

6. Institutional and policy environment for nutrition

Good nutrition contributes to a healthy and productive life, but malnutrition remains a significant problem in many regions and imposes a high cost on individuals and societies. Sustainable solutions to malnutrition of all types (undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies and overweight and obesity) must involve different sectors, but food systems and the policies and institutions that shape them are fundamental for better nutrition.

By assessing and shaping each element of the food system, policy-makers, producers, consumers and other stakeholders can create a more “nutritious” food system, in which food selections are available, accessible, diverse and nutritious. And this goal must include production and consumption patterns that are more sustainable. This aspiration is reflected in the basic principles advocated by international development institutions and inter-agency UN bodies to enhance the impacts of agricultural programmes, policies and investments on nutrition (Box 11).

The food system is an essential element of any strategy to improve nutrition, but it is part of an interconnected set of sectors and systems, including health and sanitation. This report focuses on what food systems can bring to the nutrition table. It identifies and reviews the evidence for actions that can be taken at different stages of the food system – from production to consumption – to improve nutrition. This food-based approach is often contrasted with more medical approaches that rely on supplements. Supplements are warranted in some cases, but consuming a diet adequate in energy and micronutrients is usually sufficient and provides the benefits from the whole diverse complex of energy, nutrients and fibre present in the diet.

The complex causes of nutrition and the wide range of participants influencing food systems mean that a multistakeholder

and multisectoral approach will be most effective.²⁴ Implicitly, this means understanding the relationships among the actors, how they tie together and how they influence one another. Considering the entire food system in addressing nutrition provides a framework in which to determine, design and implement food-based interventions to improve nutrition. Food systems are changing rapidly, but how they evolve can be influenced by policy decisions.

Building a common vision

Considerable effort and large sums of money have been devoted to addressing malnutrition worldwide. Progress has been made: in some countries malnutrition has been markedly reduced over recent decades. But progress has been uneven and there is a pressing need to harness the opportunities within the food system to enhance nutrition. Experience in several countries that have implemented nutrition programmes shows that it is imperative to build a common vision of nutrition. At the international level, the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) movement, the Right to Food principles and other initiatives, such as the UN REACH (Renewed Efforts Against Child Hunger and undernutrition) partnership, work towards providing necessary frameworks and support (Box 12). At the same time external input can be a catalyst for national action.

A common vision can be established by setting the nutrition strategy in terms of national poverty reduction and sustainable consumption. For example, in Peru, civil society and other stakeholders, coming together in the Child Nutrition Initiative, worked towards including nutrition goals in

²⁴ See World Bank (2013) for guidance on mainstreaming nutrition interventions into multisectoral action, with a focus on agriculture, social protection and health.

BOX 11

Guiding principles for improving nutrition through agriculture

A FAO systematic review of recently published guidance on agriculture programming for nutrition (Herforth, 2013) identified an emerging consensus around the following recommendations:

Planning for nutrition

1. **Incorporate explicit nutrition objectives** in agricultural policy and programme design.
2. **Assess the context** and causes of malnutrition at the local level, to maximize effectiveness and reduce negative side effects.
3. **Do no harm.** Identify potential harms, develop a mitigation plan, and set in place a well-functioning monitoring system.
4. **Measure nutritional impact through programme monitoring and evaluation.**
5. Maximize opportunities through **multisectoral coordination.**
6. **Maximize impact of household income** on nutrition, such as through increasing women's income.
7. **Increase equitable access to productive resources.**
8. **Target the most vulnerable.**

Taking action

All approaches should:

9. **Empower women**, the primary caretakers in households, through: income; access to extension services and information; avoiding harm to their ability to care for children; labour and time-saving technologies; and support for rights to land, education and employment.
10. **Incorporate nutrition education** to improve consumption and nutrition effects of interventions. Employ agricultural extension agents to communicate on nutrition as feasible.
11. **Manage natural resources** for improved productivity, resilience to shocks, adaptation to climate change,

and increased equitable access to resources through soil, water and biodiversity conservation.

