InsIDe
Sight and Life

Our Experience with Nutrition Data at *Sight and Life*

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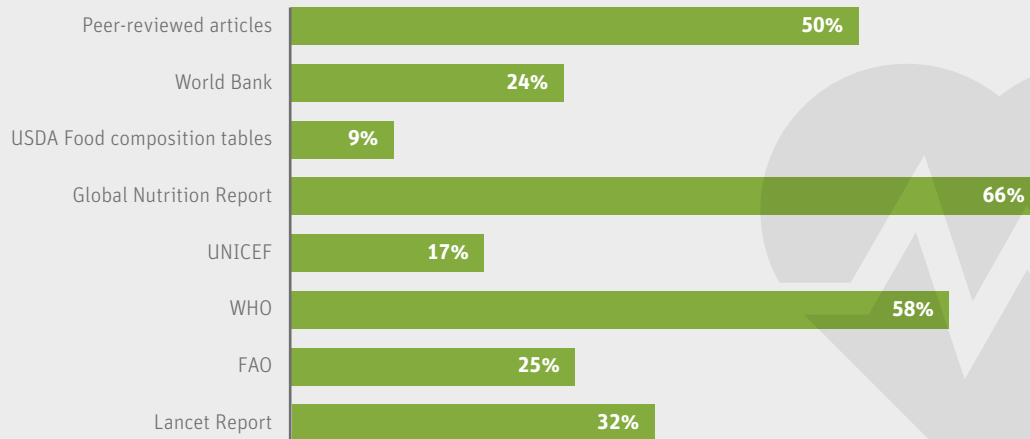### Public health nutrition data: a critical resource

Public health nutrition data is a critical resource to help us identify deep-rooted nutrition challenges and develop effective solutions to address them. While a vast number of nutrition databases seem to exist, we continue to face challenges in being able to utilize them effectively. The *Sight and Life* team therefore recently conducted a short internal survey to identify the challenges we face when working with nutrition data, with a view to finding ways to overcome them.

At *Sight and Life*, we strongly believe in the power of data to support our programs. More than 75 percent of the team are currently working on a project that involves using data on a regular basis. Projects we are currently conducting involve, for example: understanding the causes of anemia among adolescents in Indonesia; enabling smarter consumer choices through improved product labelling; using data to analyze dietary patterns among women of reproductive age; improving micronutrient intake, using mobile surveys to understand egg consumption; and turning analyzed data into easy-to-understand digital posters and infographics. These projects span all components of the entire data value chain, from defining priorities and data indicators to translating data into policies and making evidence-based decisions.

The *Sight and Life* team photographed on 6 December 2017. From left to right: Jennifer Bladt, Laura Prestel, Klaus Kraemer, Peiman Milani, Breda Gavin-Smith, Nola Martin, Eva Monterrosa, Kesso Gabrielle van Zutphen, Srujith Lingala, Kalpana Beesabathuni and Madhavika Bajoria.

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FIGURE 1: Go-to sources for public health nutrition data

Source	%
Peer-reviewed articles	50%
World Bank	24%
USDA Food composition tables	9%
Global Nutrition Report	66%
UNICEF	17%
WHO	58%
FAO	25%
Lancet Report	32%

The cumulative percentages in this graph add up to more than 100 because team members were able to pick multiple options

Despite the data-intensive nature of our work, our survey revealed a pronounced awareness of the insufficient availability of the high-quality data necessary for making well-informed programmatic decisions: 70 percent of the team felt that the public health data required to do their work was inaccessible, collected with insufficient frequency or unusable. Simple, granular and easy-to-analyze information is missing.

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What leads to the unreliability of data? What are some workarounds?
Incompleteness of data, lack of coherence, unaggregated data and the inability to compare data across time and geographies are all factors that lead to data unreliability. When asked about the biggest pain points in the current data sources, survey respondents cited as the main challenges: incompleteness of the data presented, outdated statistics, duplication and lack of coherence, inadequate national and subnational data, and lack of validated data sources.

