

Technical brief

EU support to nutrition: lessons learned from two parallel regional projects in Africa and Asia

This note aims to share key lessons learned from the experience of EU support to nutrition and serves the purpose to inform the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of similar actions in the future. The target audience is EC staff in Headquarters and Delegations.

The lessons learned are drawn from two sets of external evaluations of **two parallel regional projects covering a total of 9 countries** funded through the Food Security Thematic Programme (FSTP) with the aim to improve nutrition security¹ among women and young children in countries that bear a heavy burden of child undernutrition:

- **Maternal and Young Child Nutrition Security Initiative in Asia (MYCNSIA)** supporting five countries in Southeast and South Asia – Bangladesh, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Nepal and the Philippines (2011-2015).
- **Africa's Nutrition Security Partnership (ANSP)** supporting four African countries – Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Mali and Uganda (2012-2015).

Evaluations were based on site visits to each country, meetings with national and regional level stakeholders as well as documentation review of the analysed actions.

The evaluations, commissioned by DEVCO/C1 and carried out respectively at mid-term (2013) and at the end (2015), were initially designed to combine lessons learned and inform future continental and regional projects in nutrition.

¹ Nutrition security is the outcome of good health, a healthy environment, and good caring practices. Malnutrition encompasses both undernutrition and overweight/obesity and manifests in many forms.

Key lessons learned from EU-Unicef nutrition projects in Africa & Asia

- ✚ **Lesson learned 1:** Adopting a flexible approach in programme design is important to respond to emerging opportunities particularly with respect to policy and planning at the national level.
- ✚ **Lesson learned 2:** Promoting a multi-sectoral approach to nutrition is critical to bridge efforts to address all forms of malnutrition and adopt one coherent strategy.
- ✚ **Lesson learned 3:** Effective monitoring systems from baseline to endline are needed to enhance learning, identify principal drivers of success and find out « what works » as far as different interventions are concerned.



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1. Introduction

Understanding the issue

Malnutrition encompasses both undernutrition and overweight/obesity and manifests in many forms. All dimensions of malnutrition are disproportionately affecting women, poorer sections of society and increasingly urban as well as rural areas. Without proper nutrition, people cannot function and thrive. Stunting and wasting – two forms of chronic and acute undernutrition – are closely associated with lower-middle income countries and populations in those countries in the lower wealth quintiles and vulnerable.

The costs of malnutrition to individuals, families and to entire nations are huge, yet preventable. Undernutrition contributes to 1 in 2 child deaths. The effects of malnutrition are devastating and lasting. The economic costs of undernutrition alone are estimated to represent losses of national GDP of 10% every year in Asia and Africa².

Global progress to reduce malnutrition is not rapid enough to meet internationally agreed nutrition targets, including Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target 2.2 to end all forms of malnutrition by 2030. Progress is especially slow in fragile states and in areas affected by climate-related shocks. Additional, concerted effort is needed especially in Africa and Asia where progress is slowest and the burden highest. Effectively tackling nutrition requires a comprehensive approach addressing all key sectors (health, agriculture, water and sanitation, social protection and education).

The EU response

The new European Consensus on Development stresses the importance of addressing malnutrition to achieving the goals/objectives. Two bold global commitments in 2012 and in 2013, have underpinned the strategic and operational focus of the [Commission's work in nutrition](#): (1) 7 million children under-five averted from stunting by 2025³ and (2) €3.5 billion allocated to improve nutrition in developing countries between 2014-2020.

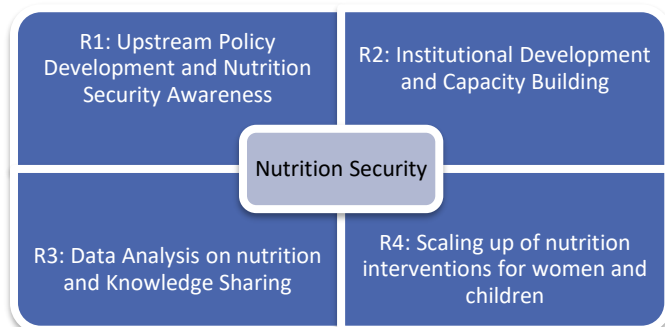
Three strategic priorities for nutrition are identified in the [Communication on Nutrition](#) and its [Action Plan](#):

1. Enhance mobilisation and political commitment for nutrition;
2. Scale up actions at country level; and
3. Knowledge for nutrition (strengthening the expertise and knowledge base).