These can be combined with approaches to:

12. **Diversify production and livelihoods** for improved food access and dietary diversification, natural resource management, risk reduction and improved income.
13. **Increase production of nutritious foods**, particularly locally adapted varieties rich in micronutrients and protein, chosen based on local nutrition issues and available solutions.
14. **Reduce post-harvest losses and improve processing.**
15. **Increase market access and opportunities**, especially for smallholders.
16. **Reduce seasonality of food insecurity** through improved storage and preservation and other approaches.

Creating a supportive environment

17. **Improve policy coherence** supportive to nutrition, including food price policies, subsidies, trade policies and pro-poor policies.
18. **Improve good governance for nutrition**, by drawing up a national nutrition strategy and action plan, allocating adequate budgetary resources and implementing nutrition surveillance.
19. **Build capacity** in ministries at national, district and local levels.
20. **Communicate and continue to advocate for nutrition.**

BOX 12

Nutrition governance at the international level

The causes of malnutrition are manifold and a number of different sectors, ranging from agriculture, health, education, social affairs, economic development and trade, among others, are involved. Nevertheless, while nutrition is everybody's business, it lacks an institutional home. A functioning international nutrition governance structure is essential to provide leadership and coordination and help surmount the challenges posed by the multisectoral nature of the fight to eliminate malnutrition.

Globally, attention to nutrition has never been higher and the renewed interest in nutrition is matched by an increased willingness to work together. In some cases, this has given rise to new multisectoral collaboration platforms (e.g. SUN and REACH). Similarly, it has reinforced the importance of existing joint efforts (e.g. the UN Standing Committee on Nutrition [UNSCN], Emergency Nutrition Cluster). These mechanisms can help foster collaboration among UN and other international agencies that have mandates linked directly or indirectly to food security and nutritional outcomes. They also facilitate multisectoral and multistakeholder dialogue and collaboration. However, an understanding of their distinctions and complementarities is important in order to engage with and leverage them effectively.

The **UN Standing Committee on Nutrition** (UNSCN) aligns and coordinates technical and policy guidance and programming among the UN agencies working on nutrition. It provides global strategic leadership, advocacy, guidance and knowledge exchange on nutrition across the UN system and for non-UN planners.

Scaling-Up Nutrition (SUN) is a country-owned movement, established in 2010, that has helped elevate nutrition on the policy agenda at international and national levels. It includes governments, UN agencies, research organizations, civil society

organizations, NGOs, the private sector and international development agencies and partners. The SUN Framework primarily focuses on scaling up interventions that target conception through the first two years of life (Bezanson and Ikenman, 2010). A SUN roadmap has been devised, providing practical guidelines for joint action to be adopted on a country-by-country basis. Over 100 organizations and 28 countries have joined SUN.

The **REACH** (Renewed Efforts Against Child Hunger and undernutrition) partnership was established by FAO, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the World Food Programme (WFP) and WHO to facilitate, support and coordinate action on nutrition among stakeholders at country level. It promotes a holistic approach to tackling undernutrition in the context of the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 1, with a view to helping governments plan, prioritize and manage inter-sectoral nutrition activities among multiple stakeholders.

The relationships among UNSCN, REACH and SUN are mutually supportive. UNSCN works toward strategic coherence in policy and programming for the UN. REACH harnesses the work of these agencies to support country governments in combating malnutrition, particularly in fulfilling their commitments in the fight against malnutrition to SUN and other bodies. As a stakeholder within SUN, the UNSCN can serve as the voice of the UN in dealing with nutrition matters.

The Global Cluster Coordination Group brings together agencies and organizations from inside and outside the UN. The goal is to improve effectiveness of humanitarian response and strengthened partnership among UN and non-UN actors. UNICEF leads the global **Nutrition Cluster**, WHO the global **Health Cluster** and FAO/WFP jointly lead the **Global Food Security Cluster**, whereas the leads of the respective country-level clusters

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BOX 12 (CONT.)

are determined according to capacity on the ground. Nevertheless, each cluster provides concrete tools and support for coordination, emergency preparedness, assessment, monitoring and capacity development.

