

Chapter Nine

Making Nutrition Good Politics: The Power of Governance



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“There is no sea more dangerous than the ocean of practical politics – none in which there is more need of good pilots and of a single, unflinching purpose when the waves rise high.”

Thomas Henry Huxley – physiologist, anatomist, anthropologist and early champion of Darwin’s Theory of Evolution, (1825–1895)

Key messages

- Undernutrition has certain features which necessitate a strong focus on governance.
- Progress in reducing undernutrition cannot be sustained where governance systems are weak or absent.
- As governance relates to power, capacity, commitment, accountability and responsiveness, it is crucially important for *all* levels of action, not just the policy level.
- Strong leadership – in the form of ambassadors championing the political cause, as well as more midlevel, lateral leadership to facilitate intersectoral action- is fundamental to success.
- Governance can be measured and monitored using innovative new tools and indices, with the results used to name, shame and praise.

What is good governance, and why is it needed for nutrition security?

The concept of governance has many definitions. Governance can be defined with regard to institutional structures, relationships between actors and/or organizations, decision-making processes, and incentives. It involves the capacity to act, the power to act and the commitment to act. It requires accountability, responsiveness and transparency. Essentially, good governance refers to the effective, efficient, accountable exercise of public authority for the provision of a public good.

The challenge of undernutrition has several features which require strong systems of governance to successfully address it.

First, the nature of the problem itself. Undernutrition is neglected because it is invisible, it is not infectious (unlike HIV, for example), it requires several actions to be undertaken by many actors in several unconnected sectors, and at different levels, it is difficult to measure success and to attribute impact to any one decision or action (unlike for example vaccinating a child against a disease), and the benefits of improving nutrition often take longer than a politician’s time in office to fully manifest themselves. These unique features generate a lack of commitment, accountability and responsiveness to act, which – linked with the major challenge of limited leadership, strategic and operational capacity – all combine to fuel the political economy of undernutrition reduction.

The **second** fundamental rationale for a strong focus on governance is the type of action that is needed to ensure nutrition security.

Globally the challenge of overweight and obesity is growing but accelerating the reduction of undernutrition remains the major challenge in many countries. In these situations, ensuring nutrition security requires action on three broad fronts.

First, there’s a need to enhance and expand the quality and coverage of *nutrition-specific* interventions. Second, maximizing the *nutrition-sensitivity* of more “indirect” interventions, such as agriculture, social protection, water and sanitation etc., And third, there is a need to cultivate and sustain enabling political and policy environments for nutrition. This third level – which largely relates to global and national governance – has been relatively neglected to date.

At this third level, the challenge is to understand how high-level political momentum can drive action to reduce undernutrition, and what needs to happen to turn this momentum into results on the ground. How to ensure that high-quality, well-resourced direct (nutrition-specific) interventions are available to those who need them, and indirect (nutrition-sensitive) actions (e.g. agriculture, social protection, water and sanitation) are re-oriented to support nutrition goals? These three levels of complementary action correspond broadly to the three levels of causes of undernutrition – immediate (individual) level, underlying (household, community) level and basic (national and global) levels.

Why is it so important now?

Yet the focus on governance has only emerged in recent years as two types of gaps or disconnects have emerged.

First, the disconnect between the strong evidence of the damage caused by malnutrition, on the one hand, and the relative inertia with regard to action, on the other. So much more is now known about the drivers of undernutrition and the serious and enduring consequences of undernutrition, the benefits of acting to reduce undernutrition, and the costs of inaction and/or poorly designed and implemented responses.

Second, the disconnect between sustained economic growth of several high-burden countries and their failure to make significant inroads in addressing undernutrition. This has been seen most dramatically in South Asia, though there are now signs of positive change in some countries (such as Nepal, and Bangladesh – see case study). As their nations grow economically, governments need to decide how important it is that their children grow. They may have the power and capacity (including financial resources) to act, but often they don't act (or not at the scale required) because they lack commitment.

Commitment has been likened to a political *will* to act – and this does not fall from the sky, it needs to be created. As James Grant, the former Executive Director of UNICEF said:

But governance is not only an issue for policy and politicians. It is a key cross-cutting issue at all three levels of action described above. This is because direct interventions can fail to scale because of weak incentives, institutions and infrastructure, indirect interventions are often underleveraged for nutrition because of commitment and coordination failures, and the environment for nutrition is more often disabling due to the invisibility of undernutrition and weak leadership from the state and civil society.

The need for good governance to ensure nutrition security is thus incontestable. Sustained progress is simply not possible where governance systems are weak or absent.

“Each of the great social achievements of recent decades has come about not because of government proclamations, but because people organized, made demands, and made it good politics for governments to respond. It is the political will of the people that makes and sustains the political will of governments.”

This then throws the spotlight on accountability and responsiveness of political systems, how power is distributed, and how equitable societies and political systems are. Are governments held accountable for their actions or their failure to act? Are they *responsive* to changing situations, especially in context of humanitarian crises.

Politics and policy processes are now firmly embedded in the agenda of both research and action. No longer is the political economy of nutrition viewed as an impenetrable “black box”. Nutrition advocates or champions, adept at navigating and shaping policy arenas, are emerging. More policy research is being done on these issues – often with multidisciplinary teams – to shine a light on success or failure and what drives it. We know a lot more now about the pathways and dynamics of change, the key levers and catalysts, and what drives success or failure (see “further reading”).

