Chapter 5.5

The Role of Good Governance in Delivering Good Nutrition

Eileen Kennedy
Tufts University, Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy, Boston MA, USA

Habtamu Fekadu
Save the Children, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
“The time is always right to do right.”


There has been a growing recognition of the key role of nutrition in human health and national development. The following quote highlights the importance of nutrition in the Post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals: “Nutrition is, not least, a fundamental right of all humanity. Without good nutrition, the mind and body cannot function well. When that happens, the foundations of economic, social and cultural life are undermined.”

With this realization, combined with the confirmation of efficacious and affordable interventions, governments around the world, and their development partners, are currently seeking effective and sustainable ways to implement solutions at scale. The process of designing and implementing nutrition policies and programs within a country has many dimensions, including the technical, logistical, political, economic and social. In addition, increased attention is now being focused on governance, capacity development, and the creation of enabling environments. Each of these terms will be defined in the following sections.

Key messages

• It is generally agreed that good governance is essential for effective policy and program development and implementation.

• There is no such thing as a formulaic approach to governance that can be applied universally; there are, however, a number of factors that contribute to effective governance, including leadership, advocacy, a legal framework, stakeholder involvement, and enduring commitment.

• Capacity development at all levels – including the individual, institutional and political – is essential.

• Evidence and research are important for policy and program development, but advocacy is key.

• Leadership at all levels is a prerequisite for sustaining the momentum of effective nutrition policies and programs.

Nutrition: A fundamental right of all humanity

There has been a growing recognition of the key role of nutrition in human health and national development. The following quote highlights the importance of nutrition in the Post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals: “Nutrition is, not least, a fundamental right of all humanity. Without good nutrition, the mind and body cannot function well. When that happens, the foundations of economic, social and cultural life are undermined.”

With this realization, combined with the confirmation of efficacious and affordable interventions, governments around the world, and their development partners, are currently seeking effective and sustainable ways to implement solutions at scale. The process of designing and implementing nutrition policies and programs within a country has many dimensions, including the technical, logistical, political, economic and social. In addition, increased attention is now being focused on governance, capacity development, and the creation of enabling environments. Each of these terms will be defined in the following sections.
A rural shepherd in Karnataka, India.
Source: Mike Bloem
The relevance of governance to nutrition today

The concept of good governance is not new. As far back as 1992, a World Bank Report – Governance and Development – defined the term as “The manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country’s economic and social resources for development.” Similarly in 1999, the World Bank defined governance as “the traditions and institutions by which an authority in a country is exercised.”

Good governance has recently received increased attention as a critical success factor both in the scientific and the implementation literature. This serious attention to a more systematic measurement of governance has been fueled, in part, by a critique of the international “nutrition architecture” as “broken, fragmented and dysfunctional.” This observation has prompted lively discussion about international and national models of effective governance.

International governance

The emergence of large-scale initiatives such as the Scaling Up Nutrition Movement (SUN), Renewed Efforts against Child Hunger and Under Nutrition (REACH), and the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) illustrate different models of governance.

SUN was launched at a United Nations annual meeting in 2010. The SUN Movement brings together authorities of countries burdened by undernutrition, a broad range of stakeholders from multiple sectors in-country, and a global coalition of partners. The establishment of SUN also provides a framework for assessing nutrition governance. The elements of nutrition governance include: an intersectoral mechanism for nutrition; having a national nutrition plan/strategy; adoption of the nutrition plan/strategy; nutrition in the national nutrition plan; the existence of a national nutrition policy; the adoption of a national nutrition policy; the allocation of budget for the plan; regular nutrition monitoring/surveillance; a line for nutrition in the health budget; a line for nutrition in the agriculture budget; and a line for nutrition in the social development budget.

REACH is a country-led approach to scale up proven and effective interventions, addressing child undernutrition through partnerships and coordinated action on the part of UN agencies, civil society, donors and the private sector, under the leadership of national governments. It has operated in 12 countries. REACH is currently being phased out, but the country-level focus for a coordinated approach to nutrition will remain.

The CFS is the UN Governing Body that reviews and follows up on food security and nutrition policies. It uses a multistakeholder platform including UN agencies, bilateral organizations, civil society, and the private sector. The CFS endorses policy recommendations and guidelines on a wide range of food security and nutrition topics. Policy recommendations are based on scientific and evidence-based reports produced by the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition.

Good governance, capacity development, and an enabling environment: definitions

The renewed emphasis on nutrition, nationally and globally, has focused attention on a linked trio of factors: governance, capacity development, and an enabling environment.

There is almost universal agreement that appropriate governance is essential for effective program and policy implementation. Yet the concept of “good governance” remains elusive. The public policy literature is replete with illustrations of governance; yet the term itself remains open to different interpretations by different audiences. Curiously, it is often easier to identify poor governance than good governance.

