

Maximizing the Potential of Multisectoral Nutrition Policies for Double-duty Actions

Thahira Shireen Mustafa

Formerly with the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement, Geneva, Switzerland

Key messages

- > Multisectoral policy frameworks in countries remain underutilized to address the double burden of malnutrition and need to be strengthened with the implementation and scaling up of double-duty actions.
- > Coordination mechanisms for nutrition have increased at the national level, but the reporting of comprehensive engagement with identified specific line ministries for coordination of nutrition activities has decreased.
- > SUN Movement member countries have the advantage of leveraging the potential of existing coordination structures for nutrition that can be strengthened to deliver double-duty actions integrated across sectors, however this opportunity remains underutilized and still needs to be fully seized to address all forms of malnutrition.

The breaking dawn of multisectoral nutrition planning¹ occurred in the early 1970s with the new coordinated thinking to combat malnutrition (Box 1). Although attractive and ambitious then, the concept seemed to slip through the cracks as policymakers did not realize the full potential of intersectoral initiatives.² Four decades later, the nutrition community has come a long way in emphasizing the need for multiple stakeholders across sectors to collaborate for designing, implementing and monitoring joint solutions to ensure improvements in nutrition. However, there remains the question of whether we have done

BOX 1

Multisectoral nutrition planning is the application of a systematic multidisciplinary planning to produce a combination of nutrition policy or project interventions in several development sectors. When well operated and coordinated, these initiatives could be effective in reducing malnutrition by treating the problem holistically, with a unified multi-sectoral approach.

(IFPRI, 2011)

enough to make multisectoral approaches for nutrition an incentive for sectors to recognize the agenda as their own.

In recent years there has been greater recognition of the importance of multisectoralism for nutrition and its varying benefits. The World Bank identified that multisectoral actions can maximize nutritional outcomes across other sectors by accelerating action on determinants of undernutrition, integrating nutrition considerations into programs in other sectors that may be substantially larger in scale and increasing policy coherence that may have consequences on nutrition.³ This was further echoed by the 2013 Lancet Series on Maternal and Child Nutrition showing that nutrition-sensitive programs in agriculture, social welfare, early child development and schooling can be successful at addressing several underlying determinants of nutrition by serving as delivery platforms for nutrition-specific interventions, potentially increasing their scale, coverage and effectiveness (Box 2).⁴ Recent evidence from carefully designed nutrition-sensitive agricultural programs with explicit nutrition goals and interventions shows a greater impact on household and child dietary diversity and improved consumption of animal-source foods or fruits and vegetables.⁵



© Tahira Shireen Mustafa

Fresh and healthy foods made available, affordable and accessible in Florence, Italy

BOX 2

Nutrition-specific interventions or programs are those that address the immediate determinants of fetal and child nutrition and development – adequate food and nutrient intake, feeding, caregiving and parenting practices and low burden of infectious diseases.

Nutrition-sensitive interventions or programs are those that address the underlying determinants of fetal and child nutrition and development – food security; adequate caregiving resources at the maternal, household and community levels; and access to health services and a safe and hygienic environment – and incorporate specific nutrition goals and actions.

(Ruel and Alderman, 2013)

The Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement has played a key role in stimulating and reinforcing political interest in nutrition among leaders of governments and development partners alike. The movement has sparked consensus among the global community to embrace the multiple stakeholders' efforts of civil society, donors, United Nations agencies, and the private sector to jointly support the country-led priorities and actions to scale

up nutrition. This further renewed the interest for multisectoral strategies to combat undernutrition, focusing especially on the 1,000 day window of opportunity from conception to a child's second birthday, to tackle the underlying causes of malnutrition as well as its direct manifestations.

As of August 2018, 60 countries had signed on as members of the SUN Movement committing to abide by the SUN Movement Principles of Engagement⁶ that guide multiple stakeholders from different sectors as they come together to create an enabling environment, change their behaviors, mobilize resources to scale up actions and align implementation efforts to achieve results, ultimately improving the nutritional status of populations and realizing key sustainable development goals through better nutrition. The members of the movement also commit to ensure that programs in all sectors of their governments are designed to result in better nutritional outcomes through enhanced opportunities for the population to diversify their diets, improved access to safe drinking water and sanitation, improved access to health services and better consumer awareness regarding adequate nutrition and child care practices. They are further encouraged and supported to develop multisectoral national nutrition action plans, policies and strategies (hereafter referred to as 'policies').

