

IDS IN FOCUS

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Accelerating Reductions in Undernutrition What can nutrition governance tell us?

In order to accelerate progress on undernutrition reduction we need to understand how the governance of nutrition programmes leads to successful outcomes. Based on evidence from six countries: Bangladesh, Brazil, Ethiopia, India, Peru and Zambia, this briefing informs government leaders, policymakers and key stakeholders of the Scaling Up Nutrition movement (1) how they can better mobilise political commitment for undernutrition reduction and (2) how they can facilitate cooperation across national and local institutions, and among nutritionists, civil society and the private sector.

Globally, 180 million infants and young children bear the scars of undernutrition, including failure to grow, frequent illness, brain damage, cognitive impairment, lower productivity and a greater likelihood of diet-related chronic disease later in life.

The available evidence gives us a glimpse of what works. Increasing economic growth alone is rarely sufficient to address undernutrition. The challenge is to ensure that nutrition interventions are delivered through effective governance systems that privilege cost-effective, transparent and targeted policies in the long run.

In the context of a renewed global commitment to end undernutrition, epitomised by the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) movement, it is of paramount importance to understand how governance works to improve nutrition outcomes. This briefing aims to inform governments how to mobilise political commitment to facilitate cooperation across multiple sectors, how to improve linkages between the national and local arenas, and how to ensure that the work of nutritionists, development actors, civil society, the private sector and donors can support government officials in sustaining nutrition efforts over the long run.

Progress on undernutrition in study countries

In all six study countries, rates of child undernutrition have declined. However, the countries differ widely in their rates of undernutrition and in the progress they have made in recent years.

Brazil is the clearest success story: it has low levels of undernutrition that have declined rapidly.

Peru has the second lowest level of stunting. It showed little progress between 2000 and 2005 but progress has accelerated more recently.

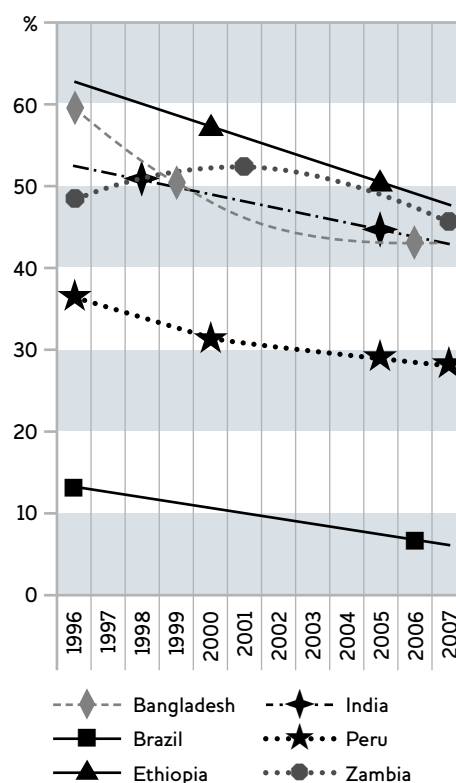
Bangladesh and **India** have very high rates of stunting with slow but steady rates of progress. Progress in Bangladesh has been marginally faster than in India.

Ethiopia has high levels of stunting, but with more rapid progress than India or Bangladesh.

Zambia saw a sharp increase in stunting in the late nineties, followed by a steady decline.

Figure 1 Levels of stunting

measured as the percentage of children under 5 years old who have low height for their age



SOURCE: WHO GLOBAL DATABASE ON CHILD GROWTH AND MALNUTRITION

Evidence shows how governance is key to progress on undernutrition reduction

This policy briefing is based on a study that used a political economy approach to compare the formulation and implementation of government nutrition strategies in six countries. All of these countries have medium or strong nutrition governance indicators as reported in WHO's Landscape Analysis 2009.