In the spirit of UN Reform, a few joint programming schemes have been created to foster increased harmonization and efficiency within the UN system. Among these, experiences from the UN Joint Programmes and the joint programmes for the thematic window on Children, Nutrition and Food Security of the MDG Fund have shown that nutrition is an effective entry point to joint planning. The UN Development Assistance Framework guides integration of efforts by UN agencies.

The **Alliance Against Hunger and Malnutrition (AAHM)** is a global initiative that links UN agencies, governments, civil society organizations and NGOs in a coalition for advocacy and action.

It provides a space where governments and civil society organizations can find their similarities and build working relationships. The potential contribution of these country-led partnerships has been recognized by global mechanisms such as the High Level Task Force on the Global Food Security Crisis and the Committee on World Food Security.

Numerous international initiatives are focused on addressing overweight and obesity as well as relevant non-communicable diseases. These include the WHO Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health adopted by the World Health Assembly in 2004, as well as the WHO 2008–2013 Action Plan for implementing the strategy. Another key effort is the Political Declaration of the High-level Meeting of the General Assembly on the Prevention and Control of Non-communicable Diseases, which was passed by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 2011.

the poverty reduction strategy (IDS, 2012). In Brazil, the Campaign Against Hunger and the subsequent *Fome Zero* programme were set within a poverty and hunger reduction strategy, thus making the programme not only a health sector issue. In Senegal, nutrition was included as a development priority in the national poverty reduction strategy.

Experience in countries with successful nutrition strategies, such as Brazil, Peru and Senegal, shows that strong and committed political leadership is essential for success (Acosta and Fanzo, 2012; Garrett and Natalicchio, 2011). Strong political leadership, as seen in Brazil, is essential for building coalitions and strong policy commitment. This is so also because nutrition does not usually have an institutional home, such as a ministry of nutrition.

It is inevitable that policy-makers and other actors will have different, sometimes conflicting, views about nutrition problems. In part, this is because malnutrition is often invisible; the malnourished are often without voice; and because interventions need to be cross-sectoral. A key step towards creating a common vision is to bring the

various sectors and stakeholders together. For example, in Uganda this process started with stakeholder fora organized by the health sector (Namugumya, 2012). A nutrition advocacy technical working group was also formed for Uganda, comprising health and agriculture but also education, gender, population and agencies responsible for statistics, civil society, the media and academia.

Raising the profile of malnutrition outcomes and policy must follow from the common vision. Effective advocacy is needed for this. In India, the Right to Food Campaign has been highly effective, also because it has been able to develop a strong narrative on the severity of undernutrition, making nutrition visible and placing it on the policy agenda. The Campaign works closely with the National Advisory Council and the Commissioners of the Supreme Court to maintain pressure for policy action and results. Accountability is needed to ensure that nutrition remains visible and that plans turn into actions and results. Advocacy and accountability will be effective only when civil society is fully involved and engaged

in the political process at all levels. Benson (2008) and Namugumya (2012) emphasize the importance of actively cultivating policy champions within government institutions, who become the visible leaders who will advocate making health and nutrition a priority of government and government institutions.

Better data for better policy-making

Effective policy-making, accountability and advocacy depend on a correct assessment of the nutrition situation. This report showed that in many countries there is a lack of basic data and indicators with which to evaluate and monitor the nutrition landscape. This is also a reflection of the limited research carried out on the linkages between the food system and nutrition, research that is needed to design efficient data collection and help develop cost-effective indicators.

The absence of adequate data proved a challenge in Colombia when preparing the Food and Nutrition Improvement Plan of Antioquia (Garrett and Natalicchio, 2011). In Ethiopia, a 2005 survey showed that malnutrition was highest in the regions with highest agricultural productivity. This counter-intuitive situation might not have been recognized without such survey data. Accurate and timely nutrition data also contribute to the effectiveness of advocacy initiatives (IDS, 2012). Collecting outcome data at regular intervals is important for building consensus, coordination and allocation of funds. As such, the demand for information must also be managed across sectors. Effective monitoring is an important part of nutrition governance.