In May 2012, the World Health Assembly (WHA) adopted a resolution (65.6) that endorsed the Comprehensive Implementation Plan on Maternal, Infant and Young Child Nutrition, which includes six global targets for nutrition to be achieved by the

BOX 3

Global Targets 2025 to improve maternal, infant and young child nutrition

1. 40% reduction in childhood stunting
2. 50% reduction in anemia in women of reproductive age
3. 30% decrease in low birth weight
4. 0% increase in childhood overweight
5. An increase in the rate of exclusive breastfeeding in the first 6 months to at least 50%
6. A reduction in childhood wasting to less than 5%

(WHO, 2012)

year 2025 (Box 3).⁷ This and other global calls to action – the Framework for Action adopted at the Second International Conference on Nutrition,⁸ the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,⁹ and the United Nations Decade of Action on Nutrition for the period of 2016–2025¹⁰ – have enormously contributed to the spree of comprehensive multisectoral nutrition policies that aim to address all forms of malnutrition. These include interventions addressing both the immediate and underlying causes of the problem being developed at the national level by governments to facilitate the integration of nutrition actions across sectoral ministries and development partners.

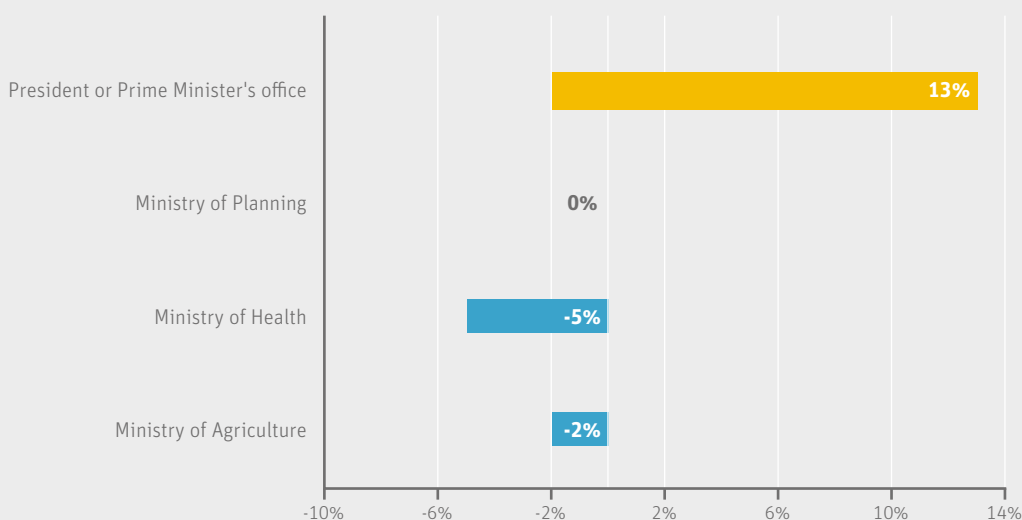
Multisectoral nutrition policies and governance: Status quo

As we are in an era where the global community is faced with the broader challenges of the double burden of malnutrition – characterized by the coexistence of undernutrition (including wasting, stunting and micronutrient deficiencies) along with overweight, obesity, or diet-related noncommunicable diseases (NCDs), it is only fitting that the policy environment is adapted to address this growing concern.

The 2nd Global Nutrition Policy Review conducted by the World Health Organization in 2016–2017 reported that 128 out of 149 countries have comprehensive nutrition policies.¹¹ This is promising regarding increasing understanding that tackling malnutrition in all its forms and diet-related NCDs requires cross-cutting and holistic government approaches rather than stand-alone sectoral strategies and siloed efforts. A comprehensive multisectoral nutrition policy also has the potential to attract the attention of high-level political leadership to gain ownership of the nutrition agenda, and in turn command resources for effective implementation.

