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Growing Health and Livelihoods through Biointensive Life Gardens: The Thrive for Good Model in Nigeria and West Africa

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ABSTRACT

Most Nigerian families, including farming households, depend heavily on starchy staple crops like maize, cassava, and rice. These foods fill the stomach but do not provide the nutrition the body needs to stay healthy. This paper examines how Thrive for Good's Life Garden model can help address hidden hunger and poverty in Nigeria and across West Africa. It draws on Thrive for Good's experience in over 23 countries, including its 2025 West Africa expansion across Nigeria, Ghana, and Sierra Leone, and on the real-life experience of the Mosrence Group in New Bussa, Niger State, trained by a certified Thrive for Good trainer in May and June 2025.

Following training, the Mosrence Group established a Life Garden with 80 double-dug beds and planted 18 crop varieties. Members began eating fresh organic vegetables regularly and generated early income from produce sales. One member reported that he and his wife had not needed malaria or typhoid treatment in eight months after growing their own food. These outcomes align with Thrive for Good's documented programme results: an average 75 percent reduction in malaria cases and up to 80 percent reduction in household healthcare costs.

This paper argues that the Life Garden model, delivered through locally trained Growing Health Champions working within existing community organisations, is a practical and urgent response to hidden hunger in Nigeria and across West Africa. Recommendations for wider adoption are included.

Keywords: *Hidden hunger, Life Gardens, organic agriculture, nutrition security, Thrive for Good, biointensive farming, community development.*

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria's food security problems have been getting worse over the past decade. As of 2026, over 33 million Nigerians are expected to face serious food shortages during the June to August lean season. That is seven million more people than the same period in 2024 (FAO/WFP, 2024). Around 5.4 million children under five are acutely malnourished in the northeast and northwest, including 1.8 million cases of Severe Acute Malnutrition that require immediate medical attention (IPC, 2024). Nigeria ranked 115th out of 123 countries on the 2025 Global Hunger Index, with a score described as "serious" (GHI, 2025).

But the real problem is deeper than just not having enough food. Most Nigerians suffer from what is called hidden hunger. This means they are eating enough calories but not enough of the right nutrients. Their diets are built around starchy, low-variety staple crops. Even farming families tend to grow what they can sell or store rather than what is most nutritious. The result is a

population that may feel full but remains deficient in the vitamins and minerals the body needs to fight disease, develop properly, and live a healthy life.

Hidden hunger creates a cycle that is hard to break. When people are frequently sick, they miss work and school. Healthcare costs drain household income. Children's development suffers. All of this keeps families trapped in poverty. As Thrive for Good puts it: hidden hunger keeps people from escaping extreme poverty. It causes kids to miss school. It keeps adults from work when they are chronically ill. And it orphans too many children. The diseases caused by hidden hunger cost the poor too much to treat, if they can access healthcare at all.

On top of this, food prices in Nigeria have risen sharply. Annualised food inflation reached over 40 percent in mid-2024. Over 133 million Nigerians, roughly 63 percent of the population, live in multidimensional poverty (World Bank/NBS, 2024). Even when nutritious food is

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available, most people simply cannot afford it. Nigeria ranked 107th out of 113 countries on the 2022 Global Food Security Index, performing poorly on food affordability, nutritional quality, and food system sustainability (GFSI, 2022).

Yet Nigeria also has real strengths. The country has 84 million hectares of arable land. Most of its southern and middle-belt regions can support year-round crop production. There are an estimated 36 million smallholder farming households. And communities across Nigeria are strongly organised around faith groups, women's cooperatives, and local NGOs. These are exactly the kinds of organisations through which Thrive for Good has built its most successful partnerships in other countries.

The question is not whether Nigeria has the conditions for change. It does. The same is true across much of West Africa, where hidden hunger, staple-crop dependence, and strong community structures create a very similar landscape. The missing piece is knowledge, practical training, and the right tools to grow nutritious food. This paper shows how Thrive for Good's Life Garden model can fill that gap, using the Mosrence Group's experience in New Bussa, Niger State, as a real and grounded example.