However, the WHO Landscape Analysis indicators are insufficient for revealing the role governance plays in undernutrition reduction. The indicators are based on checklist data, such as whether or not there exists a national nutrition plan, cross-ministry mechanisms or budget lines for nutrition.

In order to identify the real drivers of nutrition governance, we developed a framework which focuses on four key factors:

Intersectoral cooperation

Government sectors and non-government agencies must cooperate to achieve undernutrition reductions. The research examined why these actors cooperated in the six countries.

Vertical coordination

Different levels of government must cooperate to tackle undernutrition. The research determined whether national and local governments had the legal frameworks, technical capacities and incentives to transfer resources, to share information and to remain accountable to one another.

Sustainable Funding

Clearly, nutrition programmes need sustained funding to be successful. But allocating funding is a highly political matter. Effective funding mechanisms need to encourage policy coordination and implementation. They can be strengthened when national governments mobilise and manage their own funding sources. Donors and other sources of funding can also support sustained commitment.

Monitoring and advocacy

To maintain political commitment to nutrition, civil society and other groups need to monitor programmes and advocate for improvements. For monitoring to succeed, countries need to provide accurate nutrition indicators and budget estimates, and must report on progress in a timely fashion.

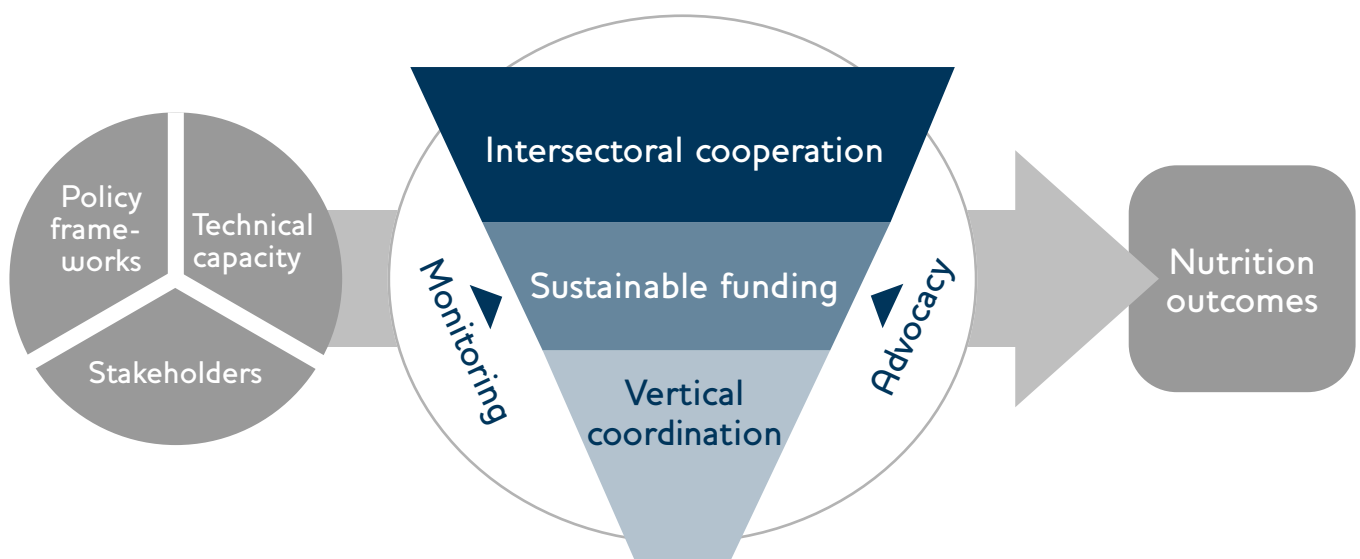
Key aspects of effective nutrition governance

Capability: Undernutrition is caused by diverse factors including poor diets, unclean water, insufficient sanitation, illness and poor parental care. It requires coordinated actions across sectors and government ministries to provide such services.