Proportions of countries reporting the content of policies, by WHO region

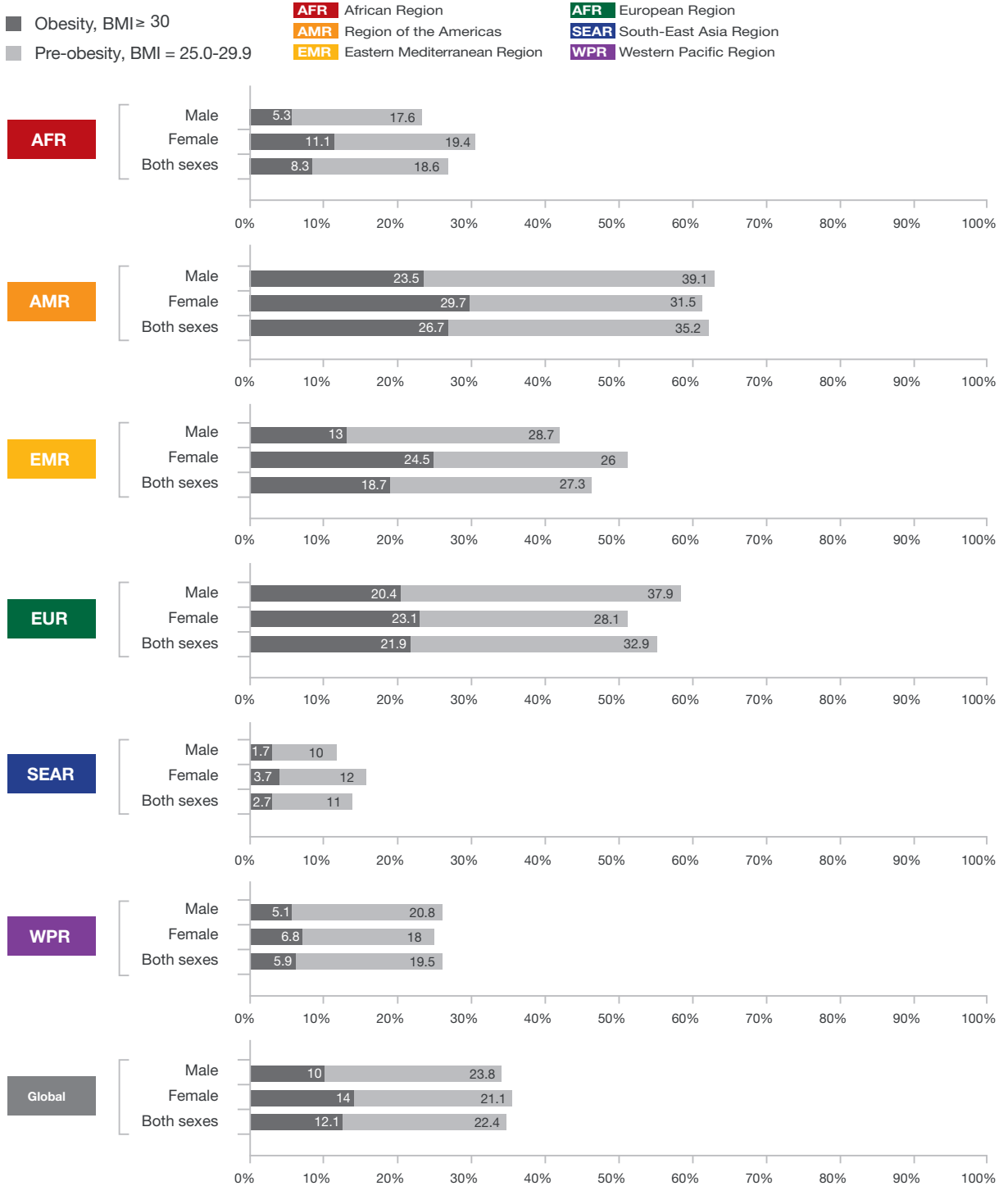


Source: WHO's Global nutrition policy review



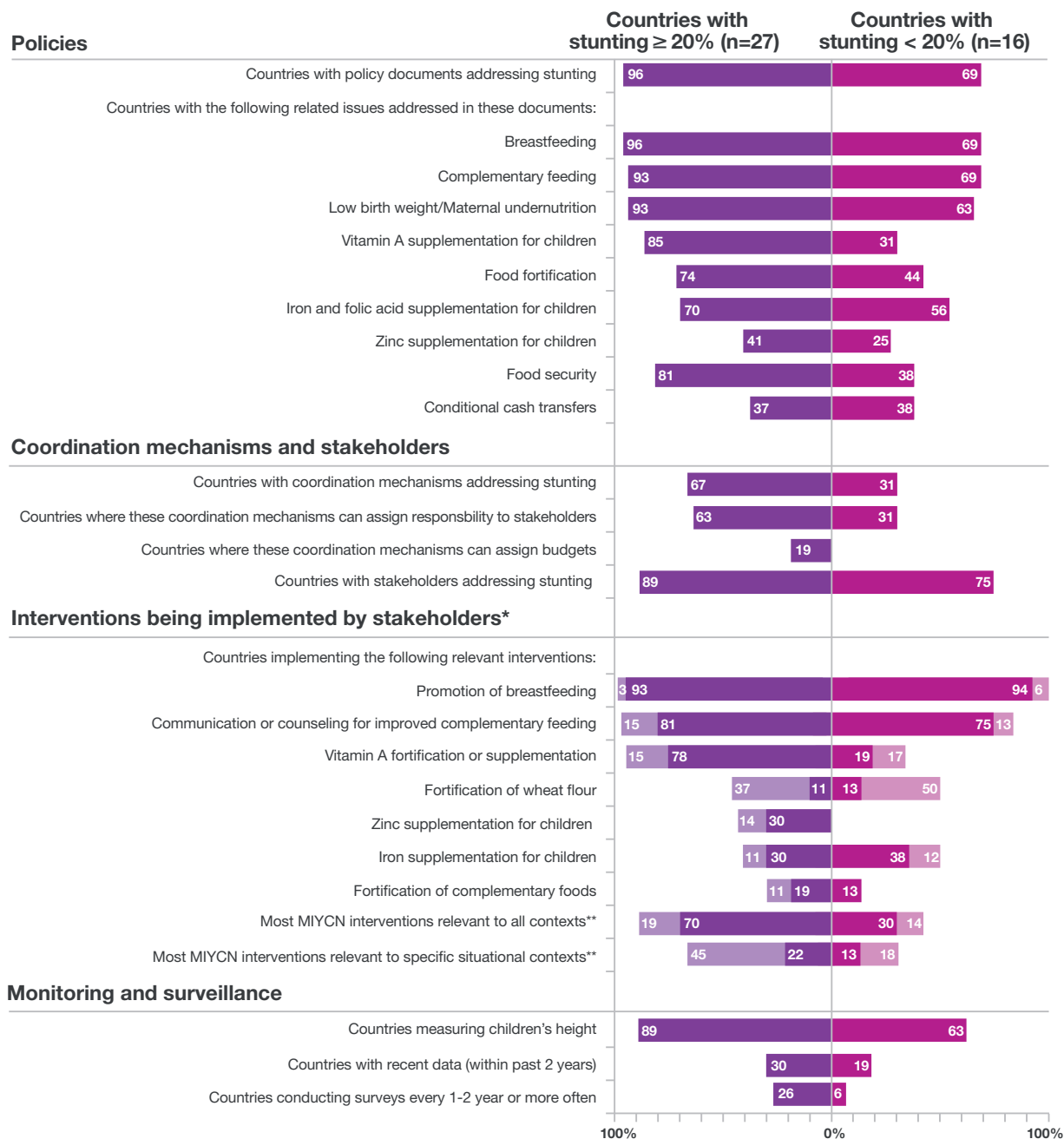
Source: WHO's Global nutrition policy review

Age-standardized prevalence of overweight and obesity in adults 20+ years of age by WHO region. 2008



Source: WHO's Global nutrition policy review

Policies, coordination mechanisms and stakeholders, interventions and surveillance in countries with high and low levels of stunting. Data are presented as the percentage of total number of countries in each group.



Note: * For interventions, the darker area indicates implementation at national scale, the lighter area indicates implementation at subnational scale, and the full bar implementation at any scale (national or subnational). ** This refers to a majority of maternal, infant and young child nutrition (MIYCN) interventions relevant to please all contexts or in specific situational contexts as identified by Bhutta et al. (2008) and listed in Table 4.

What are the core drivers and ingredients of good governance?

At the time of the 2008 Lancet Nutrition Series, the governance of the international nutrition system was said to have been fragmented and dysfunctional. Since then, a process of reforming UN institutional architecture has been underway, and the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement has emerged with a core focus on galvanizing national and country-led action (see box).

The global architecture is now characterized by an array of governments, NGOs, international and regional organizations, donors, foundations, research organizations, academia and private foundations and companies. Compared to five years ago, there is much more coherence and complementarity in the way these different actors and organizations interact.

But the SUN Movement will ultimately only realize its true potential through its application in each country. This will require the maintenance of support and consensus amongst all SUN stakeholders, and strong country-level ownership.

Strong leadership – in the form of ambassadors championing the political cause, as well as more mid-level, lateral leadership to facilitate intersectoral action – is fundamental to success.

In terms of institutional arrangements, nutrition is an issue that needs an executive body, ideally linked to the Prime Minister's office, and a coordinating body that ensures horizontal (cross-sectoral) and vertical (national to district) coherence in action.

These two bodies need to ensure accountability and responsiveness through regular collection and management of key data on nutrition trends and changing drivers, ensuring the quality and appropriate scale-up of direct nutrition interventions (targeted to the 1,000-day window of opportunity), maximizing the nutrition-sensitivity of wider development programs (especially agriculture and social protection), and mobilizing and managing capacity and financing to sustain all these efforts.



United Nations headquarters
Source: <http://www.panoramio.com>

How is governance measured and monitored?