Materials and Methods

This paper uses a case-study approach. It combines a review of existing literature and secondary data on food security and nutrition in Nigeria with a close look at how the Life Garden model has worked in practice through the Mosrence Group.

The Mosrence Group is a ten-member community group in New Bussa, Niger State. The group was trained by a certified Thrive for Good trainer in May and June 2025. The main sources of information for the case study are the Mosrence Group's March 2026 progress report, submitted as part of Thrive for Good's regular reporting system, and a written testimony from Mr. Solomon Tsado, a group member who independently replicated Life Garden practices at his home.

Secondary data on Nigeria's food and nutrition situation come from internationally recognised sources including the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), the World Food Programme (WFP), the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), the Global Hunger Index (GHI), and the Global Food Security Index (GFSI). Information about the Thrive for Good model and its outcomes comes from Thrive for Good's own programme documentation

including the 2025 Growing Health in Nigeria paper, the 2025 Charis Foundation West Africa Expansion Report, and the 2023 Food for the Hungry Partnership Impact Assessment.

The paper is structured around a simple logic: first, understand the problem in Nigeria; second, describe the Thrive for Good model and what it has achieved; third, show how it has worked on the ground through the Mosrence Group; and fourth, explore what would be needed to expand the model further.

Discussion

Overview of Thrive for Good

Thrive for Good is a Canadian-registered, Kenya-based not-for-profit organisation that has been working with communities since 2008. Its mission is simple: to help people who cannot afford healthy food to grow their own, in abundance. Thrive provides training, simple tools, and starter seeds so that individuals and communities living in poverty can create organic gardens that produce nutritious food and generate income.

The organisation's vision is to empower one million people in the developing world to lead healthy and sustainable lives by training them to grow nutritious and income-generating whole foods.

Thrive currently works in 23 countries and has established 2,842 Life Garden projects, directly reaching 376,758 individuals. It has 130 active programme partnerships. Its roots are in Kenya, but Thrive has planted gardens across Africa, South Asia, and beyond. More than 95 percent of Thrive's team members come from the regions where they work, and most are recruited directly from the communities they serve. The training is led by local educators who understand the challenges their communities face.

Thrive expanded into West Africa in 2025, with active engagement in Nigeria, Ghana, and Sierra Leone, and partner networks also developing in Benin and Togo. By the end of 2025, the West Africa programme collectively reached 1,876 community members across the region (Thrive for Good, 2025b). Nigerian partner organisations showed strong commitment from the start. They arrived at workshops prepared, with compost materials already gathered and land set aside for demonstration plots.

The Life Garden Model

A Life Garden is an organic garden designed to

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grow the most nutritious foods and natural medicinal plants. A standard community Life Garden has about 40 double-dug beds (each 20 feet by 5 feet, covering roughly a quarter acre), planted with 25 to 40 varieties of vegetables, herbs, and tea bushes. Life Gardens can be set up anywhere there is 100 square feet of soil per person, six hours of daily sunlight, and at least 500 mm of rain per year. Most gardens are up and producing within three months of starting training.

Thrive describes Life Gardens this way: we call the agricultural projects Life Gardens because they provide a foundation for flourishing. Gardens give people security, health, income, and a future.

The Life Garden model brings together five areas of learning: organic farming methods; nutrition education; natural and medicinal plant cultivation; sanitation and hygiene; and income generation through selling surplus produce. Participants also learn seed-saving, composting, and basic financial skills so the garden keeps going without relying on outside support.

Thrive uses a Social Return on Investment (SROI) framework and digital monitoring tools to track what its programmes achieve. Based on years of implementation across sub-Saharan Africa, the documented outcomes per community Life Garden include:

- An average 75 percent reduction in malaria cases in the first year
- Up to 80 percent reduction in household healthcare costs
- Sick days dropping to less than one per month per community member
- Around 90 percent replacement of store-bought food with home-grown produce
- 16,000 nutritious meals produced per year per Life Garden
- An estimated US\$8,000 worth of food produced annually per garden
- A lifetime cost of less than US\$15 per person, which works out to about three cents per day

In 2022, Thrive partnered with Food for the Hungry across four countries, reaching over 5,000 community members. At the end of the programme, 98 percent of participants reported a new understanding of the link between vegetables and health. Ninety-nine percent had improved their farming techniques. And 93 percent said they planned to keep maintaining their gardens long-term (Thrive for Good, 2023).

