

# Scaling up impact on nutrition: what will it take?

Over the last five years or so, a broad-based consensus on the “what” questions in nutrition has solidified. We know a lot more about what is driving malnutrition and we know more about the type of interventions that are needed to respond. And yet, we continue to struggle with the “how” questions. We simply do not know enough about how to operationalize an appropriate mix of actions - nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive – equitably, at scale, in different contexts.

**T**he concept of “scaling up nutrition” is now so routinely espoused within the nutrition community, it has become a mantra. But it’s actually quite new – the main background paper for the first International Conference on Nutrition in 1992, for example, contained not one single mention of any of “scaling up”, “going to scale” or “mainstreaming” in its 279 pages.

What do we mean by “scaling up”? Is there a shared understanding? And what do we know about success in nutrition-relevant scaling? There is a need for greater coherence and consistency with regard to the “ends and the means” of scaling-up – its scope, purpose and its essential processes. This was the start point for this *Transform Nutrition* evidence review.

Given the focus on scaling-up impact (rather than an intervention per se) we defined “scaling-up nutrition” as “a process aimed at maximizing the reach and effectiveness of a range of nutrition-relevant actions, leading to sustained impact on nutrition outcomes”.

**Methods.** A comprehensive literature search (2000-2014) across various sectors led to the identification of 55 papers that met inclusion criteria – 36 of which described theoretical frameworks, 19 of which described experiences with scaling-up nutrition-relevant actions. Drawing on this review, we first developed a long list of specific elements as critical factors for scale-up. This list was then condensed through careful review into a smaller set of nine thematic elements of success, listed below, and located within a theory of change (Figure 1):

## Recommendations

- 1 Articulating a **clear and shared vision** or goal for impact. Like a hammer looking for the nail, too many discussions on scale up start by asking “how do we expand coverage of the intervention?”



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The start point has to be a vision of what success looks like, and what constitutes impact.

- 2 **Characteristics of selected interventions** should be aligned with the dynamic context, explicitly recognizing the need for adaptation and flexibility over time and space.
- 3 **Enabling environment:** successful scaling experiences usually involved an explicit focus on contexts – socio-economic, institutional, political, cultural – at different levels from households up to districts and beyond.
- 4 **Establishing drivers and dealing with barriers.** Drivers include different types of catalyst or trigger, well-defined incentives and the development of system-wide ownership. Nutrition champions often play a major role (e.g. Santiago Levy, the main architect of the *Progresas-Oportunidades* anti-poverty program in Mexico). Successful scale up experiences often recognize and anticipate potential barriers, and develop approaches to circumvent them (e.g., the use of mass media in *Alive & Thrive* in Bangladesh was central to a supportive social environment for promoted behaviors).

Sintayehu, 16, breastfeeding her 15-month-old son, Biruk, at home in Wogidi, South Wollo Zone, Amhara Region, Ethiopia

“A new focus that also encompasses nutrition-sensitive development and the role of leadership and enabling policy environments is a new imperative for nutrition.”

**5 Contextually-relevant strategies and pathways for scaling-up.** “Scaling up” goes well beyond the quantitative (scaling out) aspects. Functional scaling relates to the expansion or deepening of horizontal (cross-sectoral) or vertical (national to local) linkages. Organizational scaling is where the capacities of organizations are growing and strengthening. And political scaling reflects a move from “beneficiaries” receiving benefits to progressively empowered communities making demands on governments and national leaders’ being held accountable for public action.

**6 Operational and strategic capacities.** In planning for scale up, a failure to assess, strengthen and expand capacity (different types, levels and purposes) will be like building castles on sand. Sustainable scale up will simply not happen.