Governance is key for all stages in the policy process – from agenda-setting, to policy formulation, program planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. It is fundamental for creating and sustaining commitment but also crucially for *converting* such commitment into real impact on the ground. Different challenges emerge at this point. The quality, intensity, and equity of implementation may not be as easily tracked as the existence of a plan or a legal framework, as shown by a landscape analysis. Understanding whether and how well policies are actually implemented and legal instruments are

enforced will require different measures and different perspectives, including importantly those of nutritionally vulnerable populations themselves.

In 2012, WHO introduced a comprehensive “Landscape Analysis” mapping tool in order to assess nutrition governance in different countries. If a country has most or all of the following indicators in place, they could be described as having ‘strong’ nutrition governance, and good readiness to accelerate action in nutrition: political

commitment and awareness of nutrition, focused policies and regulation at a central level, with supporting plans and protocols at subnational level, resource mobilization at central level and budget provision at subnational level, coordination of nutrition activities at all levels, involvement of partners, support to districts and facilities, trained staff with appropriate skills at all levels, capacity and motivation of staff, quality of services and follow up, management, information systems and supplies in place, and community engagement strategies.

The SUN Movement has a simple four indicator system to track country-level progress, including existence of a multi-stakeholder platform, coherent legal and political framework, alignment of policies and programs around a common results framework, and mobilization and tracking of financial resources.

Innovative tools are increasingly available to stimulate and build commitment and accountability. For governments and donors, for example, a Nutrition Commitment Index has been developed by the Institute of Development Studies for cross-country and country-specific comparisons over time.

Definitions and ingredients of good governance

In possibly the first statement defining “governance”, in 1999, the World Bank defines national governance as:

“the traditions and institutions by which authority in a country is exercised. This includes the process by which governments are selected, monitored and replaced, the capacity of the government to effectively formulate and implement sound policies, and the respect of citizens and the state for the institutions that govern economic and social interactions among them.”

(Source: Kaufmann, D. and Kraay, A. (2008) Governance Indicators: Where are We, Where Should We Be Going? The World Bank Research Observer 23 91), 1–30.)

“Governance is....the exercise of economic, political, and administrative authority to manage a country’s affairs at all levels. It comprises mechanisms, processes, and institutions through which citizens and groups articulate their interests, exercise their legal rights, meet their obligations, and mediate their differences.”

(Source: Governance for Sustainable Human Development: A United Nations Development Program Policy Document, 14 April 2005)

“Good governance refers to governing systems which are capable, responsible, inclusive and transparent. All countries, developed and developing, need to work continuously towards better governance.”

(Source: Helen Clark, Administrator of the UNDP, Fourth United Nations conference on the Least Developed Countries High Level Interactive Thematic Debate on Good Governance at All Levels, Istanbul, 11 May 2011)

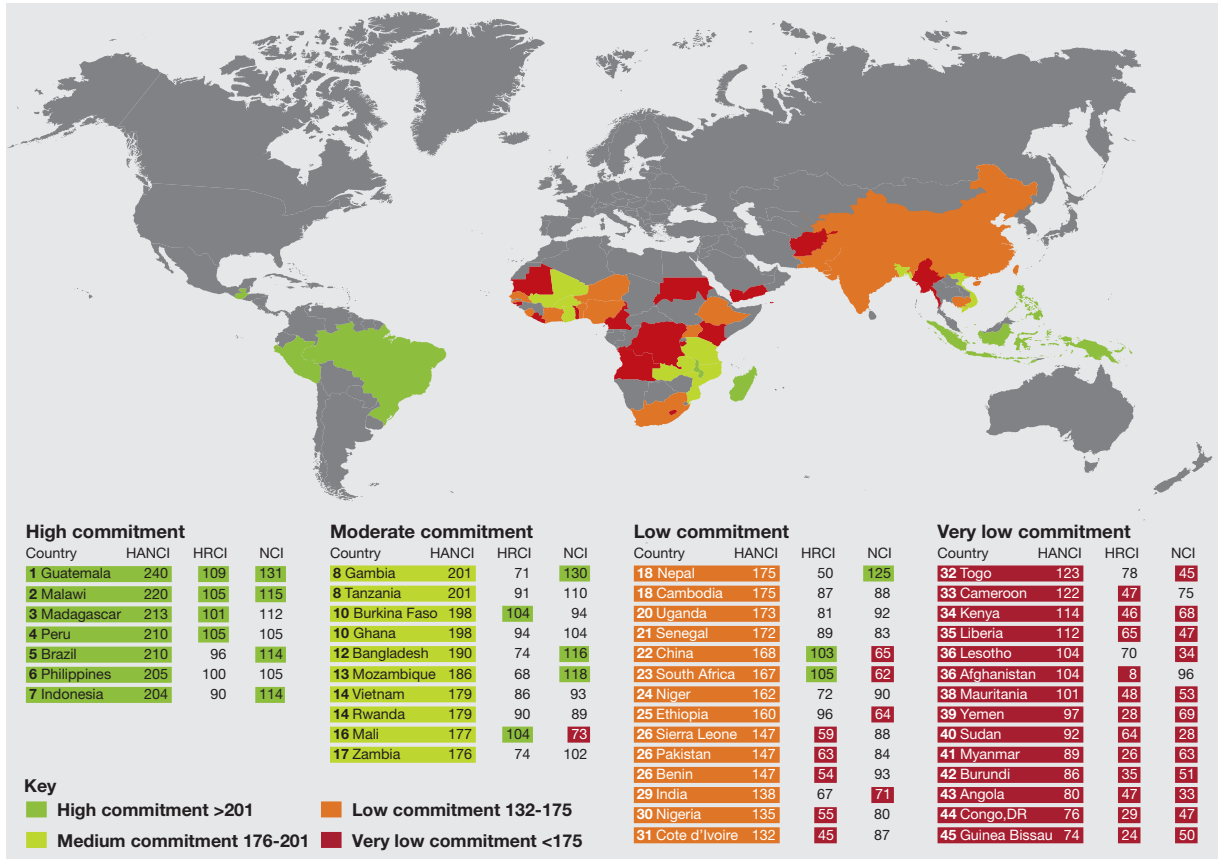
This measures political commitment to tackle undernutrition in 45 developing countries by focusing on a series of policy, legal and spending indicators. The first analysis in early 2013 generated some interesting results – for example, some of the poorest developing countries are showing the greatest political commitment to tackling undernutrition, e.g., Malawi and Madagascar, while economic powerhouses such as India and Nigeria are failing some of their most vulnerable citizens. The index not only shows that low wealth is no barrier to committed action, it also highlights that sustained economic growth does not guarantee that governments will prioritize undernutrition reduction. This may help explain why many countries in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia remain blighted by high levels of hunger and undernutrition. In naming, shaming and praising, such tools can be very powerful.