The Thrive Institute and Growing Health Champions

In 2020, Thrive launched the Thrive Institute, an online training platform that makes the full Life Garden curriculum available to participants around the world. The platform has over 40 courses covering organic gardening, nutrition, natural medicine, and income generation, and has enrolled more than 5,000 active students globally.

At the heart of Thrive's expansion model is the Growing Health Champion (GHC). A GHC is someone, usually an existing community leader or organisation staff member, who completes the full Thrive Institute training (about 25 hours of video content across four modules) and is then equipped to run five-day Life Garden workshops in their community. Each GHC is expected to work with about six community groups in a twelve-month cycle. Each group has eight to twelve members, and the garden they manage can support forty or more people with nutritious food. A network of ten GHCs can therefore directly benefit around 2,400 people in the first year. In the following years, as trained community members go on to train others, that reach grows further without a matching increase in cost.

Why Thrive for Good is Relevant to Nigeria

There are several reasons why the Life Garden model is a strong fit for Nigeria.

First, Nigeria's diet is the problem Thrive is designed to solve. The heavy dependence on low-nutrient staples like maize, cassava, and rice is exactly the pattern that causes hidden hunger. Growing 25 to 40 varieties of vegetables, herbs, and medicinal plants in a single manageable garden space directly addresses the missing nutrients. And at a lifetime cost of less than US\$15 per person, the model is within reach of communities living in poverty.

Second, Nigeria's community structures are a natural fit for this model. The country has strong faith organisations, women's cooperatives, youth associations, and local NGOs. These are the same kinds of community networks through which Thrive has built its most successful and durable partnerships elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa. Nigeria has around 86 million Christians (mainly in the south and middle belt) and 90 million Muslims (mainly in the north). Both faith communities offer trusted leadership, organised membership, and regular gathering points that can support Life Garden adoption and

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sustainability.

Third, Nigeria has the land. With 84 million hectares of arable land and an estimated 36 million smallholder farming households, there is no shortage of space or agricultural experience. The Life Garden model's small land requirement (100 square feet per person) means it can work even in urban and peri-urban settings, not just in rural areas.

Finally, the 2025 West Africa expansion showed that Nigerian partner organisations are ready and motivated. They turned up to training sessions prepared and committed. That readiness is the most important starting point for the model to succeed.

Case Study: The Mosrence Group, New Bussa, Niger State

The Mosrence Group is a practical example of what the Life Garden model looks like when it is implemented in Nigeria. The group has ten members (eight male, two female) based in New Bussa, Niger State. It is led by the author, Dr. Moses Yisa, a researcher at the National Institute for Freshwater Fisheries Research (NIFFR).

Training and Garden Establishment

The Mosrence Group was trained in May and June 2025 by Mr. Jacob Lotodo, a certified Thrive for Good trainer from Kenya. The training took four days in total: two days of classroom instruction (25-26 May 2025) covering the goals of Thrive for Good, organic gardening, medicinal plants, nutrition education, and income generation; followed by two days of practical field training (2-3 June 2025). This combination of theory and hands-on practice is the standard Thrive approach and has been shown to lead to lasting learning and skill development.

After the training, the group set up a Life Garden with 40 double-dug beds (each 5 feet by 20 feet), one keyhole bed, and one compost pile. This is the standard Thrive community garden design. In the months that followed, the garden was expanded to 80 double-dug beds, showing that the group had the skills, confidence, and commitment to grow the project.

Crops Grown and Produce Harvested

The group planted 18 different crop varieties in the Life Garden. These included: collards, spinach, sweet potatoes, coriander, cabbage, black nightshade, serat, jute, carrots, cowpea, garlic, beetroot, okra, ginger, cucumber, piquante red pepper, turmeric, and onions. This level of crop diversity is a significant change from the

typical farming pattern in the area, and it provides a wide range of vitamins, minerals, and other nutrients that address common deficiencies.

