

Stories of Change in Nutrition

Synthesis Brief



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What works in the real world?

After several years of growing political commitment, with more and more pledges and declarations and an increasing focus on data and on evidence, the international nutrition community has come to recognise the power of narrative. Knowledge that is practically useful needs to encompass a lot more than data and evidence – it needs to include experience. To meet this growing demand for *experiential* learning, Transform Nutrition developed the Stories of Change (SoC) initiative. The goal was to systematically assess and analyse drivers of change in six high-burden countries – Bangladesh, India (Odisha), Ethiopia, Nepal, Senegal, and Zambia – that have had some success in accelerating improvements in nutrition.

From 2014–16, country teams undertook analysis of changes over time in nutrition outcomes, in nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive drivers, and changes in nutrition-relevant policies and programs. Semi-structured key informant interviews (434 in total) were carried out with a range of stakeholders at different levels.

Main findings and recommendations

The devil is in the detail – which is available in the individual country papers (see key reading section) – but overall, SoC has highlighted the importance of a set of interlinked factors that underpin, enable and drive change in nutrition – and the way these factors manifest themselves and interact. We see that **commitment, coherence, accountability, data, leadership, capacity and finance** all need to be present over time, for progress to be made and for it to be sustained. These interlinked factors are the fundamental building blocks that determine how change happens, and can be (proactively) made to happen.

Major progress has clearly been made in terms of generating political attention and in many cases political and policy **commitment** to nutrition as a development issue. But for

promises and pledges to be progressively translated into changes in incentives, new decisions and actions, different forms of commitment are needed. In this, we find that SoC countries are struggling to grapple with the challenges of turning political commitment into institutional and financial commitments, and into large-scale implementation of effective actions.

Second: **coherence**. This is when commitment has become embedded and reflected in institutional structures and processes that are appropriate and mutually-reinforcing – when the whole can be greater than the sum of its parts. Such coherence applies horizontally (across or between sectors) and it applies vertically (from national-level down to the grassroots community level). It also goes well beyond governmental action and sectors, to include the role of civil society and the private sector. Progress has been made in generating cross-sectoral coherence, but much remains to be done to embed coherence in action from national to grassroots levels.

Third, **accountability**. This addresses the question of who is responsible for what type of action, where and when – and whose job is on the line if they consistently fail to deliver? Proper accountability exists when there is clarity and cross-sectoral consensus on roles and responsibilities. Global and national accountability is key, but accountability is relevant at all levels, and ultimately should be channeled downward to communities where nutritionally vulnerable populations live.

Accountability cannot operate in a **data** vacuum. It is crucial that timely data on trends in different forms of malnutrition and on outcomes of actions and programs (from different sectors) become available and accessible in the public domain. More data (and evidence from research) that is actionable at the subnational level is also needed. More and better evaluations are required- including those that highlight impact pathways—to help understand why, how, and where programs work or do not work.

“It is the bridge between evidence and action that helps countries learn what works and what does not that the ‘Stories’ approach seeks to build”.
Gerda Verburg, Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement Coordinator

Just as no single individual or organisation can be held accountable unless they have the power to act, nor can they be held to account unless they have the actual **capacity** to do what is needed. Capacity is needed at different levels—individual, community, organisational, and systemic – and for different purposes. In particular, within the new generation of nutrition professionals, we need individuals with stronger strategic and operational capacities to go along with their technical skillsets. And we need to strengthen the capacity of individuals in other sectors, to empower and motivate them to apply a nutrition lens in their work and to contribute to nutrition-relevant change through their programming and investments.

An example of transformational capacity is **leadership**. Leaders open doors, turn keys, and inspire others. Leaders in and for nutrition are not necessarily hierarchical; they tend to exhibit lateral leadership—the ability to successfully work across sectors, build collaborations and alliances, and communicate effectively. Nutrition champions and policy entrepreneurs are needed to catalyse social and political change and make development policy in general more nutrition-sensitive.

Many stories in the country case studies shed light on how nutrition champions can spring from different quarters. We need to develop the next generation of nutrition leaders and to strengthen existing initiatives, including academies and curricula that aim to build leadership capacity.

