

Understanding, enabling and building effective leadership in nutrition

Transform Nutrition's work on leaders in nutrition explores how effective leaders understand the systems which both shape and constrain their action; and are able to translate this understanding into action which spans the boundaries of sectors and disciplinary knowledge. As what leaders do is more important than who leaders are, we suggest a number of ways in which leadership can be supported and built. A more structured effort is called for to build a cadre of leaders up to the challenge of working effectively to tackle undernutrition as a pressing global issue.

Leadership in nutrition

Why Study Leaders?

Case studies of successful action on health issues such as HIV and Aids have highlighted the importance of leadership in advocating for successful change and directing that change (Bor, 2007). Similarly a number of nutrition 'success stories' have emphasised the role of leaders and champions in particular country contexts and have advocated for further research on what enables and constrains such leadership in creating change. Leadership here encompasses the role of individuals but might extend beyond this to include loose coalitions, groups and organisations. It has been shown to be important at every stage of the political process – from helping set the political agenda to ensuring this is turned into actionable plans; which are followed through to the frontline, inspiring leadership at multiple levels along the way.

A stress on leadership in achieving effective action comes with its own dangers, however, without research to back it up leadership risks becoming a mythical ingredient, something which only the special possess; something sought and emulated but never created and nurtured. It risks also ignoring wider aspects of politics and political economy – ie the way which individual and group interests combine to shape whole systems and approaches to key issues, including nutrition and its underlying determinants in food, care and health.

Our research

Researchers within the Transform Nutrition consortium (Nisbett et al. 2015) carried out a study of 89 individuals or representatives of organisations who had been identified as national level leaders



within the field of nutrition in four countries: India, Bangladesh, Kenya and Ethiopia. Leaders here came from diverse backgrounds but were able to adapt strategically to the political landscape; spanning boundaries between sectors and disciplines and bring others along as their understanding of nutrition's multi-sectoral nature developed. The findings place less stress on character traits and formal positions and more on the actual practice of leadership – where this is adaptive and responsive; where it helps translate between the technical and the political – then others will follow. Such findings therefore borrow from the field of adult

Participants from the 2015 Transforming Nutrition short course at the Institute of Development Studies.

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development, which points to ways in which leadership skills might be acquired and taught rather than existing as the innate trait of a lucky few.

Implications

This has important implications for policy. Nutrition is a complex multi-faceted problem but requires urgent action. That under-nutrition is thought responsible for an estimated 45% of all child deaths is well established but not well known. So national level champions are required

to advocate for nutrition's role on the political agenda. To translate this into effective action, competent leaders and policy entrepreneurs are required in multiple fields – from the bureaucracy to the research institute, from the national level to the frontline. But for real sustainability, leadership needs to come from below, with forms of leadership and advocacy occurring at the community level which spur further action and increase government responsiveness to ground level realities.

Recommendations

Instead of calling for more leadership on nutrition, or bemoaning its lack, more investment is needed to find and nurture merging leaders; build leadership skills in others; and convert leaders in other fields to champions on nutrition. Important initiatives such as the [African Nutrition Leadership Programme](#) need to be supported and replicated elsewhere. The Transform Nutrition consortium is experimenting with further ways to support nutrition leadership, [from highlighting the work of nutrition champions; to building a network of leaders trained in the latest thinking](#), to sharing this wider research on the [barriers and enablers to nutrition leadership at a national level](#). A number of further ways to invest in leadership include:

- supporting leader to leader networks and mentoring;
- story telling around nutrition success stories/ lessons;
- building forms of community leadership, accountability and activism; championing those who give communities and sufferers a voice;
- targeting efforts to expose and convert other influential leaders (from government, academia, media, business and civil society) to champion the cause of nutrition;
- enhancing curricula to include both nutrition knowledge and adult development/leadership capacities;
- building better competency, rewards and incentives frameworks for particular parts of the nutrition workforce

Further reading

- Acosta, A. M., & Haddad, L. (2014). The politics of success in the fight against malnutrition in Peru. *Food Policy*, 44, 26-35.
- Bor, J. (2007). The political economy of AIDS leadership in developing countries: an exploratory analysis. *Soc Sci Med*, 64(8), 1585-1599.

Developmental Leadership Programme
<http://www.dlprog.org/>

Nisbett, N., Wach, E., Haddad, L., El-Arifteen, S., 'What drives and constrains effective leadership in tackling child undernutrition? Findings from Bangladesh, Ethiopia, India and Kenya' *Food Policy* Volume 53, May 2015, Pages 33-45

Pelletier, D. L., Menon, P., Ngo, T., Frongillo, E. A., & Frongillo, D. (2011). The nutrition policy process: the role of strategic capacity in advancing national nutrition agendas. *Food & Nutrition Bulletin*, 32(2 Suppl), S59-S69.

Credits

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Transform Nutrition is funded by UK aid from the UK government and is a consortium of five international research and development partners. Using research-based evidence we aim to inspire effective action to address undernutrition. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK Government's official policies

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