Accountability: Undernutrition is often invisible until it becomes highly acute. Organised citizens need to generate public awareness and demand that officials take action.

Responsiveness: The window of opportunity for preventing irreversible damage from undernutrition is 1,000 days, from when a child is conceived until age 2. A rapid government response is needed to address the needs of the most vulnerable.

Figure 2 The nutrition governance framework shows how intersectoral cooperation, vertical coordination, sustainable funding and monitoring and advocacy lead to nutrition outcomes



Key findings and policy recommendations for Scaling Up Nutrition

1. The executive branch of government should be directly involved in undernutrition reduction policies at presidential or prime ministerial level.

Executive involvement helps raise public awareness of undernutrition, coordinate the efforts of different line ministries and agencies, and protect funding allocations. Executive leadership, agenda setting and strategic messaging all played key roles in Brazil, Peru and in Ethiopia. In Brazil, reductions in undernutrition rates were linked to the president's personal commitment to fight against hunger and reduce poverty.

2. Establish effective bodies to coordinate nutrition actions

across government ministries. These bodies can facilitate effective funding allocations, monitor progress and bring other stakeholders into decision-making. Coordination bodies need to have strong political support and appropriate funding sources. In Zambia, the recent government change has opened a unique opportunity to secure additional commitment around nutrition. The government intends to strengthen the functions and funding of the National Food and Nutrition Commission.

3. Frame nutrition as an integral part of the national development agenda.

Giving nutrition high national profile generates greater public awareness of and concern about nutrition issues. This is most effective when nutrition is framed as part of a broader development agenda. In Peru, civil society movements and other stakeholders lobbied the government to include nutrition goals as part of Peru's poverty reduction strategy.

4. Develop a single narrative about the severity of undernutrition.

Such a narrative can contribute to clear policy goals. Using specific nutrition targets as part of national political campaigns helps secure commitment from incumbent politicians. In India, the *Right to Food* Campaign has developed a powerful narrative to put the issue of *food security* on the policy agenda and highlight it through the media. The Campaign is a network of several non-state

organisations that focuses its lobbying efforts on the expansion and universalisation of the Targeted Public Distribution System. It works closely with the National Advisory Council and the Commissioners of the Supreme Court to maximise policy influencing. The Campaign offers a useful platform to include *nutrition* in national priorities.

5. Ensure that local governments have the capacity to deliver nutrition services.

Service delivery is more effective when channelled through decentralised structures, and accompanied by active political parties and technical support from government ministries and donors. Having reliable nutrition data and performance indicators also leads to better delivery. Training programmes and salary incentives can also contribute. In Ethiopia, the vertical structure of the EPRDF government party provides a good opportunity to ensure effective and transparent implementation of nutrition policies through Development Army workers all the way to local districts.

6. Encourage local ownership of nutrition programmes and their outcomes.

Incumbent politicians are more likely to commit funding and efforts to improve nutrition when they are directly accountable to citizens' demands. This is especially true if the successful implementation of nutrition programmes can also advance their prospects for election. In Brazil, mayors from government and opposition parties were keen to support and sponsor national poverty reduction schemes as long as they were beneficial to their constituencies.

7. Support civil society groups to develop social accountability mechanisms.

When civil society groups have the capacity to produce, analyse and disseminate credible data, they can make undernutrition problems visible and improve the scope and quality of service delivery. Civil society groups have actively campaigned on behalf of nutrition issues in Brazil and India. These groups were more effective in Brazil

because they directly engaged with (and became part of) political parties, government ministers and local governments to turn nutrition campaigns into government policies.

8. Collect nutrition outcome data at regular intervals,

especially in highly dynamic and fragile contexts. Frequent data observations to monitor progress are preferable to the development of detailed nutrition indicators. The absence of accurate and timely nutrition data has been a major limitation in formulating nutrition strategies in all countries, especially Bangladesh and India. Regularly updated and well-collected data is crucial for identifying coverage gaps and for preventing and responding to emerging crises, such as in areas of Bangladesh and Brazil where flooding and climate change has increased the vulnerability of the most undernourished populations. Collecting data in a frequent and reliable manner is key to expanding political commitment, tracking progress and allocating needed funding for nutrition initiatives.