Effective coordination is essential

Because malnutrition has multiple causes – poor diets, unclean water, poor sanitation, illness and poor child care – multisectoral interventions are therefore required and these need to be coordinated. The experience of UN Joint Programmes, in particular the programme area “Children, Food Security and Nutrition” of the MDG Achievement Fund, shows the importance of coordination among all involved stakeholders, particularly

local governments and civil society (MDG Achievement Fund, 2013).

Effective horizontal coordination is one of the key features of the success of *Fome Zero* and other, albeit less ambitious, programmes. In Brazil, formulation, adoption and implementation of nutrition policies is coordinated by the National System of Food Security and Nutrition (SISAN). This system consists of 17 ministries and is led by the President. Also in Brazil, the Congress has contributed to intersectoral collaboration through legitimizing policy initiatives and facilitating communication among different stakeholders such as ministries, state and municipal governments and civil society (Acosta, 2011a). Civil society has also played an important part through the National Council on Food Security (Conselho Nacional de Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional – CONSEA) which consists of two-thirds civil society members and one-third government representatives. CONSEA provides support, monitoring and policy advice in the formulation of food and nutrition policies and programmes.

In Peru, success in reducing malnutrition was in part due to economic growth, but more due to improved national coordination structures and mechanisms, more public and private spending on nutrition programmes and the alignment of social programmes with the national nutrition strategy (Acosta, 2011b). An important role in fostering dialogue and coordination was played by the Roundtable for Poverty Reduction (Mesa de Concertación para la Lucha Contra la Pobreza – MCLCP). Since the 1980s, there have been many attempts to establish similar bodies in Latin America and the Caribbean but many had a limited impact because of mixed coordination and dialogue functions, the lack of adequate funding and resources and a lack of political will. The examples of CONSEA and MCLCP demonstrate which factors facilitate the successful implementation of mechanisms and bodies that improve the governance of food and nutrition security. There are differences, but the main lessons are common to both:

- The process must be country-driven.
- Separate bodies are needed for internal government coordination and for dialogue on policies, participation and coordination of stakeholders' efforts.

- Institutional arrangements must have adequate resources.
- Decentralized bodies must be established to enable these mechanisms to work at national and subnational levels.

The importance of intersectoral coordination is also highlighted by the experience of Bangladesh, where nutrition policy has evolved over a lengthy period. For a number of reasons, multisectoral coordination has been weak and although donors play an important role, they seem to focus on accountability at the programme level rather than on coordination across sectors (Taylor, 2012a). Donor support has clearly been crucial but has not provided the framework or incentives for cross-sectoral cooperation and programming.

In India, malnutrition has become an issue of importance to policy-makers through a combination of judicial activism, the Commissioners of the Supreme Court, a Right to Food Campaign and media attention. In 2001, a series of court orders gave legal entitlements to government interventions on malnutrition. The Right to Food Campaign, which grew out of the court case, was a key factor in putting malnutrition on the policy agenda. Despite these developments, there appears to be relatively little intersectoral coordination between state and non-state agencies and even across ministries. A recent analysis found that there are no coordinating bodies, integrated work plans or joint budget lines to deal with malnutrition (Mohmand, 2012).

In many countries, significant challenges have hampered coordination efforts thus far. Lack of funding and qualified nutritionists and the inability to convene high-level actors have been identified as key constraints (Taylor, 2012b). Coordination can be enhanced through multisectoral policy reviews and impact assessments. For example, an impact assessment for agricultural projects could include health and nutrition outcome indicators. At the same time, incentives that encourage cross-sectoral collaboration are needed. Garrett and Natalicchio (2011) note that institutional links that are built on joint incentives – both financial and success sharing – is essential for coordination to be effective.

In Africa, planning and coordination are facilitated by the New Partnership for

Africa's Development (NEPAD). Efforts are now being made to integrate nutrition into the National Agricultural and Food Security Investment Plans, established under the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP).