EU-Unicef nutrition regional projects in Africa and Asia

The **Maternal and Young Child Nutrition Security Initiative in Asia (MYCNSIA, 2011-15)** and the **Africa's Nutrition Security**

Partnership (ANSP, 2012-15) were implemented by Unicef in partnership with the EU. The projects aimed to increase the commitment to nutrition security in terms of policies, budgets, effective programming and implementation in close collaboration with the national governments as well as continental and regional level organisations. The projects focused on both high-level policy engagements as well as on evidenced-based nutrition-specific interventions⁴ and integrating nutrition goals into broader health, development and agricultural efforts through work under four pillars (results areas).



Projects :	MYCNSIA	ANSP
<i>Countries</i>	Bangladesh, Indonesia, Lao, Nepal, Philippines	Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Mali, Uganda
<i>Targets</i>	Reduce stunting and anaemia among 30 million children 5 million pregnant and lactating women	Reduce stunting and anaemia among 25 million children 5.5 pregnant and lactating women
<i>EU grant</i>	€22.5 million (€26.5M multi-donor initiative)	€15 million (€21M multi-donor initiative)

2. Principal lessons learned and recommendations

Lesson learned 1: Adopting a flexible approach in programme design is important to respond to emerging opportunities particularly with respect to policy and planning at the national level

The ANSP and MYCNSIA experiences underscore the importance of adopting a flexible approach in project design to address nutrition. The reasons and principal lessons learned can be summarised as follows:

- The **nature of the nutrition conceptual framework** demands flexibility based on a context-specific analysis of problems and causes of malnutrition (figure below).

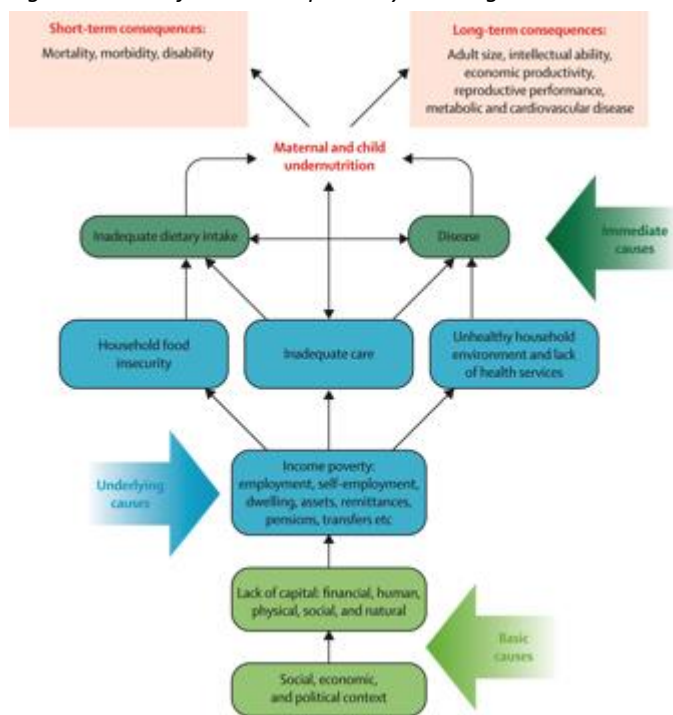
⁴ Including high-impact and proven nutrition interventions (e.g. maternal, infant and young child feeding, micronutrient supplementation, fortification of staple foods and management of acute malnutrition; and mainstreaming and promoting nutrition sensitive policies and programmes in relevant sectors (agriculture, food security, social protection, gender, health, water, sanitation and hygiene etc.).

² Global Nutrition Report 2016 (Horton and Steckel 2013; IFPRI 2015a; World Economics 2016)

³ Representing 10% of the World Health Assembly target

- The **evolving international development agenda on nutrition** during this period ([SUN Movement](#) formalised in 2011, IFPRI's global conference on [Leveraging Agriculture for Improving Nutrition and Health](#) in New Delhi 2011, [Nutrition for Growth](#) event in London 2013) demanded new and effective ways of working.
- **New and emerging government agendas** (thereby ensuring government ownership at different levels) required adaptability. For instance, the response to the double burden of malnutrition⁵ became a new emerging priority following the recognition of strong inter-relationship between the various forms of malnutrition.
- A flexible approach encouraged **the engagement of all relevant sectors and development partners** as well as bringing in new sources of financing.
- **New opportunities** such as **the incorporation of nutrition into national budgets** required versatility.

Figure: Model of the causal pathways leading to malnutrition



Source: Based on the UNICEF Conceptual Framework (1990)

Recommendation 1: How to adopt a flexible approach in programme design

- **Design and set up of interventions to be responsive** to changing circumstances.
- Capitalise on as much **government ownership of the project agenda** as feasibly possible. Building the capacity of national institutions so they can gradually take over policy implementation and support functions can facilitate this process.

