

The politics of reducing malnutrition: building commitment and accelerating progress

In recent years, political discourse on the challenge of undernutrition has increased markedly at both national and international levels and led to stated commitments on the part of many national governments, international organisations and donors. We now find greater harmonisation among stakeholders with regard both to their understanding of the main causes of malnutrition, as well as the various options for addressing it. The core question that we address in this paper is: “how can enabling environments and processes be cultivated, sustained and ultimately translated into impact on the ground”?

Results

Following a literature review of nutrition-relevant policy processes, a six cell framework (shown overleaf) was developed to structure discussion of the ways in which three domains are pivotal for creating and sustaining political momentum, and for translating it into nutritional impact in high-burden countries.

Recommendations

- An emerging set of country experiences show that rates of undernutrition reduction can be accelerated through deliberate action.
- Politicians and policymakers who want to promote broad-based growth and prevent human suffering should prioritise investment in scaling-up nutrition-specific interventions, and maximising the nutrition-sensitivity of national development processes.
- Nutrition governance and policy process studies broadly concur on three factors that shape enabling environments: a) knowledge and evidence, b) politics and governance and c) capacity and resources.
- Framing undernutrition reduction as an apolitical issue is myopic and self-defeating. Political calculations lie behind effective coordination between sectors, between national and subnational levels, private sector engagement, resource mobilisation, and state accountability to its citizens.
- Political commitment can be built—there is no need to wait for it. But commitment must not be squandered—conversion to impact requires a different set of strategies and skills.
- Leadership for nutrition, at all levels, is fundamentally important for creating and sustaining momentum and converting it into impact on the ground.
- It will not be possible to accelerate and sustain progress in nutrition without national and global support to a long-term process of strengthening systemic and organisational capacities.
- The private sector has significant potential to contribute to accelerating improvements in nutrition, but efforts to realise this have to date been held back by a lack of credible evidence and a lack of trust. Both of these issues require significant attention if the positive potential is to be realised
- Operational research on delivery, implementation and upscaling of interventions, and more contextual analyses on how to shape and sustain enabling environments, is essential as the focus shifts toward action.

“Three domains are pivotal for creating and sustaining political momentum, and for translating it into nutritional impact in high-burden countries”

Creating an enabling environment	Converting momentum to impact on nutrition status
Framing, generating and communicating knowledge and evidence	
<p><i>Why is it important?</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Undernutrition is a multisectoral challenge, open to multiple interpretations (e.g. as a health issue, an economic growth issue, an intergenerational rights issue or a humanitarian issue). Each context requires its own enabling narrative or framing. This multisectoral nature also raises challenges for nutrition programme implementation, and increases the premium on quality implementation and impact assessment research. 2. Undernutrition early in life is irreversible. This means that there is a high return to timely and reliable information on nutrition status and its determinants in programmatic contexts. 3. Rigorous research is needed to capture the long term, intergenerational benefits of preventing undernutrition, with evidence communicated clearly to generate pressure on politicians to act. 	
<i>Specific issues and challenges:</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Framing and narratives • Evidence on outcomes and benefits • What works? And how well do nutrition interventions work relative to others? • Advocacy to increase priority (civil society) • Evidence on coverage, scale, quality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementation research (what works, why and how) • Programme evaluation (impact pathways) • Generating demand for evidence of impact
Political economy of actors, ideas and interests	
<p><i>Why is it important?</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A number of actors and agencies, each with different and frequently competing agendas (especially in decentralised systems of governance), need to work together to reduce undernutrition. 2. All but the most extreme manifestations of undernutrition are invisible, and thus open to neglect, so even well-meaning governments may underinvest in nutrition. 3. Nutrition trend and programme impact data are often out of date or virtually absent, allowing unsubstantiated political narratives to be sustained in an evidence vacuum. 	
<i>Specific issues and challenges:</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incentivising and delivering horizontal coherence (multisectoral coordination) • Building up accountability to citizens • Enabling and incentivising positive contributions from the private sector 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delivering vertical (national to community) coherence • The role of civil society and private sector in delivery and impact
Capacity (individual, organisational, systemic) and financial resources	
<p><i>Why is it important?</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Human and organisational capacity need to reflect not only nutrition know-how, but also a set of soft-power skills to operate effectively across boundaries and disciplines such as leadership for alliance building and networking, communicating the case for collaboration, leveraging resources and being able to speak truth to those in power. 2. Both strategic and operational capacities of different actors at several levels are key. 3. Additional financial resources and much better budget data are required if undernutrition efforts are to be scaled up, with innovation required from governments and donors to maximise investment. 	
<i>Specific issues and challenges:</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership/championing • Systemic and strategic capacity • Making the case for additional resource mobilisation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delivery/operational capacity • New forms of resource mobilisation • Prioritisation and sequencing of nutrition action • Implementation and scaling up

Further reading

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Credits

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