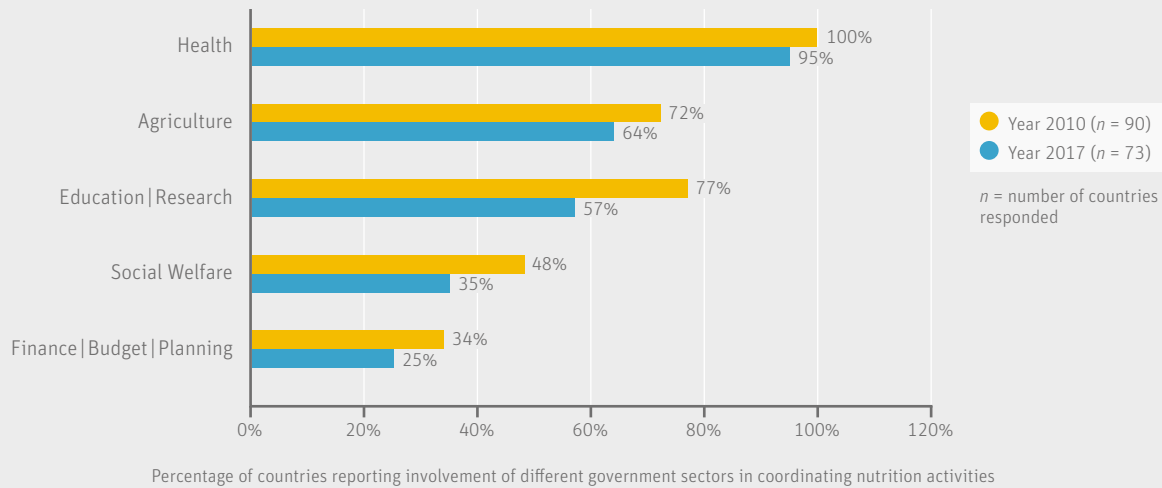
In addition to comprehensive policies, strong nutrition governance in the form of relevant coordination mechanisms such as multisectoral groups or organizations that oversee, coordinate and harmonize the nutrition related activities are conducive to the scaling-up of essential nutrition actions and addressing the double burden of malnutrition. Globally, the number of countries with an established coordination mechanism for nutrition at the national level with a main objective of coordination across

FIGURE 1: Change in coordination mechanisms established for nutrition between 2010 and 2017 (%)



The percentage indicates the difference in location of coordination mechanism for nutrition among the number of countries that responded in 2010 ($n=90$) and 2017 ($n=105$)

Source: Adapted from World Health Organization (2018). Global nutrition policy review 2016-2017: Country progress in creating enabling policy environments for promoting healthy diets and nutrition.

FIGURE 2: Multisectoral involvement in nutrition coordination mechanisms in countries

Source: World Health Organization (2018). Global nutrition policy review 2016-2017: Country progress in creating enabling policy environments for promoting healthy diets and nutrition; and World Health Organization (2013). Global nutrition policy review: what does it take to scale up nutrition action?

sectors has grown by 4% since 2013.¹¹ The strategic positioning of these mechanisms in high governmental offices, such as the president's or prime minister's office, has increased by 13% (Figure 1) and can serve as an enabler to improve the likelihood of positive policy change by building political will and creating synergy across sectors around a common goal for nutrition results rather than competition and prioritization of their own sectoral objectives.¹²

While it may only seem logical that a multisectoral policy environment will translate into a working environment that brings together the sectors for implementation, it may not be so in reality. In recent years, the number of countries reporting the involvement of multiple sectors for coordination of nutrition activities has seen a decrease. Furthermore, it should be concerning that the reported level of sectoral involvement for nutrition (meaning the comprehensive engagement with identified multiple ministries) has decreased since 2013 (Figure 2). This reported decline is a question worth pondering, and an unfortunate trend that needs to be reversed.

Multisectoral collaboration challenges

The importance of acting across several sectors to improve nutrition outcomes has been long emphasized; however, there is little documented evidence that demonstrates the effectiveness of multisectoral approaches. Well-recognized challenges to implementing multisectoral nutrition approaches exist at the level of individuals, organizations, and the overall system. They include: (1) the capacity constraints in aligning sectoral mandates and funding priorities with nutrition; (2) over-reliance on sectoral focal points to stimulate nutrition sensitivity and institutionalize