This is quite possible at more decentralized levels too – ICT-based monitoring systems, social accountability mechanisms, and community-based tools such as community scorecards, have all been shown to promote accountability and to improve the provision of direct public services.

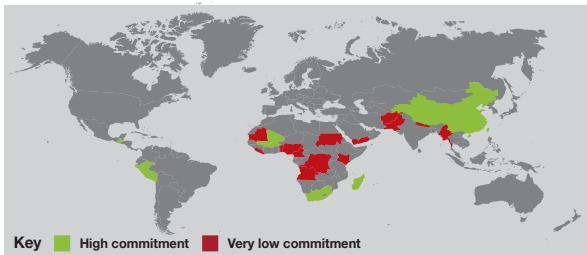


President Obama at the G8 Summit At Lough Erne
Source: WPA Pool (GETTY)

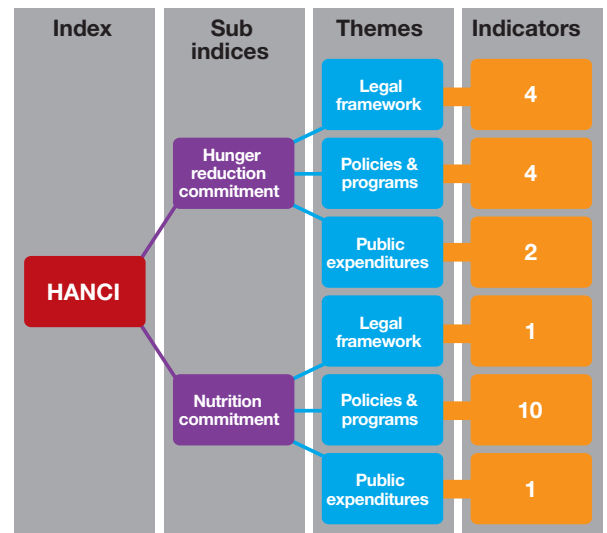
Hunger and Nutrition Commitment Index (HANCI) Scores