During the active growing season, the group harvested regularly, mostly for home consumption among members. Some early income was generated through the sale of tomatoes and amaranth. This showed that even in its first months, the Life Garden was beginning to produce both nutritional and economic returns.

Dry Season Challenges and Adaptation

One of the most important lessons from the Mosrence Group's experience is what happened during the dry season. This is a challenge that is specific to Nigeria's savanna environment, but it is highly relevant to any effort to sustain year-round food production in the region.

As the dry season intensified in early 2026, the group reduced its active planting to ten crop varieties that are better suited to drier conditions: tomatoes, cucumber, cowpea, amaranth, coriander, pumpkin, okra, cabbage, pepper, and maize. The main problem was water. Without a proper irrigation system, keeping the soil moist enough to sustain vegetable growth became very difficult. Some crops, including tomatoes, pepper, and cucumber, suffered and partially died during the driest weeks of March 2026. The hardening of the soil also meant the group could not add new beds as planned. That expansion has been deferred to the rainy season.

Despite these difficulties, the group kept farming. They continued harvesting for household consumption and produced amaranth for sale throughout the dry season. They also continued submitting monthly progress reports as required by Thrive for Good.

The group leader, Moses Yisa, identified solar-powered borehole drilling and sprinkler irrigation as priority investments that would allow the garden to stay productive year-round. Funding for this infrastructure has been the main obstacle. This is an important lesson for other groups planning to implement the model in Nigeria's drier zones: water access planning needs to be built into the programme from the start.

Member Testimony: Growing Health at Home

The impact of the Mosrence Group's training was not limited to the shared garden. Mr. Solomon Tsado, a 65-year-old group member, took what he learned and applied it at his own home. His compound garden now includes vegetables such

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as amaranth, okra, tomatoes, pepper, and sweet potato; fruit trees including mango, guava, soursop, coconut, mulberry, sugarcane, avocado, orange, and pawpaw; and medicinal plants such as lemon grass, *Bryophyllum pinnatum* (miracle leaf), and scent leaf.

Mr. Tsado shared a very clear and meaningful outcome. Before the training, he and his wife were buying vegetables from the market. These were often irrigated with contaminated water and he believes this was causing them to suffer from typhoid fever and diarrhoea regularly. He and his wife were also getting malaria at least once every one to two months. Since starting to grow and eat their own organic vegetables, he reports that neither of them has needed malaria treatment in eight months. The recurring typhoid fever has also stopped.

This is one person's experience and should not be treated as a controlled study. But it is consistent with the health outcomes that Thrive for Good has documented across its broader programme work. Mr. Tsado himself summed up the experience simply and powerfully: "Thrive for food, Thrive for health and Thrive for wealth."

Community Outreach

Beyond the group and individual household level, the Mosrence Group's experience has begun to spread. Members have been actively reaching out to other groups and communities in the New Bussa area to share what they learned and encourage them to consider the Life Garden approach. This kind of informal, community-to-community spread is a key part of how Thrive's model is designed to grow. When people see results in their neighbours' gardens, they become curious and motivated to try it themselves. It is organic growth in the most literal sense.

Opportunities for Expansion in Nigeria

The Mosrence Group's experience is a beginning, not an end. It shows that the model works in Nigeria. And Nigeria's experience sits within a broader regional story: Thrive for Good's 2025 West Africa expansion has already reached communities in Ghana, Sierra Leone, Benin, and Togo. Nigeria, as the most populous country in the region and in Africa, is positioned to become the anchor of that expansion. But to reach the millions of Nigerians suffering from hidden hunger, the model needs to be scaled up deliberately. This section outlines what that could look like and what would need to be in place.