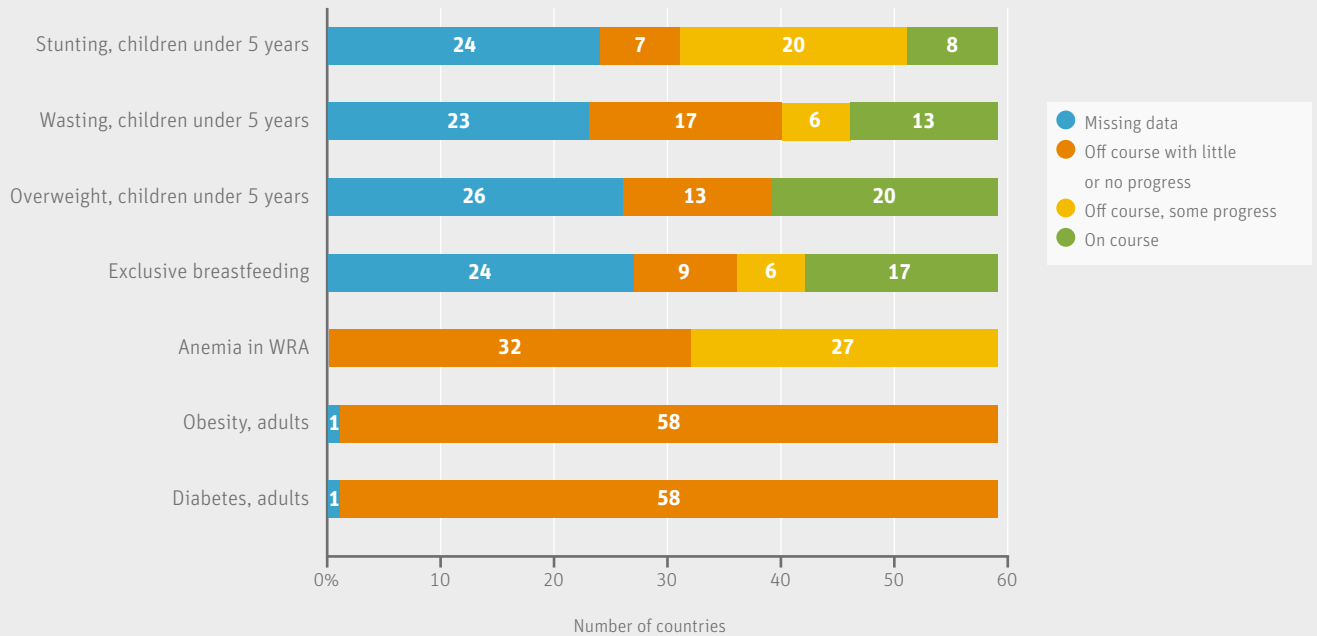
multisectoral approaches; and (3) dysfunctional coordination structures with a lack of shared vision and commitment to country-centered strategy and ownership of the nutrition agenda.¹³

Researchers have argued that the nutrition community is required to go beyond just creating the understanding that nutrition has multisectoral causes and reinforce the role of incentives that would motivate individuals to step outside their sectors and



Women of reproductive age make use of services including anemia diagnosis and iron and folic acid supplementation in an Anganwadi center in Uttar Pradesh, India

© Tahira Shireen Mustafa

FIGURE 3: Progress by SUN countries in meeting global nutrition targets

WRA = women of reproductive age

Source: Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, Learning (MEAL) 2016 Baseline Report.

promote cross-sectoral collaboration.¹ It requires increased effort and resources for joint goal setting, building capacities in nutrition across sectors, strengthening ownership of nutrition, scaling up of activities and building alliances and systems to support the joint efforts.^{14,15}

An in-depth experience documentation of four SUN Movement member countries (Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Mali and Uganda) showed that multisectoral approaches often provide soft or intangible accomplishments for nutrition. This includes the improvement of the enabling environment through creation or reform of coordinating structures (e.g., national nutrition councils, multisectoral working groups, interministerial committees, etc.), and addition of multisectoral dimensions to pre-existing policies, programs and mandates¹³ (e.g., involving new sectors and stakeholders to scale up and strengthen existing nutrition actions and appointing sectoral focal points to coordinate policy implementation). The achievement of tangible outcomes such as improving the nutritional status of the population requires more time and is often not as evident within the limited period of the policy cycle and can create multisectoral coordination fatigue when results are not immediate.¹⁴

Addressing the double burden in SUN Countries

SUN Movement member countries aim to meet the WHA endorsed Global Targets to improve maternal, infant and young

