

Action brief

A holistic and community-based approach to nutrition in Kenya

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Country: Kenya

Themes: Nutrition-sensitive

Sub-themes: Food security

Date: 2023



Overview



VICCO is a community-based organization in Nairobi, Kenya, that focuses on empowering children, young mothers and the community as a whole through holistic approaches to improving nutrition and building skills. Believing that change must start at the household level, VICCO aims to improve overall health and well-being by equipping individuals with the knowledge and tools they need to improve their nutrition. It provides meals, cultivates vegetables, and offers employment opportunities to community members, relying on external funding and community contributions to sustain its projects. To further engage and support the community, VICCO has established a library, farm, gym and internet services.



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VICCO's story highlights the importance of addressing nutrition at the household level and empowering individuals, especially children and young mothers, to make positive changes in their communities.



Objectives of the action brief

This action brief showcases the impact and power of community-led initiatives to tackle malnutrition.

“We live in this community, We understand it better than others.” one VICCO representative said.



Period covered

VICCO was founded more than ten years ago. A conscious shift to focus on nutrition began roughly four years ago when leaders saw the importance of nutrition to community health and well-being.

The initiative has been growing on a small scale, but leaders nonetheless have celebrated significant milestones – including the recent creation of a community kitchen to offer nutritious meals to the community.



What action was taken?

Fully registered with the Government of Kenya, VICCO focuses on empowering children and young mothers to give them skills and techniques to create affordable and healthy meals. It's not just about food, but also about how food is being prepared at the **household** level.

VICCO has a distinctly hands-on approach, encouraging teens and young mothers to work with their own hands. Young mothers have their own small children and need to feed them properly – these children are considered as future changemakers. VICCO founder Shakur Njeru notes that while it is difficult to convince an adult to change, teens and even younger children can help influence their parents.

A stakeholder mapping exercise was conducted to understand who was active on breastfeeding questions, what they were working on, and how best to synergize their efforts. Following this, VICCO has made targeted interventions to support the diets of breastfeeding mothers by providing them with porridge, rice, maize flour and cooking oil. They also support African Population & Health Research Center **breastfeeding** practices.

Every morning during the week, VICCO feeds healthy **porridge** to 250 schoolchildren and 50 elderly people.

On Wednesdays, fresh **vegetables** are distributed to people in target areas. VICCO volunteers speak with community members about the importance of good nutrition and how the vegetables need to be cooked.

VICCO's Saturday programme provides support to address the needs of **children** on the weekends when they are not in school. One of VICCO's lead volunteers and her friends

give of their time each Saturday to teach teens and young **mothers** how to prepare food, help them understand the types of foods they are cooking and its nutritional value, and show them how to maintain a balanced diet.

Most **teenagers** and children in the community struggle to maintain a balanced diet, often not even eating regular meals due to food insecurity. Through the programme, volunteers explain the importance of consuming meals three times a day. The children and adolescents are grateful for any food they are given when they cannot afford to buy their own. Another key purpose of the programme is to support children and young people's mental health, building their strength and resilience and helping them appreciate themselves so they can build strength, resilience and self-esteem.

Up to 150 **youth** are typically engaged in the programme, with the number often exceeding 200 on school holidays. In the future, VICCO hopes to be able to take the children on small trips out of the city where they can camp and engage in mentoring activities.

Over time, VICCO has progressively broadened the scope of its activities to become truly holistic. The initial focus of the project was garbage collection and community cleanup. The VICCO team realized ten years ago that their surrounding area was very dirty and wanted to bring young members of the community together for proper sanitation. Given that good nutrition is integral to WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene) principles, the programme eventually expanded to cover nutrition. VICCO's leaders realised that to engage youth further, they needed to offer sports, bringing youth together and giving them



something to do, like play football. This offered them a meaningful outlet. VICCO also recognized a need to talk about reproductive health for girls and boys. Health practitioners were invited to the community space to talk with the adolescents about reproductive health in youth-friendly and supportive ways. Conversations around health

and well-being then drew attention to the importance of nutrition, so VICCO's leaders and volunteers created the kitchen garden and began to grow their own food.

In the Makuri area, where the organization is located, VICCO targets 23 villages and roughly 53,000 people.



What would the country do differently?

Funding has always been difficult to come by.

To ensure the sustainability of the project, VICCO has asked for support from community members. When VICCO began the porridge initiative, for example, leaders approached the community to ask them to contribute a little bit to support their neighbours in need. When COVID-19 hit, VICCO leaders began selling internet access to enable community members to accomplish what

they needed online while contributing to the organization's funding. VICCO also manages a farm, selling vegetables and other fresh produce to as many as 20 families. The gym also brings in a little money via the low rate paid by the youth who use the gym for exercise and other activities. The gym boosts mental health among youth and allows them to channel their energy in positive ways, helping keep the crime rate in the slow from rising.





Adaptation and applicability

- Help the volunteers enjoy their work. When they started, the volunteers quickly saw how much the children loved attending the workshops. This was a motivating factor for the volunteers.
- When working with volunteers, Njeru recommends identifying the person's interests and determine how to set up a project that fills a gap in the community. Everyone can start somewhere, he says, and this allows for small improvements to be made even without donor funding.
- “The small thing you can do by volunteering is the thing that the world needs,” Njeru says.
- Find a way to get the community involved. Young mothers are committed to attending the workshops, and VICCO leaders have learned that they are an important entry point towards a conversation about nutrition. There is a significant need to educate the young mothers about nutrition, especially those living in informal settlements where the knowledge gap is wide and the needs high.
- Learn from others and adapt their good ideas. VICCO volunteers spend a lot of time researching and studying in the libraries to understand best practices in nutrition and to develop ideas on how they can best scale these up.
- Listen to what community members need. As volunteers work with the women and children, they build a strong rapport with them and create space for them to share their needs and challenges. This helps VICCO understand how best to use its resources.
- For example, from conversations with children and their families, volunteers identified many barriers to community members accessing their basic rights. They learned that the lack of access to food partly explained school drop-outs. VICCO implemented a breakfast feeding programme for the children most in need. VICCO also learned that there were many young/teenage mothers living in the neighbourhood, so they brought them together to share good practices for child care, provide day care. The mothers could work and were offered nutrition classes so they could alleviate their nutrition skills.
- Monitor and evaluate to help gauge success. Programme managers have established clear indicators to monitor whether they are on the right track or whether they need to correct their course. By working closely with local health facilities, VICCO can measure the success of interventions. In one instance, VICCO began feeding a malnourished child with its healthy porridge and invited health centres to measure the changes from the first to the last day. VICCO members reported that the positive changes helped them to continue.



Next steps

- VICCO plans to continue to prioritize nutrition and transform the local food system through a holistic approach.
- VICCO's main challenge is locating sufficient funding, and the organization also needs materials and food. VICCO leaders want to recognize and reward the huge contributions of their volunteers, who are fully dedicated to the mission. With financial support, leaders can focus on wider issues within the informal settlement.



Further information



VICCO Instagram

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