While these challenges may appear overwhelming, creative workarounds can be found. Our knowledge and research manager noted that if she finds an interesting reference, she doesn't hesitate to go back to the original source just to compare and cross-check findings. Our social marketing expert finds that data

is often hard to interpret and visualize, especially qualitative data, and suggests using quotes to present examples of powerful insights. Other workarounds suggested by team members include talking with subject matter experts to obtain additional sources and insights, and doing one's own research when feasible and cost-effective.
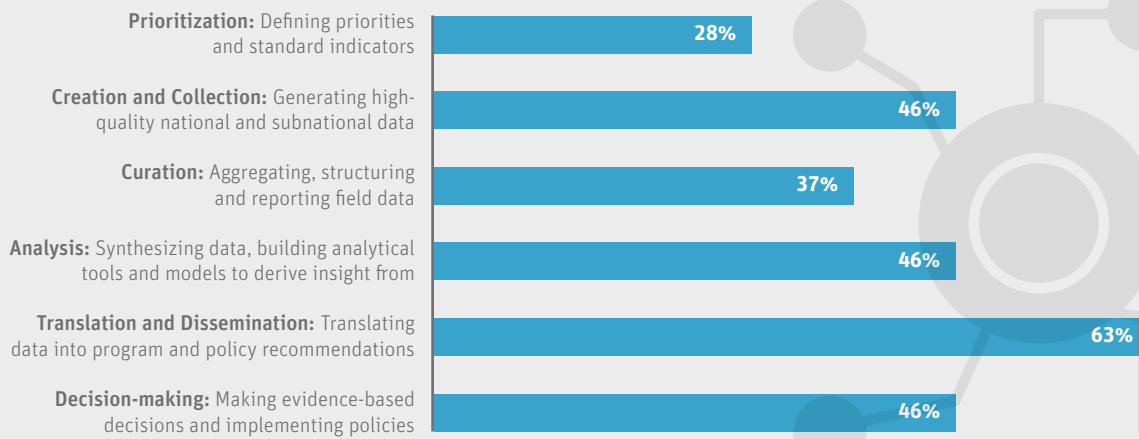
What makes for good and usable data?
Credibility, reliability and ease of use attract users to a data source: sources such as the Global Nutrition Report, EAT–Lancet, FAO, WHO and peer-reviewed articles are the go-to sources for public health nutrition data among the team (**Figure 1**). We find these sources credible, comprehensive and accurate, and they provide excellent starting points when embarking on a project or study. Team members also ascribe importance to data sources such as the FAO that provide straightforward statistics and statements accompanied by graphics.

> "Sources such as the Global Nutrition Report, EAT-Lancet, FAO, WHO and peer-reviewed articles are the go-to sources for public health nutrition data"

Which components of the data value chain would we like to see more of?
When our team members were asked which components of the data value chain they would like to see more of, *data trans-*

FIGURE 2: Components of the data value chain that the *Sight and Life* team would like to see more of

Prioritization: Defining priorities and standard indicators	28%
Creation and Collection: Generating high-quality national and subnational data	46%
Curation: Aggregating, structuring and reporting field data	37%
Analysis: Synthesizing data, building analytical tools and models to derive insight from	46%
Translation and Dissemination: Translating data into program and policy recommendations	63%
Decision-making: Making evidence-based decisions and implementing policies	46%

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lation and dissemination polled the highest, followed closely by *data creation and collection* and *data analysis and decision-making* (**Figure 2**). One team member noted that she would love to see more high-quality national and subnational data collected – granular data that are regularly updated, go beyond inadequate proxies and are a true reflection of what is actually happening on the ground. Without accurate data in the first place, it becomes difficult to recommend anything that is evidence-based at a higher level. At the same time, it is imperative to make good use of the data we already have to hand. We know so much more than ever before, and yet we struggle to translate that knowledge into practice. A lot of data is still too fragmented: it needs to be turned into a digestible and actionable format. Our technology and entrepreneurship manager notes the acute need for platforms that

analyze data and can help us derive crucial insights for easy dissemination.

Is the data required by our team readily available and easily accessible?

It is striking that none of our team members strongly agreed with the statement: "The data and information required to do my work is readily available and easily accessible." In fact, the internal survey reveals a general ambivalence toward data in nutrition on the part of respondents (**Figure 3**).

The gaps, challenges and opportunities identified by the *Sight and Life* team in this survey are explored in depth in this edition of the magazine. We hope that our analysis will provide valuable insights and stimulate constructive debate among practitioners, researchers and decision-makers in the nutrition space.

FIGURE 3: Does our team think the data necessary for their work is readily available and easily accessible?

Strongly disagree	10%
Disagree	30%
Somewhat disagree	30%
Somewhat agree	20%
Agree	10%
Strongly agree	0%