Effective vertical coordination is also needed. A highly centralized decision-making process, for financial planning and programme design, leads to lack of coordination with local communities and at the local level itself. Service delivery is more effective at the community level, that is, when decentralized. Multisectoral collaboration is also easier at the subnational level. Vertical coordination is therefore very important but is only effective when there is capacity to deliver. Building incentives for collaboration among central, state and local government is essential to achieve this goal.

The incentives from greater intersectoral cooperation and improved vertical cooperation come in part through the particular funding modalities. For example, *Bolsa Família*, in Brazil, tied payments to poorer families to school attendance and regular health checks, so creating an incentive for coordination between the Health and Education Ministries. Similarly, the school lunch programme was tied to food purchases from local producers. The Brazilian government also provided additional support to poorer municipalities to implement the *Bolsa Família* programme (Acosta, 2011a). In general, transparency in budget allocation is a critical factor for continued intersectoral collaboration.

Introduction of new seed types or food products requires legislation and regulation that deal with, for example, environmental and health issues. Here again, cross-sectoral collaboration plays an important role. For example, in Burkina Faso and Mali the Ministries of the Environment play a leading role in biosafety regulation, but the Ministry of Health also is an important actor, as is the Ministry of Agriculture. At the same time, farmer organizations, rural women's organizations, consumer organizations, NGOs and the food industry are directly involved and each will try to influence the process in its interest (Birner *et al.*, 2007). Legislation and regulation are also relevant to the challenge of supply chain governance,

which grows more complex with the food system transformation.

Agencies must have the capacity to coordinate, plan, implement, monitor and evaluate. In Zambia, increasing the number of qualified nutritionists in the main coordinating body may improve coordination (Taylor, 2012b). Staff training in nutrition is important also to help develop a common language amongst actors in different sectors. In Senegal, qualified NGOs and training allowed the Nutrition Enhancement Program to work well at the local level (Garrett and Natalicchio, 2011).

A great many actors and institutions must work together across sectors to more effectively reduce undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies and overweight and obesity. Good governance, that is, providing leadership, coordinating effectively and fostering collaboration among the many stakeholders, is a first priority.

Key messages of the report

The State of Food and Agriculture 2013: Food systems for better nutrition offers the following key messages:

- **Malnutrition in all its forms imposes unacceptably high costs on society in human and economic terms.** The costs associated with undernutrition and micronutrient deficiencies are higher than those associated with overweight and obesity, although the latter are rising rapidly even in low- and middle-income countries.
- **Addressing malnutrition requires a multisectoral approach that includes complementary interventions in food systems, public health and education.** This approach also facilitates the pursuit of multiple objectives, including better nutrition, gender equality and environmental sustainability.
- **Within a multisectoral approach, food systems offer many opportunities for interventions leading to improved diets and better nutrition.** Some of these interventions have the primary purpose of enhancing nutrition. Other interventions in food systems, and in the general economic, social or political environment, may affect nutrition even though this is not their primary objective.
- **Agricultural production and productivity growth remain essential for better nutrition, but more can be done.** Agricultural research must continue to enhance productivity, while paying greater attention to nutrient-dense foods such as fruits, vegetables, legumes and animal products and to more sustainable production systems. Production interventions are more effective when they are sensitive to gender roles and combined with nutrition education.
- **Both traditional and modern supply chains offer risks and opportunities for achieving better nutrition and more sustainable food systems.** Improvements in traditional supply chains can help reduce losses, lower prices and increase diversity of choice for lower-income households. The growth of modern retailing and food processing can facilitate the use of fortification to combat malnutrition, but the increased availability of highly processed, packaged goods may contribute to overweight and obesity.
- **Consumers ultimately determine what they eat and therefore what the food system produces.** But governments, international organizations, the private sector and civil society can all help consumers make healthier decisions, reduce waste and contribute to the sustainable use of resources, by providing clear, accurate information and ensuring access to diverse and nutritious foods.
- **Better governance of food systems at all levels, facilitated by high-level political support, is needed to build a common vision, to support evidence-based policies, and to promote effective coordination and collaboration through integrated, multisectoral action.**