- **Operate at levels where the impact can be greatest** (district, national, regional, continental) through enhanced participation of national and regional actors in multiple processes.
- **Maximise convergence of sectoral efforts** by having stakeholders agree on jointly prepared standards and tools as well as soliciting cooperation between all relevant actors (ministries, projects and local authorities).
- **Review a project's Theory of Change at mid-term** to enable course corrections and accelerate progress.
- **Enhance regional project support functions (learning)** for greater catalytic role to advocate and promote changes in policies and programming for long term, strategic nutrition interventions.

Lesson learned 2: Promoting a multi-sectoral approach to nutrition is critical to bridge efforts to address all forms of malnutrition and adopt one coherent strategy

A multi-sectoral approach to nutrition requires a judicious mix of nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive interventions at the implementation level of scale-up. Some principal lessons learned when facing this challenge include:

- **The need to overcome the « division » between nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive** i.e addressing the underlying causes as well as the immediate causes to ensure a more holistic and sustainable approach.
- **Specific interventions** to one sector or service have less relevance to households and communities experiencing food and nutrition insecurity.
- A multi-sectoral strategy to nutrition is **supportive of government-driven nutrition policies and strategies that are themselves multi-sectoral in approach**. The four inter-related and mutually reinforcing pillars of action of MYCNSIA and ANSP enabled just that i.e. to advocate, enhance and practically implement approaches to nutrition security in a multi-sectoral way.
- The importance of **partnering with other development partners and agencies** to achieve multi-sectoral outreach as no single project can embrace the complexity of nutrition.



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⁵ The double burden of malnutrition is the coexistence of undernutrition along with overweight and obesity, or nutrition-related non-communicable diseases (like diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease), within individuals, households and populations, and across the life-course.

Recommendation 2: How to promote a multi-sectoral approach to nutrition

- Integrate a **multi-sectoral approach to nutrition deliberately into the design** of the intervention.
- Support nutrition-specific approaches in such a way that **nutrition-sensitive linkages become explicit**. Through local level entry points it is possible both to reach poorer populations and to create linkages between nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive packages.
- Increase the awareness of equity and **ensure that programming for equity is explicit in the design** and the Monitoring and Evaluation framework of future programmes.
- **Collaborate with all stakeholders** (government, civil society and non-traditional partners) to adopt a rights-based approach and to **broaden the scope and effectiveness** of the intervention.
- **Develop nutrition-sensitive actions in education, WASH and other sectors along with health**. Seek convergence of the efforts of all relevant sectors especially at district level and below, as it is at this level where the lives of women and children evolve and where ultimately multi-sectoral nutrition policies should be implemented.
- **Generate learning** from the multi-sectoral approach and **share cross-country experiences**.



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- **Knowing more what we should monitor through future interventions** and what is realistic within the time frame of a project.

Need for learning of « what works »

"I remain amazed at how few country or state level case studies there are of change. Why did stunting go down in this country? Why is wasting static? Why is overweight declining? Why is anaemia static? [...] The nutrition journals currently dis-incentivise this kind of study, presumably because it is not methodologically pure enough. This is a real shame. Slicing and dicing research may help researchers get published, but who is going to weave all the strands back together again?"

[Lawrence Haddad of the International Food Policy Research Institute]

Recommendation 3: How to learn through effective use of programme monitoring systems

- **Generate sound evidence of what works in practice** through effective information and monitoring systems.
- **Raise awareness of government decision-makers of the economic returns** of investing in good nutrition.
- Draw on wealth of available data to **better understand trends, changes and causes of malnutrition** over space and time.
- Ensure **disaggregated data collection systems and analysis to improve coverage and equity** in nutrition related programmes.
- Ensure **integrated programming and monitoring by building on key strengths of multi-sectoral teams** (health, nutrition, WASH, social protection etc.) to encourage the development and support of nutrition sensitive activities.
- **Advocate for national investments needed in nutrition governance** mechanisms, typically involving information management and coordination, advocacy and communications, and systems capacity building.



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Lesson learned 3: Enhancing learning from effective monitoring systems from baseline to end line

- **Identifying principal drivers of success and finding out « what works »** as far as different interventions are concerned (box below). Learning around common drivers for success can contribute to capacity development at all levels and knowledge management and can help projects remain more flexible and relevant over time.
- **According attribution of particular interventions (or combinations of) to nutrition outcomes through different approaches**. Baseline/end line surveys can be leveraged to yield lessons for the reduction of anaemia and stunting which have wider applications.
- **Contributing to a broader body of evidence and knowledge** (at different levels) about nutrition interventions for broader dissemination.