Hunger Reduction Commitment Index (HRCI) Scores



The structure of the HANCI

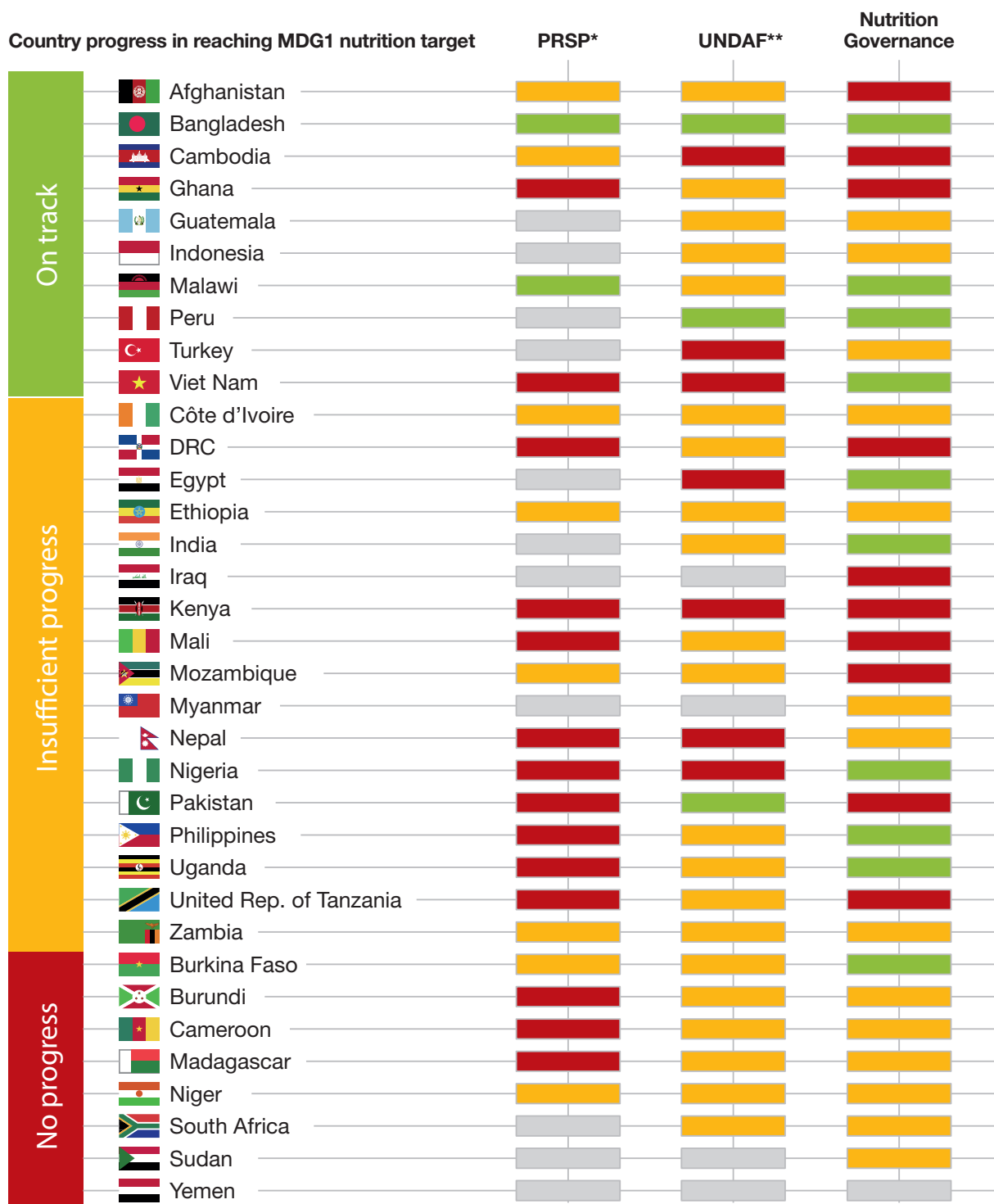


Nutrition Commitment Index (NCI) Scores



Source: www.hancindex.org, June 2013

Landscape Analysis:



Source: *Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers; **United Nations Development Assistance Framework
 "Assessing countries' commitment to accelerate nutrition action demonstrated in PRSPs, UNDAFs and through nutrition governance." Engesveen et al (2009) SCN NEWS 37

How does the SUN Movement work?

The Movement recognizes that malnutrition has multiple causes. That's why it requires people to work together across sectors to put nutrition into all development efforts.



Case study

What worked: Thailand's big push

Thailand outlined their first multi-sectoral nutrition policy in 1977, under the national economic and social development plan (1977–1982). One of the early key messages was that malnutrition should not be perceived as simply a health problem, but should be regarded also as a social and economic problem with human impact. The policy stated that investment in nutrition would not be a short term 'fix', but a national investment for intermediate and long-term growth. In addition, it was agreed that "nutritional literacy should be an integral part of planning and implementing nutrition programs."

Establishing a multi-sectoral policy and plan was the first and major step in nutrition improvement efforts. The challenge was then to implement the program in an integrated manner. The fifth national development plan, Thailand's "Poverty Alleviation Plan (PAP)" was a spearhead of the rural development program, focusing on poverty stricken areas. Nutrition programs were employed as stopgap measures to relieve the most severe forms of malnutrition until systematic solutions could bring about long-term, sustainable improvement.

The PAP was one of Thailand's first efforts to bring about effective and efficient infrastructural reforms conducive to rural development. Effective organizational structure and managerial mechanisms to coordinate and integrate multi-sectoral efforts at various administrative levels and within the communities was critical. Four major ministries, i.e., Health, Agriculture, Education, and Interior (Community Development Unit), were involved and streamlined the integrated budgetary allocations to target poor villages. Each ministry also strengthened the intra-sectoral collaboration among its various departments or divisions.

PAP employed four key programs, namely, (1) *Rural Job Creation* to create jobs for rural people during the dry season so that they remain in the communities and participate in community development; (2) *Village Development Projects* included village fish ponds, water sources and other development projects to improve economic status and household food security; (3) *Provision of Basic Services*, i.e., health facilities and health services; and (4) *Agricultural Production Programs* including nutritious food production (e.g., crops for producing complementary foods), upland rice improvement and a soil improvement project.

Income generation and household food security were the direct benefits.

During the five years of PAP, 32 development projects were implemented in 12,562 poor villages in 38 provinces. By 1986, 550,000 village primary healthcare volunteers were trained, covering almost every rural village in the country. Nutrition activities were integrated within the PHC with other health services. The PHC movement mobilized the community to address malnutrition. It was recognized that successful nutrition programs should not be centrally planned and made into ready-made packages. Rather, they should serve as guidelines.

Another major breakthrough in nutrition governance was the adoption of the Basic Minimum Needs (BMN) approach in village-based social planning, empowering villagers in decision making using BMN indicators in problem identification and prioritization. This was a key contributor to reduction in malnutrition.

In nutrition governance, policies such as primary healthcare and poverty eradication are as relevant as food and nutrition policies. Community-based nutrition intervention programs have a better chance of sustainability if the people themselves become agents of change and if certain elements are in place: community organization for planning and management; community manpower development based on appropriate technology and information and a viable self-perpetuating community financing scheme.