Good governance is not unique to nutrition; however, with the renewed emphasis on nutrition through initiatives such as SUN, the nutrition focus in the SDGs and the proliferation
Chapter 5.5 | The Role of Good Governance in Delivering Good Nutrition

of country-level national nutrition plans, governance related specifically to nutrition is front and center.

Capacity development is critical for the effective implementation of policies and programs. When the term “capacity” was first linked to nutrition, some focused narrowly on academic capacity, as measured by the granting of degrees. Capacity is now viewed in a much more holistic perspective and includes individual, institutional, political, advocacy, leadership, communication and delivery capacity. A recent high-level workshop concluded that inherent in effective capacity development is the imperative to simultaneously and consistently address the three interrelated levels of capacity: individual, institutional and systemic.5

Similarly, more attention is now being given to the importance of an “enabling environment” for nutrition. In many ways, this term is as nebulous as that of governance. One definition describes it as “A set of interrelated conditions – such as legal, organizational, fiscal, informational, political and cultural – that impact on the capacity of development actors such as civil society to engage in development processes in a sustained and effective manner.”6 Alternatively, at the national level, the word “enabling” means to “make able; give power, means, competence, or ability to; authorize.”7 The examples in this chapter point to the fact that enabling environments can be created. They contain three essential elements.8 These are:

- Knowledge and evidence;
- Capacity and resources; and
- Politics and governance.

Figure 1 | The key factors for effective nutritional policy-making and program development. The nine crescents represent ministries relevant for multisectoral coordination. These will vary from country to country.

Concepts such as good governance and an enabling environment are intrinsically vague. Policy officials essentially want an answer to the questions: “What works, in what context, and at what cost?” No formulaic approach as yet exists that can delineate the specific steps that can provide a menu for success, or the necessary ordering of these steps. What we can do, however, is to learn from a series of examples in this chapter, which may lay out some broader principles.

A first step in the policy cycle for nutrition (broadly defined) is to get issues onto the policy agenda at the international or national level. The presentations at the 2014 Micronutrient Forum Global Conference pointed out that: “having proven solutions to address malnutrition and, more specifically, to eradicate micronutrient deficiencies, does not automatically result in the adoption of these interventions.” Much of the literature on public policy emphasizes that, in the final analysis, identifying nutrition as a priority is a political process. Indeed, global forums have highlighted that fact that “Political will and evidence-informed policy are essential for the sustainability of nutrition initiatives at both the national and international levels.” Here again, one representative of a bilateral organization commented that “political will is commonly used as a catch-all concept, the meaning of which is so vague that is does little to enrich our understanding of the political and policy processes... We must begin by giving ‘political will’ a quite specific and narrow meaning.” With these observations in mind, this chapter will try to “deconstruct” elements of political will and enabling environments into some core components. How does nutrition get on the policy agenda?
Evidence linked to policy and programs

Former Deputy Executive Director of the World Food Programme Namga Ngonge once said: “The world is replete with good ideas that have never made it off the shelf.” So how, if at all, does evidence get translated into action? Some researchers have been rather unimpressed by science’s ability to influence the nutrition agenda. For example, as Alfred Sommer once remarked: “The central premise of this symposium, that data can drive public policy, is both laudatory and even vaguely plausible. The historical record, however, is not encouraging.” Can evidence influence policy in a sustainable manner? To provide an answer to this question, we use two examples: one is international, the other country-specific.

Hidden hunger

Assumptions following the World Food Conference in 1974 colored the nutrition agenda for decades. There was a basic understanding that agricultural production was needed to increase incomes of smallholders and that this, in turn, would improve energy intake. There was the implicit assumption that most malnutrition was caused by inadequate energy intake at household level. During the 1970s and 1980s, there was a definite food bias towards malnutrition. Indeed, the “green revolution” produced dramatic results in some parts of the world. Agricultural output grew and caloric intakes increased in certain areas, while nuances of the complexity of nutrition also began to emerge. For example, the gains achieved with the green revolution technologies did not necessarily translate into improvements in nutritional status, particularly in preschool-aged children. With this as a backdrop, the early studies on micronutrient malnutrition took on special significance.

Administration of vitamin A. The tip of the red capsule containing a dose of vitamin A is cut with scissors and the contents of the capsule squeezed out into the child’s mouth. Source: Mike Bloem
It has been known for years that vitamin A deficiency, if left untreated, can cause blindness. A group of researchers from Johns Hopkins University conducted research in Indonesia in preschool-aged children and found that vitamin A supplementation significantly decreased child mortality. There was incredulity among some in the research community that this postulation of a link between vitamin A and mortality was correct. At a meeting of the Sub Committee on Nutrition in the 1980s in Nairobi at which the findings from the study in Indonesia were discussed, one SCN member noted: “If [the results] were true, we would have known this already.”