Finally, the basic issue of **financing**.

Past work has highlighted the importance of funding to nutrition that is adequate, stable and flexible. Some countries report increases in nutrition-relevant funding, but others suggest that

“Stories of Change in Nutrition reached some interesting conclusions that inform and inspire us regarding the possibilities of nutrition development in Senegal”.

Abdoulaye Ka, National Coordinator, Unit for the Fight Against Malnutrition, Senegal



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Parfait, two, and her mother Rachael read together at their home.

limited progress has been made in generating adequate finance for nutrition. Again, the issue of finance is bundled with the other key factors we have discussed. For accountability to have

teeth, it needs a clear understanding of which organisation is responsible for which set of actions, and it needs to be matched by adequate capacity and financing to act. Nutrition plans need to be costed, and finance ministries properly engaged in budgeting discussions – especially given the need for engagement by several sectors. The SUN Movement is actively working

to support countries in meeting this challenge, and it has helped bring donors together to support national development of plans. But more work is needed.

Key reading

- [Global Food Security, Volume 13, Special issue Stories of Change in Nutrition](#) Edited by Stuart Gillespie, Mara van den Bold, Purnima Menon and Nicolas Nisbett
- [Stories of Change in nutrition: An overview](#) Stuart Gillespie, Mara van den Bold, the Stories of Change Study Team
- [Accounting for nutritional changes in six success stories: A regression-decomposition approach](#) Derek Headey, John Hoddinott, Seolle Park
- Bangladesh's story of change in nutrition: [Strong improvements in basic and underlying determinants with an unfinished agenda for direct community level support](#) Nicholas Nisbett, Peter Davis, Sivan Yosef, Nazneen Akhtard
- [Maternal and Child Nutrition in Nepal: Examining drivers of progress from the mid-1990s to 2010s](#) Kenda Cunningham, Derek Headey, Akriti Singh, Chandni Karmacharya, Pooja Pandey Rana
- [Reprint of “What will it take to accelerate improvements in nutrition outcomes in Odisha? Learning from the past”](#) Neha Kohli, Rasmi Avula, Mara van den Bold, Elisabeth Becker, Nicholas Nisbett, Lawrence Haddad, Purnima Menon
- [From coherence towards commitment: Changes and challenges in Zambia's nutrition policy environment](#) Jody Harris, Scott Drimie, Terry Roopnaraine, Namukolo Covic
- [How Senegal created an enabling environment for nutrition: A story of change](#) Halie Kampman, Amanda Zongrone, Rahul Rawat, Elodie Becquey
- [Mid-level actors and their operating environments for implementing nutrition-sensitive programming in Ethiopia](#) Andrea M. Warren, Edward A. Frongillo
- [Community-level perceptions of drivers of change in nutrition: Evidence from South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa](#) Nicholas Nisbett, Mara van den Bold, Stuart Gillespie, Purnima Menon, Peter Davis, Terry Roopnaraine, Halie Kampman, Neha Kohli, Akriti Singh, Andrea Warren
- [Stories of Change: Perspectives](#) Arti Ahuja, Ramesh K. Adhikari, Madhu Dixit Devkota, Shams El-Arifeen, Abdoulaye Ka, Tesfaye Hailu, Rob Hughes, David Pelletier, Georgina Fekete, Cara Flowers, Gerda Verburg



Stories of Change in Nutrition are a series of structured case studies in six countries: Bangladesh, Nepal, Odisha (India), Ethiopia, Senegal and Zambia. These ‘stories’ aim to improve our understanding of what drives impact in reducing undernutrition, and how enabling environments and pro-nutrition policy and implementation processes can be cultivated and sustained. This work is funded by ClFF and DFID through Transform Nutrition and Leveraging Agriculture for Nutrition in South Asia (LANSA). This brief was written by Stuart Gillespie, based on the overview paper, cited above.

Web www.transformnutrition.org/stories_of_change Twitter #nutritionstories

The views expressed do not necessarily reflect the funders official policies.