(Source: Abridged from Keynote Talk on 'Thailand's Community-Based Nutrition Improvement' by Pattanee Winichagoon, at the 'Leveraging Agriculture for Improving Nutrition and Health' International Conference, 2011, Delhi, India)



Case study

Scaling up nutrition in Bangladesh

There has been rapid economic growth and substantial poverty reduction in Bangladesh over the past two decades. Poverty rates declined by 8 percent between 2005 and 2010, per capita GDP doubled from 1990 to 2010, and agricultural growth averaged 3.3 percent, due to impressive gains in rice yields (FAO 2012). In line with the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), current estimates suggest that Bangladesh has achieved a 50 percent reduction in undernourishment, will achieve the same for underweight, has achieved the required child mortality figures, and will achieve the target for maternal health. It has also performed well in terms of nutrition improvements, particularly in the 1990s. While progress reduced between 1999 and 2004, it improved again from then onwards.

There are other figures released, highlighting the various success stories. For example, literacy rates for young

females aged 15–24 years are said to have doubled, rising from 38 percent in 1991 to 77 percent in 2009. Also the coverage of vitamin A supplements for children is now nearly universal, the use of oral hydration salts has increased, and there has been a substantial rise in exclusive breastfeeding during the first six months of life, from 43 percent in 2007 to 64 percent in 2011. There have been several government initiatives that have helped to arrive at these figures, with research and surveys to identify where continued development is needed.

For example, it is acknowledged that nearly one third of women in Bangladesh are undernourished still, and there are challenges regarding population growth, crop vulnerability, poverty and natural resources. Malnutrition in Bangladesh costs an estimated US\$1 billion a year in lost economic productivity, there are known to be widespread vitamin A, iron and zinc deficiencies, and cases of anemia remain strong in groups of young children, adolescent girls and pregnant women.

As a member of the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement, the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) is recognized for its commitment to improving nutrition. Various initiatives have been launched since 1995, with the current Health, Population and Nutrition Sector Development Program planned to run until 2016, at which point it will be reviewed and updated.

The GoB has mainstreamed nutrition within the existing health system, with improved access to nutrition interventions for those in remote areas. There is a strong focus on the first 1,000 days of a child's life through education and support, with infant and young child feeding schemes throughout the country, as well as substantial investments in agriculture and health.

Specific programs operated by the GoB include the Vulnerable Group Distribution (VGD) and Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) schemes, which distribute food items at subsidized rates, based on a rationing system. The VGF program helps those who find it difficult to meet the basic needs for survival, providing food to low-income groups, and VGD promotes self-reliance amongst women. A school feeding initiative has also been started in poor areas with help from the World Food Program, providing high-energy biscuits to children.

Source: The Hunger And Nutrition Commitment Index (HANCI 2012): Measuring the Political Commitment to Reduce Hunger and Undernutrition in Developing Countries, Dolf te Lintelo, Lawrence Haddad, Rajith Lakshman and Karine Gatellier, Institute of Development Studies, UK, April 2013



Case study

Global governance: the rising of the SUN

A number of factors served as background to the launching of the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Framework and Roadmap in 2010. These factors include the recognition of the importance of early childhood nutrition, the increased political support for nutrition as being central to development strategy, and the acknowledgement that a wide range of stakeholders, including governments, civil society and the private sector, needed to collaborate if significant advances in improving nutrition were to be achieved.

The SUN Movement is founded on the principle that all people have the right to food and good nutrition. It unites people – from governments, civil society, the UN, donors, businesses and researchers – in a collective effort to improve nutrition.

Following on from the publication of the SUN Framework and Roadmap in 2010, the US and Irish governments committed, in September 2010, to promote the SUN at international level. By the end of 2012, 33 countries had made a commitment to implement the principles and associated programs of the SUN. The Global Movement is supported by a series of Networks, including a Country Network, Civil Society Network, UN System Network, Donor Network and a Business Network. In April 2012, the UN Secretary-General appointed a SUN Lead Group of 27 high-level leaders charged with improving coherence, strategic oversight, resource mobilization and accountability across the Movement.

The key focus of the SUN must be at the national level of the 33 countries committed to the Movement. A particular focus of the Movement is aimed at reducing the level of stunting in these countries. The early indication is that the average annual rate of reduction in stunting in the 33 SUN countries is 1.8%. It is hoped that operational research such as the RAIN project in Zambia – see box – will provide policy insights which can accelerate progress in reducing stunting.

The SUN Movement is defined as “a country-led, global effort to advance health and development through improved nutrition.” Not a new institution, organization or fund, SUN is a shared approach that supports the implementation of direct nutrition interventions, while also looking to address the underlying causes of malnutrition and engage the multiple sectors that could contribute to an overall

improvement in nutrition, health and development.

SUN represents an unprecedented opportunity for coordination, collaboration, cross-learning and advocacy to catalyze sustainable nutrition gains at national and global levels. Membership of the SUN Movement implies a national commitment to address undernutrition. By July 2013, SUN had grown to include 41 countries committed to scaling up direct nutrition interventions and advancing nutrition-sensitive development, including 18 of the 31 highest burden countries.