Working through Existing Organisations

Nigeria already has the organisational infrastructure to support a significant expansion of Life Gardens. Some promising entry points are faith-based organisations, which are found in virtually every community and are deeply trusted. Women's cooperatives and savings groups are also important because women are often the ones making food decisions at the household level, and Life Garden adoption by women tends to produce faster improvements in children's nutrition. Schools, orphanages, and youth organisations offer access to young people who are most vulnerable to the long-term effects of growing up without proper nutrition. Agricultural cooperatives and smallholder farmer networks bring existing farming knowledge and motivation. And prisons and correctional facilities have been successfully reached by Thrive in other contexts and represent a high-need, institutionally organised setting.

Building a Local Trainer Network

Expanding the model sustainably requires investing in Nigerian trainers who can certify and support new Growing Health Champions without depending on international travel. Three West Africa-based trainers have already been identified through the 2025 West Africa expansion process (Thrive for Good, 2025b). These individuals are the foundation of what could become a regional training network, with Nigeria as its hub.

The pathway is straightforward. GHCs complete their Thrive Institute certification and begin working with community groups under the supervision of a Master Trainer. The best-performing GHCs are then mentored to become certified trainers themselves, able to certify new GHCs. Over time, a Nigeria-based regional coordinator can be developed from this group to oversee partnerships and monitor garden progress across the country. Based on Thrive's own benchmarks, a network of ten certified GHCs could reach around 2,400 people with direct nutritional benefit in the first year, with that number growing in each subsequent cycle.

Solving the Water Problem

The Mosrence Group's dry season experience makes it clear that water access cannot be treated as an afterthought. In Nigeria's Sudan and Guinea savanna zones, dry season farming is only sustainable with reliable irrigation. Solar-powered boreholes and drip or sprinkler irrigation systems are the most practical

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solutions. Future programme design in these regions should include water infrastructure planning from the start. This may require partnerships with organisations that specialise in rural water access, or targeted funding for irrigation as part of a broader Life Garden package.

Connecting with Policy and Research

The Life Garden model is consistent with several of Nigeria's national agricultural and nutrition policy frameworks, including the National Agricultural Technology and Innovation Policy (NATIP) and Nigeria's commitments under the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP). There is an opportunity for research institutions like NIFFR, which employs the Mosrence Group's team leader, to play a role in monitoring and evaluating Life Garden outcomes over time. This would generate Nigerian-specific evidence to support policy adoption and integration of the Life Garden approach into public health nutrition strategies.

The Association of Organic Agriculture Practitioners of Nigeria (NOAN) is well placed to champion this work. NOAN can build awareness, connect practitioners, and advocate for the kind of policy environment that would allow organic nutrition gardening to flourish across the country.

Conclusion

Nigeria's nutrition crisis is real, it is serious, and it is getting worse. The same pressures, hidden hunger, heavy reliance on staple crops, and rising food costs, are felt across West Africa. But there are solutions. The Life Garden model that Thrive for Good has developed and tested over seventeen years in over 23 countries is one of the most practical and cost-effective responses available. It works because it is simple, grounded in local knowledge, and designed for sustainability.

The model costs less than US\$15 per person for a lifetime of nutritional security. It uses materials that are locally available. It does not depend on ongoing donations or expensive inputs. It builds skills that stay in the community. And it spreads naturally as trained members go on to train others.

The Mosrence Group's experience in New Bussa adds a Nigerian voice and a Nigerian story to the global evidence base. In the heat of a dry season, with limited water and no irrigation system, a ten-member community group has maintained an 80-

bed Life Garden, grown 18 crop varieties, generated early income from produce sales, and started reaching out to neighbouring communities. One member's health outcomes, eight months free of malaria and typhoid treatment, give a human face to what the statistics show at scale.

For the model to reach its full potential in Nigeria, investment is needed in local trainer development, strategic partnerships with community organisations, and practical infrastructure such as irrigation in drier areas. NOAN has a key role to play in making this happen, by connecting practitioners, sharing knowledge, and advocating for the right conditions.

Hidden hunger affects 4 out of 10 people worldwide. In Nigeria and across West Africa, the numbers are even more alarming. But as Thrive for Good's work shows, the solution is already within reach. People just need the training, the tools, and the seeds to get started. After that, they can grow their own health, for good.

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