The novel findings from the Indonesia study set in motion a series of activities. Additional vitamin A supplementation trials were conducted. A meta-analysis of studies was conducted and concluded that there was a 23% reduction in mortality in preschool-aged children who were given vitamin A supplementation. A high-level conference, chaired by UNICEF and WHO, was held in early 1990 in Montreal. A spotlight was shone on micronutrient malnutrition – called “Hidden Hunger.” Dramatic increases in funding emerged from donors in developed countries.

Over time, the evidence of a positive impact of vitamin A programs has been widely documented. While there are still disagreements over short-term vs. longer-term strategies for vitamin A treatment and deficiency prevention, vitamin A supplementation is one of the efficacious and effective interventions identified in the 2013 Lancet Series.

The example of vitamin A may appear to be a clear story of research linked to action. That would be an incomplete assessment. The evidence was important, but advocacy in support of these results was key. The researchers involved in the initial work made a concerted effort to reach the policy community. In the USA, hearings were held in Congress, an earmark for micronutrient interventions was passed – and the rest is history. Some might think the vitamin A story is a clear example of leadership in championing nutrition issues.

Hunger in America

The topics of food insecurity and hunger in the USA have had a stormy history. In the late 1960s, attention was focused on the problem of hunger in the USA. Activities such as the Ten State Nutrition Survey, documentaries such as “Hunger in America,” and visits by politicians to poverty-stricken areas of the country pointed to the fact that hunger was a problem. However, a Presidential Task Force on Food Assistance could not agree whether, and to what extent, hunger existed in the USA. All the members of the committee agreed that hunger was unacceptable. In addition, there was general agreement that clinical measures of hunger – mainly anthropometrics – did not provide sensitive indicators of the condition: “In many people hunger means not just symptoms that can be diagnosed by a physician, it bespeaks the existence of a social, not a medical problem: a situation in which someone cannot obtain an adequate amount of food, even if the shortage is not prolonged enough to cause health problems.”

The clear message that there needed to be a definition of hunger delinked from clinical signs prompted attention from the research community. Two events turned out to be critical in the debate about hunger in America. First, legislation was passed under the National Nutrition Monitoring and Related Research Act of 1990, which required the government to recommend a standardized method for defining hunger and food insecurity. Second, the American Institute of Nutrition published a major report clarifying the meaning of hunger from the scientific literature. For the first time, all people defined food insecurity in the US as access at all times to enough food for an active and healthy life.

A 1994 Conference on food security measurement built on the AIN report and additional research. The conference brought together a wide constituency including policy officials, researchers and advocates. The conference led to the launch of the US Food Security Module, which has subsequently become a routine part of food security monitoring in the USA. The Food Security Module measures hunger and food insecurity from the perspective of those affected. It was launched by the then US Vice President, Al Gore, and gave the event enormous visibility. The reaction to the Food Security Module was both positive and negative. Opponents – in part, because of the perceived link to the White House – criticized this monitoring approach as a means of inflating the number of hunger- and food-insecure households in the USA. The Food Security Module survived and is used as one method for monitoring food security in the USA. Here again, the leadership linked to evidence was one ingredient that contributed to success.
Similar to good governance, capacity development is generally agreed as being important in program and policy implementation, but here again, the definition is interpreted in a variety of ways. A guiding principle in the launch of the SUN Movement was that what ultimately matters is what happens at the country level. The phrase that is used within SUN is that policies and programs need to be “country-owned.”

The example of Malawi and its commitment to eliminating and preventing acute malnutrition illustrates the power of harnessing sustainable resources and investing in capacity development. Severe acute malnutrition is defined as -3 z-scores below the median weight-for-height. If left untreated, the case fatality rate is extraordinarily high. The Government of Malawi, acting together with two international non-governmental organizations – Valid International and Concern International – embarked on a strategy to promote the community-based management of acute malnutrition (CMAM) in children under the age of five. Using frontline workers, a system of identifying and triaging children with severe acute malnutrition was implemented. The premise of CMAM is that uncomplicated forms of severe acute malnutrition can be successfully treated in the community.

Community-based management of acute malnutrition has been shown to be a very effective way to deal with severe malnutrition in Malawi. Frontline health workers are trained to screen and monitor preschool-aged children; this allows malnourished children to be identified and treated early. The treatment modality is based on a combination of ready-to-use therapeutic foods provided in the form of take-home rations complemented by outpatient care. Community mobilization has been key to the success of treating severe acute malnutrition in Malawi. In addition, a focal point for nutrition in the Office of the Prime Minister in Malawi provides a platform to ensure that community-based management of acute malnutrition continues to be a priority for Malawi. Here again, leadership at the highest level has been an important success factor.