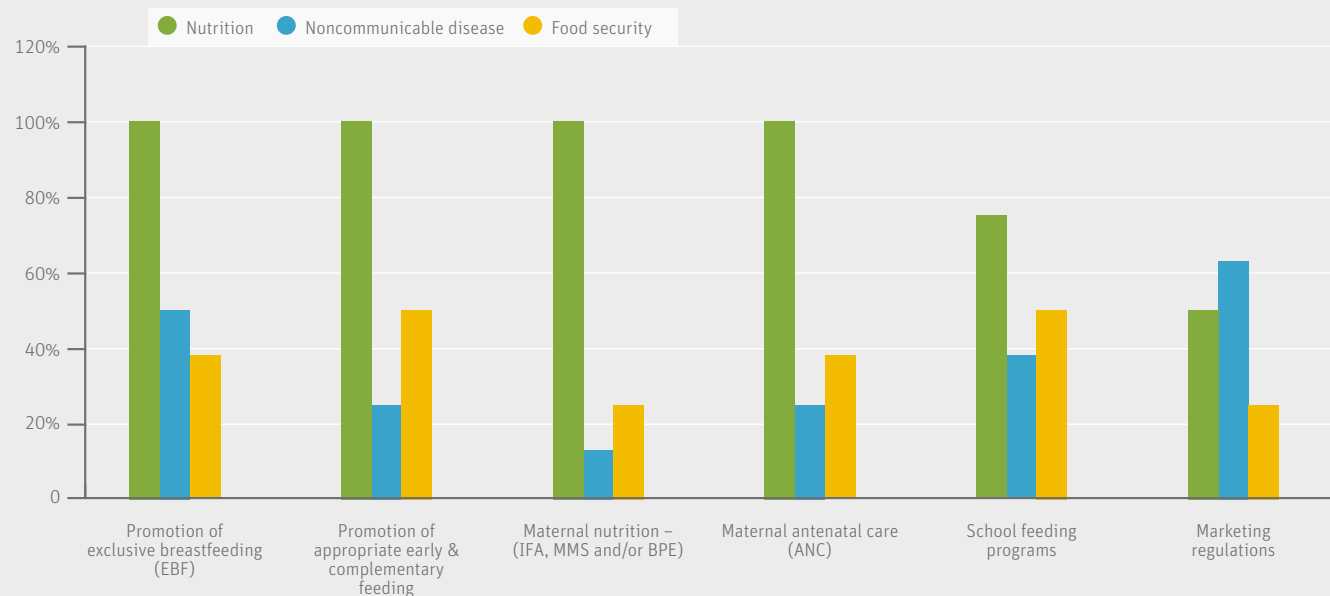
child nutrition by 2025, yet many SUN Countries have not yet included these goals in their national policies and strategies. In 2016, 32 of the 57 SUN Countries assessed had explicitly stated one or more of the six global nutrition targets in their national nutrition policy and strategy documents. Only 10 countries have included all the six targets.¹⁶ Nearly 50% of the SUN countries are yet to include the diet-related NCD targets for 2025¹⁷ (a 30% relative reduction in mean population intake of salt/sodium and halting the rise in diabetes and obesity) in their nutrition plans, national development plans and economic growth strategies.¹⁶

In 2016, only eight SUN Countries were reported to be on course to meet the stunting target, 13 for wasting, 20 for child overweight and 17 for exclusive breastfeeding (Figure 3). None of the SUN Countries are on course to reduce anemia among women of reproductive age or halt the rise in adult obesity and diabetes.

Nearly 22 SUN countries are ranked in the top 30 (out of 126 countries globally) for the presence of undernutrition in national development plans and economic growth strategies, compared to only three SUN countries ranked in the top 30 (out of 116 countries) and nearly half ranked in the bottom 30 for the presence of overnutrition in national development plans.¹⁶

The SUN Movement has placed a greater focus on the enabling environment for nutrition with a wide range of features that relates to broader issues of governance – including the estab-

FIGURE 4: Double-duty actions included in proportion of nutrition, noncommunicable disease and food security policies in selected SUN Movement member countries ($n = 8$)



*IFA = iron and folic acid, MMS = multiple micronutrient supplementation and BPE = balanced protein–energy

Source: Adapted from SPRING (2018). National Policies and Plans to Address the Dual Burden of Malnutrition: A Multi-country Policy Review.

lishment of coordination structures for nutrition with the active participation of multiple stakeholders from different sectors and the inclusion of relevant goals and targets in national policies to address all forms of malnutrition. Although 85% of the SUN Countries report having coordination structures for nutrition in the form of multistakeholder platforms,¹⁸ currently, the enabling environment in the SUN Movement is still mostly geared towards addressing undernutrition,¹⁶ and more efforts are required to ensure maximum coherence across sectors to tackle the double burden by facilitating cooperation both vertically and horizontally across the multiple actors and levels involved.

