including doctors, community nutritionists, and health workers, highlight the importance of millets, dairy products, backyard poultry, and forest foods. Intensive training covers recipe demonstrations and the preparation of a *Poshana Thali* (Nutri Plate) tailored for infants, adolescent girls, and pregnant or lactating women. Entrepreneurship support further enables women to establish ready-to-cook and ready-to-eat food enterprises, transforming nutrition promotion into sustainable livelihood opportunities.



Dialogue through Food Display

CHALLENGES FACED DURING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THIS INITIATIVE

One of the major challenges was bringing about behavioural change in food and dietary practices at the household level. Shifting preferences from polished rice and market foods to traditional, diverse, and millet-based diets required consistent effort and patience. Communities initially showed resistance to change, viewing millets and local foods as old-fashioned. This was addressed through repeated engagement, food festivals, live cooking demonstrations, and interaction sessions by doctors and nutritionists, which gradually helped families adopt healthier eating habits.

The second challenge was retaining trained volunteers, as most Nutrition Change Agents had multiple responsibilities at home and in their livelihoods. To sustain their participation, the programme introduced regular refresher training sessions, exposure visits, and small honorariums to recognise their contributions.

The third challenge was sustaining the supply chain and creating market demand for nutritious foods. To overcome this, linkages were established with Farmer-Producer Organisations (FPOs) for sourcing local produce. At the same time, *Poshan Vanithas* and SHGs promoted millet-based products and local foods, gradually creating both community demand and a steady supply ecosystem.

COVERAGE & IMPACT

The programme now covers 70 villages across five districts — Vikarabad and Kumuram Bheem Asifabad in Telangana, and Sri Sathya Sai, Annamayya, and Alluri Sitarama Raju in Andhra Pradesh — with Gram Panchayats committing to become “malnutrition-free.” Nutrition Change Agents, as trusted local leaders, inspire families to adopt healthier diets, while millet shops provide affordable alternatives to rice, supporting a gradual shift towards more nutritious eating habits. This initiative is also fostering the connection between what we grow and what we eat, and encouraging the cultivation of as much as possible of what we consume. Through these activities, each *Poshana Vanitha* earns an additional ₹4,000–₹5,000 per month, in addition to their regular agricultural income.



Recipe Diversity: Taste, Nutrition and Health



Institute Inclusion: ICDS Centres

KEY LESSONS

Several lessons emerged from the programme's implementation. Positioning nutrition not just as a health concern but as an entrepreneurial and empowerment pathway motivated women to participate and take on leadership roles actively. Some key lessons we learned are,

1. **Local resource persons**, such as **Nutrition Change Agents**, proved critical in sustaining knowledge dissemination and driving behaviour change at the grassroots.
2. **Promoting dietary diversity**—through millets, uncultivated greens, and forest foods—was most effective when combined with cooking demonstrations and awareness campaigns, increasing community acceptance.
3. **Panchayat (Local Government) engagement** played a pivotal role in ensuring community ownership and accountability through formal resolutions. Linking nutrition education with small food enterprises strengthened sustainability, making nutritious foods accessible and affordable while improving women's income security.
4. Finally, the programme highlighted the importance of **continuous capacity building**: short trainings were valuable, but regular refresher courses and exposure visits were essential to reinforce knowledge, boost confidence, and maintain momentum.

SUSTAINABILITY AND SCALING

The Poshan Vanitha model has demonstrated strong potential for replication and integration across existing rural development frameworks. Its sustainability is built on three pillars — institutionalisation, integration, and innovation.

1. **Institutionalisation**: Embedding the concept of Nutrition Change Agents within existing community structures, such as SHGs, FPOs, and Panchayati Raj Institutions, ensures continuity beyond the project period. The role of Poshan Vanitha can be integrated into Village Health, Sanitation, and Nutrition Committees (VHSNCs) or linked with the ICDS system to complement the efforts of Anganwadi workers.

2. **Integration with Government Schemes:** The initiative aligns seamlessly with ongoing programmes such as Poshan Abhiyaan, National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), and National Nutrition Mission. With government convergence, Poshan Vanithas can serve as community resource persons under these schemes to drive dietary diversification, promote millets, and establish home nutrition gardens at scale.
3. **Innovation and Enterprise Development:** Sustainability also depends on converting nutrition awareness into viable micro-enterprises. Scaling efforts will focus on developing ready-to-cook and ready-to-eat millet-based products, supporting local marketing, and connecting women entrepreneurs with financial institutions and digital platforms to facilitate business expansion. Partnerships with FPOs and local eateries can ensure a continuous supply and demand for nutritious, locally sourced foods.

By embedding nutrition promotion into the broader livelihood ecosystem and enabling women to earn income through their nutrition advocacy, this initiative ensures long-term social, economic, and nutritional sustainability.

END NOTE

The *Poshan Vanitha* initiative bridges the gap between food production and consumption by reconnecting communities to local, diverse, and nutritious foods. It addresses key nutrition indicators, such as stunting, wasting, anaemia, and BMI, while promoting year-round access to diverse diets through crop diversification, backyard poultry, dairy promotion, and millet cultivation, as well as the use of forest foods.



Nutrition for All

By empowering women as both nutrition educators and entrepreneurs, the initiative transforms nutrition from a welfare activity into a community-led movement for better health and dignity. The focus on replacing at least 30% of rice consumption with millets and fostering self-reliant, nutrition-sensitive villages ensures that communities move toward a future of improved nutrition, enhanced incomes, and greater resilience to climate and market vulnerabilities.

This approach — **integrating agriculture, nutrition, and livelihoods** — stands as a scalable model for building malnutrition-free, resilient rural communities across India.

Salome Yesudas holds a Master's degree in Food and Nutrition and works as a Human Nutrition Consultant with several organizations. She actively engages with marginalized communities to strengthen local food systems and promote sustainability. She can be reached at salomeyesudas@hotmail.com.

Anil Uppalapati is a Program Officer at WASSAN, focusing on climate change, sustainable food systems, and community resilience. He supports regenerative agriculture, nutrition, and smallholder farmer empowerment across India. Combining research, fieldwork, and policy, Anil promotes inclusive, locally driven solutions and shares community stories to inspire social change. He can be contacted at aniluppalapati@wassan.org.

Chejarla Narasimha Reddy holds a Master's degree in Agricultural Sciences with a specialization in Soil Science. He has been working with WASSAN as a Program Coordinator for two years, contributing to agri-nutrition projects, sustainable food systems, and other related initiatives. He can be contacted at narasimha@wassan.org.

**AESA Secretariat: Centre for Research on Innovation and Science Policy (CRISP)
Road No 10, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad 500034, India**

www.aesanetwork.org

Email: aesanetwork@gmail.com