Politics and governance

While the Lancet Series of 2008 and 2013 provided the scientific basis for the SUN Movement, for the concepts they conveyed to become “real,” it was imperative to translate the science into action.

As noted earlier in this chapter, SUN identified characteristics that were associated with good governance. These included:

- The existence of a National Nutrition Plan/Program;
- An intersectoral mechanism for nutrition; and
- The existence of a National Nutrition Monitoring System.

Ethiopia was one of the initial countries to join the SUN Movement, and as such was termed an “early-riser”
country. It exemplifies the SUN principles outlined above. For Ethiopia, this included a National Nutrition Strategy and National Nutrition Plans of 2008 and 2013. These two National Nutrition Plans were not, however, the first endeavor to launch strategies for improving nutrition in Ethiopia. Decades earlier, the Government of Ethiopia had participated in the Joint Nutrition Support Programme funded by UNICEF and WHO. The Joint Nutrition Support Programme was not viewed by the Government of Ethiopia as a long-term success, yet it shares some elements with the country’s more recent activities within the framework of the SUN Movement. A recent study attempted to ascertain what has contributed to the Government of Ethiopia’s enthusiasm for the SUN Movement and the palpable energy supporting the implementation of the National Nutrition Plan.\(^\text{15}\)

The SUN Movement has always stressed that nutrition programs must be “country-owned.” Various steps were taken by the Government of Ethiopia to ensure a sense of inclusion in preparation for implementation of the second National Nutrition Plan. One seminal event that created awareness of the importance of investing in nutrition was a 2010 Workshop on accelerating the reduction of stunting. This was followed by the formation of a technical working group which included all sectors involved in nutrition; as noted in a recent study, this working group turned out to be influential in guiding the 2013 National Nutrition Plan.\(^\text{16}\)

Finally, a 2013 meeting which included all ministers in the Government of Ethiopia provided a high-visibility forum for showing the importance of nutrition. In addition to having a National Nutrition Strategy and two National Nutrition Plans, the Government of Ethiopia established a National Nutrition Coordinating Body chaired by government and donors and including representatives of civil society. In the early years of operation, this body was criticized for being a board on paper only, and for failing to provide the necessary level of coordination across varied sectors. The National Nutrition Coordinating Body has since been revitalized so as to better bring together the major players to implement a multisector nutrition program.

Going forward, there are clearly challenges in maintaining the momentum of the National Nutrition Plan. First, senior government officials and parliamentarians, renewed the commitment to end hunger and undernutrition in Ethiopia by 2030. The ambitious declaration that resulted is called the “Seqota” declaration. It is a clear indication of a policy commitment to keep the momentum for nutrition vibrant in Ethiopia. In addition, the Government of Ethiopia recently launched its second five-year Growth and Transformation Plan, which includes stunting as an indicator, and emphasizes the importance of multisector approaches to improving nutrition.

What will success of the National Nutrition Plan look like? Curiously, answers from each of the stakeholder groups involved stress the importance of taking the timeframe into account when formulating such a judgment. Early success can be measured by awareness of the National Nutrition Plan. As noted by respondents, it may take time for the elements of the plan to filter down from the national to sub-national level. As the present book is being written, the next five-year National Nutrition Plan is under revision, with a view to aligning it with the goals of the Growth and Transformation Plan; this is a further indication that the Government of Ethiopia is utilizing a holistic approach to improving nutrition. Ultimately, improvement in the health and nutrition of Ethiopians will be the true litmus test of success.

**Figure 2 | The Seqota Declaration articulates the Government of Ethiopia’s renewed commitment to end undernutrition and hunger by 2030**

Source: Federal Ministry of Health of Ethiopia
There are proven, effective nutrition interventions for improving the nutritional status of at-risk populations. There is also a growing understanding of the need to attend to certain aspects of governance in order to ensure the successful implementation of policies and programs. Research in the area of good governance is still in its early stages. The recognition of the vital importance of good governance has sparked serious attention to research in this area. This is an exciting time for nutrition, and more attention to governance and the enabling environment is a giant leap forward.
Chapter 5.5 | The Role of Good Governance in Delivering Good Nutrition

My personal view
Eileen Kennedy

Having been involved in nutrition as a policy official, program implementer and researcher, I have seen at first hand the critical need for good governance. Its constituent elements may take many forms. Without leadership combined with advocacy, however, there will be missed opportunities for making a positive difference in nutrition.

Further reading


References

10 Ngonge N, personal communication.
13 Anon.