While the double burden of malnutrition is largely recognized by governments and nutrition stakeholders across regions, it is key to adapt the current nutrition policies and governance mechanisms to adequately respond to the rising challenges with concrete multisectoral interventions. The World Health Organization recommends the implementation of ‘double-duty actions’ that are not necessarily new actions but are actions that are already used to address single forms of malnutrition but with the potential to address multiple forms simultaneously (Box 4).¹⁹

The policy actions in eight selected countries (Cambodia, Guatemala, India, Madagascar, Nepal, Nigeria, Rwanda and Tanzania) were extensively reviewed to determine if double-duty actions were incorporated in the existing three types of policies – nutrition, NCD and food security.²⁰ It was observed that the dou-

BOX 4

Double-duty actions include interventions, programs and policies that have the potential to simultaneously reduce the risk or burden of both undernutrition (including wasting, stunting and micronutrient deficiency or insufficiency) and overweight, obesity, or diet-related NCDs (including type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and some cancers).

(WHO, 2012)

ble-duty actions were incorporated in nearly all nutrition and NCD policies, but rarely within food security policies (Figure 4).

Actions with implications for obesity and diet-related NCDs, such as marketing regulations aiming to mitigate the food marketing practices that influence children’s food preferences and diet-related behaviors and outcomes, were increasingly included in NCD policies, but not as much in the nutrition policies. This emphasizes that multisectoral policies and specific sectoral policies still require better harmonization to amplify the benefits of interventions with effective utilization of resources.²⁰

Double-duty actions have the potential to address the common drivers of malnutrition through shared platforms



© Thahira Shireen Mustafa

Expectant mothers participate in a counseling session on infant and young child feeding in Vietnam

PANEL 1: Committing to double-duty actions in Vietnam

Vietnam has made great progress in combating under-nutrition and achieving the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of reducing child underweight and improvements in food security earlier than planned. In light of the new challenges facing the country, including – especially in urban areas – the rising prevalence of overweight and obesity, micronutrient deficiencies, and diet related noncommunicable diseases, the government recently launched its 2017–2020 National Plan of Action for Nutrition (NPAN) with the contributions of several line ministries and stakeholders.²¹

Vietnam has demonstrated a strong commitment to place nutrition as a high priority and to deliver for its people. This is also well reflected in the recently enacted and enforced pro-nutrition policy by including nutrition as part of the Communist Party’s Resolution No. 20/NQ-TW.

Learning from the implementation challenges of the previous NPAN, a Prime Minister’s Directive No: 46/CT-TTg was issued in 2017 calling upon all the ministries, sectors, and localities to coordinate effectively and strengthen multisectoral collaboration in implementing the NPAN 2017–2020. The prime minister has also requested an annual review and reporting on the results of the sectoral implementation of the activities.

The revised NPAN outlines defined roles and responsibilities of several sectors including health, planning and investment, agriculture and rural development, education and training,

information and communications, industry and trade, finance, labor, and culture, and seeks cross-sectoral collaboration for the implementation of the double-duty actions to address the double burden of malnutrition.

capitalizing on existing actions across multiple sectors. The increasingly growing multisectoral policy framework in countries, however, has been underutilized for the double burden of malnutrition and needs to be strengthened with double-duty actions that allow for clear lines of sectoral responsibilities for joint actions and a win-win result for individual ministries with limited resources.

Conclusion

The SUN Movement’s strategic role in working with committed governments to strengthen nutrition governance by ensuring stakeholder alignment and promoting country-owned and country-led strategies has been a recipe for success to anchor nutrition high in the political agenda. However, there is an urgency for SUN Movement member countries to translate their political commitments to address the double burden of malnutrition with a systems thinking approach to maximize the impact of double-duty actions. Systems thinking allows for multiple sectors to go beyond the policy setting and ensure coordination at every level of implementation by broadening their focus and working towards strengthening whole systems for improved nutrition outcomes.²²

SUN Countries have increasingly been applauded for their efforts to align efforts nationally through strengthened multistakeholder platforms that include relevant line ministries – across agriculture, health, education, social welfare, women’s affairs, and local government – and key partners including civil society, United Nations agencies, donors, the technical and research community, parliamentarians, media, and the private sector. Now, it is imperative that they lead the way by embracing a renewed multisectoral approach that addresses the double burden of malnutrition and advances the potential of double-duty actions. This requires breaking away from siloed thinking among sectors and enabling synergies with experience-informed and evidence-based policies and actions to deliver maximum gains for nutrition.