**7 Financing** for scale up needs to be adequate, stable, and flexible (to permit local adaptation).

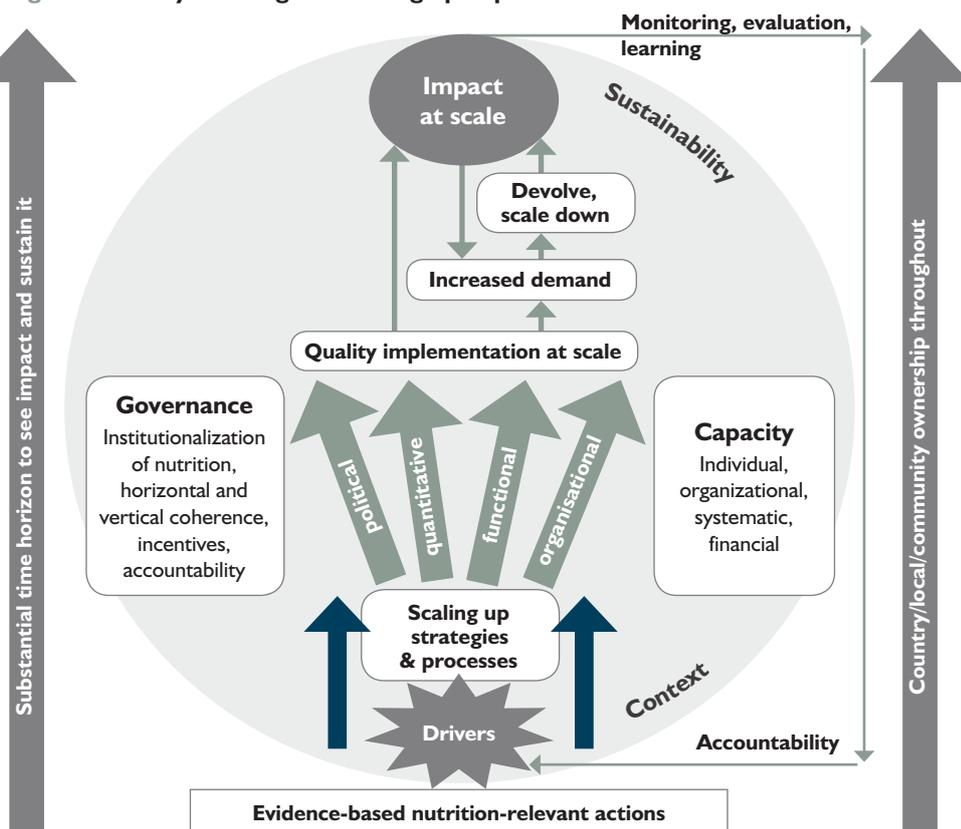
**8 The governance** of scaling up is a pivotal issue which needs to be clearly reflected in strategy and process. Governance involves anticipating and resolving trade-offs e.g. possible tensions between community participation/ownership and replication of standard models, between quality and quantity, and between the need to demonstrate short-term impacts and the need for impacts to be sustained, which might require a slower start-up as capacities are developed and ownership and demand are strengthened.

**9 Monitoring, evaluation and learning** – linked with governance systems -- need to be built into scaling strategies. This provides the feedback loop (see Fig 1) that strengthens and supports accountability, where impacts become visible and can themselves act as drivers.

## Conclusion

The review calls for more and better research on scaling up impact on nutrition, as many countries (including those in the SUN Movement) grapple with the nuts and bolts of implementing plans of action. More experiential learning (e.g. through

Figure 1 Theory of change for scaling up impact on nutrition



“stories of change”) and a better sharing of lessons across contexts and countries, is needed.

Many successful large-scale nutrition programs have had several of the key scaling elements described here. They have tended to focus mainly on nutrition-specific interventions, with good reason. But a new focus that also encompasses nutrition-sensitive development and the role of leadership and enabling policy environments is a new imperative for nutrition. This in turn will require a massive increase in capacity. More nutrition champions are needed, supported by strengthened organizational capacity. Some countries have successfully established and funded strong national institutions to support the operationalization and scaling of nutrition – shining examples include the National Institute of Public Health in Mexico, the Institute of Nutrition in Mahidol University in Thailand, and the icddr in Bangladesh – but more are needed.

## Case studies

- 1 [Scaling up a high quality IYCF counseling intervention in Bangladesh: Alive & Thrive](#)
- 2 [Scaling up iron-folic acid supplementation in Nepal](#)
- 3 [Scaling up social protection in Mexico: Progresa-Oportunidades](#)
- 4 [Scaling up homestead food production in Bangladesh](#)

## Credits

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