9. Use centralised funding mechanisms to generate greater incentives to cooperate in the design, implementation and monitoring of nutrition interventions.

By contrast, if line ministries mobilise funding from a wide array of sources, they are accountable to external rather than domestic funding sources. In Bangladesh, nutrition funding could be significantly improved if donors channelled transfers through central coordination bodies and ensured rapid and transparent allocation of funds.

10. Governments should create financial mechanisms to protect (earmark) nutrition funding and use it in a transparent way.

The presence of alternative sources of funding from extractive industries or private sector investments can allow nutrition funding to be better targeted and allocated. In Zambia, the adoption of a 1 per cent Medical Levy suggests that there is potential for channelling tax revenue from mining companies to fund nutrition strategies in the long run.

Accelerating Reductions in Undernutrition

Generating hope: How does governance help achieve sustainable reductions in undernutrition?

It is possible to make rapid gains in reducing undernutrition. The technical and scientific evidence is relatively clear; we know what works. The challenge is making sure these interventions are delivered through governance systems that make them cost-effective and sustainable. This means countries must prioritise and sustain funding for nutrition programmes.

The six study countries have followed different paths to political will and nutrition governance. Some have been more successful than others. The evidence suggests that increasing economic growth alone, while important, is not sufficient to address undernutrition. Nutrition security requires a broad range of efforts, including enhancing nutrition interventions, increasing access and utilisation and strengthening political commitment. Countries need to address the most vulnerable populations using an equitable, human rights-based approach.

Different people have, at various times, called nutrition status the bedrock, the hardware, the software and the infrastructure of human development. All of these analogies imply that the delivery of improved nutrition status is gradual and complex, but also permanent and foundational. While there is no single blueprint to achieve this foundation, the six countries highlighted in this report help us to identify the ingredients, blends and cooks that are vital to success.

Nutrition is central to progress on the MDGs, and will likely remain central with the new Sustainable Development Goals to be announced at Rio+20. The lessons shared here can help leverage nutrition status for a wider set of development goals towards and beyond 2015.

Further reading

WHO (2009) 'Landscape Analysis on Countries' Readiness to Accelerate Action in Nutrition', *SCN News* 37

Mejía Acosta, A. (2011) *Analysing Success in the Fight against Malnutrition in Peru*, IDS Working Paper 367, Brighton: IDS

Mejía Acosta, A.; Franzo, J. and Haddad, L. (2012) *Fighting Maternal and Child Malnutrition: Analysing the Political and Institutional Determinants of Delivering a National Multi-Sectoral Response in Six Countries*, Brighton: IDS.

Key recommendations for ensuring successful governance and undernutrition reduction

1. Governments need strong executive leadership to promote effective intersectoral cooperation

High-level government officials play a decisive role by coordinating actions across ministries and government offices, channelling donor and civil society efforts, and developing compelling narratives around nutrition as a poverty reduction priority.

2. Ensure the right structures are in place to support coordination among different levels of government

National and local governments need the legal frameworks, technical capacities and incentives to transfer resources, share information and to remain accountable to one another.

3. Provide predictable funding sources to sustain nutrition interventions

The allocation of nutrition funding needs to be agreed with the main stakeholders. Stakeholders must ensure that nutrition funding is protected in national budgets and effectively and transparently managed. Alternative sources of funding should also be mobilised.

4. Invest in monitoring and advocacy

Monitoring and advocacy are critical to maintaining political commitment. Civil society actors need to be supported so they can undertake monitoring and advocacy. Countries need to disseminate accurate nutrition indicators, monitor progress in a timely fashion and make realistic budget estimates.

Credits

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