Disclosure statement: *The views, opinions and positions expressed in this article are the author’s own and do not reflect the views of any third party, affiliated entity or organisation.*

.....

Correspondence: *Thahira Shireen Mustafa,*

*Former Policy Advisor, Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement,
Palais des Nations, Geneva 1211, Switzerland*

Email: *thahirashireenmustafa@gmail.com*

.....

References

01. Garrett J, Natalicchio M, eds. Working multi-sectorally in nutrition: principles, practices, and case studies. Washington, DC: IFPRI; 2011.
02. Field JO. Multisectoral nutrition planning: a post-mortem. *Food Policy*. 1987;12(1):15–28.
03. World Bank. Improving nutrition through multisectoral approaches. Washington, DC: International Bank for Reconstruction and Development; 2012.
04. Ruel MT, Alderman H. Nutrition-sensitive interventions and programs: how can they help to accelerate progress in improving maternal and child nutrition? *Lancet*. 2013;382:536–51.
05. Ruel MT, Quisumbing AR, Balagamwala M. Nutrition-sensitive agriculture: what have we learned so far? *Glob Food Sec*. 2018;7:128–53.
06. Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement. SUN Principles of Engagement. Internet: scalingupnutrition.org/about-sun/the-vision-and-principles-of-sun/ (accessed 27 May 2018).
07. WHO. Maternal, infant and young child nutrition. Geneva: WHO; 2012.
08. WHO, FAO. Framework for Action, Second International Conference on Nutrition, Rome, 19–21 November 2014. Internet: www.fao.org/3/a-mm215e.pdf (accessed 11 September 2018).
09. United Nations Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform. Sustainable Development Goals. Internet: sustainabledevelopment.un.org/?menu=1300 (accessed 27 May 2018).
10. United Nations Decade of Action on Nutrition. Seventieth session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 2015. Agenda item 15 (A/70/L.42). Internet: www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/70/L.42 (accessed 27 May 2018).
11. WHO. Global nutrition policy review 2016–2017: country progress in creating enabling policy environments for promoting healthy diets and nutrition. Geneva: WHO; 2018.
12. Cullerton K, Donnet T, Lee A, Gallegos D. Playing the policy game: a review of the barriers to and enablers of nutrition policy change. *Public Health Nutr*. 2016;19(14):2643–53.
13. Pelletier D, Gervais S, Hafeez-ur-Rehman H, Sanou D, Tumwine J. Boundary-spanning actors in complex adaptive governance systems: the case of multisectoral nutrition. *IJHPM*. 2018;33(1):e293–e319.
14. Lamstein S, Pomeroy-Stevens A, Webb P, Kennedy E. Optimizing the multisectoral nutrition policy cycle. *Food Nutr Bull*. 2016;37(4_suppl):S107–S114.
15. Pomeroy-Stevens A, D’Agostino A, Adero N, Foehringer Merchant H, Muzoora A, Mupere E. Prioritizing and funding the Uganda nutrition action plan. *Food Nutr Bull*. 2016;37(4S):S124–S141.
16. Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, Learning (MEAL). 2016 Baseline report on key indicators. 2017. Internet: docs.scalingupnutrition.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/MEAL-Baseline-Report_O2112017.pdf (accessed 11 September 2018).
17. WHO. Global action plan for the prevention and control of non-communicable diseases 2013–2020. Geneva: WHO; 2013.
18. Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement. Annual Progress Report 2017. Internet: docs.scalingupnutrition.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/SUN_Main_Report_ENG_2017_WEB2.pdf (accessed 11 September 2018).
19. WHO. Double-duty actions: policy brief. Geneva: WHO; 2017.
20. Strengthening Partnerships, Results, and Innovations in Nutrition Globally (SPRING) Project. National policies and plans to address the dual burden of malnutrition: a multi country policy review. Arlington, VA: USAID/SPRING Project; 2018.
21. Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement. Vietnam champions the SUN Movement and leads the way for other SUN Countries. 2018. Internet: scalingupnutrition.org/news/viet-nam-champions-the-sun-movement-and-leads-the-way-for-other-sun-countries/ (accessed 11 September 2018).
22. Strengthening Partnerships, Results, and Innovations in Nutrition Globally (SPRING) Project. A systems thinking and action for nutrition: a working paper. Arlington, VA: USAID/SPRING Project; 2015.