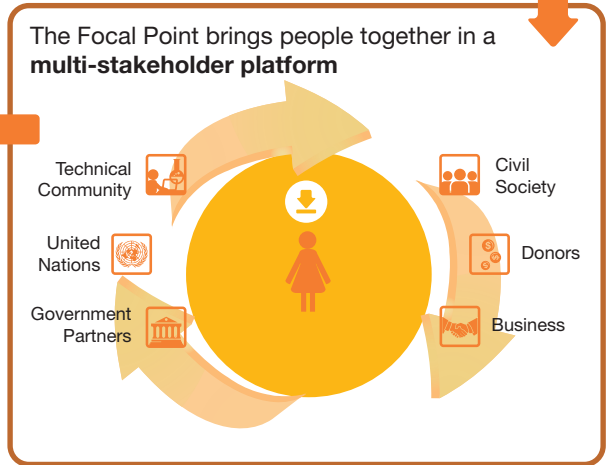
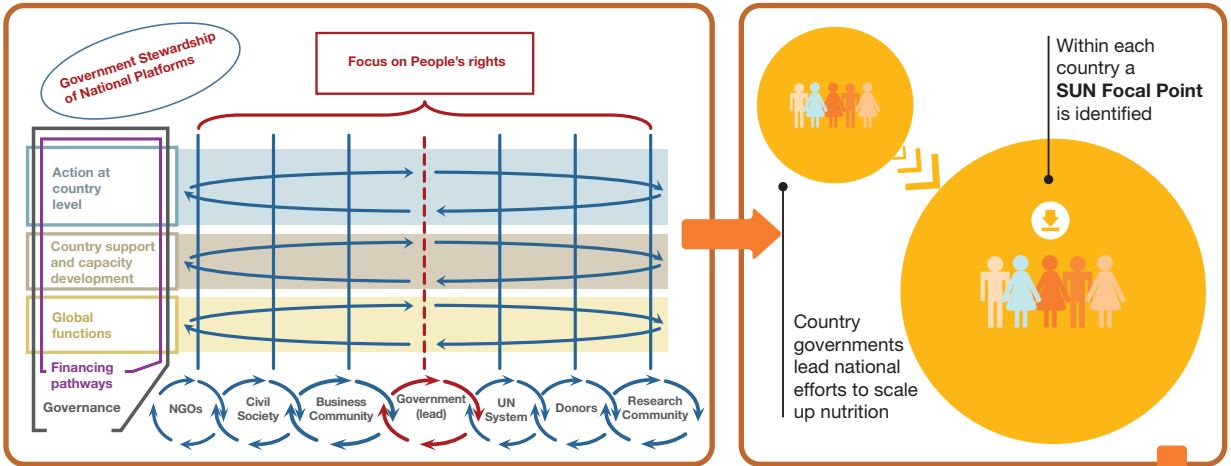
In broad terms, the roles and responsibilities of “SUN members” are first, that countries are in the lead and must work to establish coordinated national plans of action, allocate national resources to nutrition and foster a policy environment supportive of nutrition goals. Second, supporters align with this approach by committing to back country-developed plans and build coordination and alignment to leverage resources, knowledge and capacity in a more effective and efficient manner.

The intended “value-added” of the SUN approach is to create a platform to bring governments, businesses and other entities together, both globally and nationally, to find new opportunities to advance nutrition by determining best practices, tracking the effectiveness of efforts, promoting cross-sector learning and strengthening the enabling environment – and ultimately by aligning stakeholders behind a shared goal. A strength of the movement is the depth of expertise and experience represented by the more than 100 organizations and entities that have endorsed the SUN Framework. The collective ability, resources and reach of these supporters has the potential to impact far more communities and nations than any one group could alone. Working toward a common goal through a shared platform such as SUN, stakeholders have an opportunity to maximize the effectiveness of actions and investments.

As it reaches its third birthday, the SUN Movement is well aware that it needs to progressively increase the focus on results on the ground. The success of high-level discourse and commitments made by politicians from the podium can only be judged by their impact on the lives of nutritionally vulnerable young children and women.

For more, please see: www.scalingupnutrition.org

The SUN approach



My personal view

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In the last five years momentum has been building and malnutrition is finally being taken seriously as a major development challenge. At long last there is a degree of harmony with regard to the scaling up of nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive actions, driven and supported by enabling political and policy environments. Various actors and organizations are converging on the core challenge and developing partnerships and collaborations. The energy of the SUN Movement – which would probably not have survived ten years ago – is driving this momentum and raising the stakes. As the political and multisectoral nature of the challenge is taken on board, issues of governance become ever more prominent.

Research is more operational and more policy-relevant than before. In the past, nutritionists did their research, made recommendations and then implored politicians to do the right thing. More often than not, it didn't happen. Now, there is a new focus on opening up the black box of “political will” to better understand (and ultimately shape) governance and policy processes, to make nutrition outcomes, and the policy pathways that lead to them, more visible.

In reality, political will is a political *choice* – to act to ensure children grow healthily, or not to act. New tools and indices and greater access to information for more stakeholders will help to continue to shine a light on governance systems at different levels. In this way, political leaders will increasingly be held to account if they choose not to act, and they stand to reap the rewards if they do.

Further reading

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