

Effective Multisectoral Partnerships among Government Ministries, Agencies, and Departments for Stronger Nutrition Programming in Selected Nigerian Southern States: Motivations, Achievements, Challenges and Recommendations

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Abstract

Background: Efforts to address malnutrition and its consequences in Nigeria have been on for more than 40 years with multi-stakeholders' involvement. Presently, there is limited opportunity for experiential learning to enhance performance.

Objective: This paper documented shared experiences, challenges and opportunities in nutrition programming, strategies and framework for better co-ordination and resource mobilization as envisioned by members of seven States Committee on Food and Nutrition (SCFN).

Methods: A two-day participatory workshop on strengthening multisectoral nutrition programming across states ministries, departments and agencies including technical and brainstorming sessions, group activities, opinion polls and plenary presentations was conducted. Thirty-two SCFN stakeholders from UNICEF Zone B states (Edo, Ekiti, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Osun, Oyo) participated including budget and economic planning, health, agriculture, and academia.

Results: Key motivation to promote personnel performance included conducive working environment, government commitment/funding support and performance-based reward. Common achievements included existence of approved State Strategic Action Plan of Food and Nutrition, yearly workplans, regular quarterly meetings, and periodic public nutrition education. Major challenges included poor political will, unfavourable hierarchical structure, inadequate budgetary allocation, weak coordination/collaboration, poor skills/competencies of nutrition desk officers, and dwindling partners' support. Recommendations included mainstreaming nutrition into government political and development agenda, continued sensitization and orientation of policy actors, re-orientation of nutrition desk officers, strengthen collaboration, entrenching the creation of State Council of Nutrition in subsequent nutrition policy review, enhance public awareness and media roles, and institute Nutrition Community of Practice platform.

Conclusion: Remarkable progress and surmountable challenges characterise nutrition programming in southern Nigeria. Experience sharing, better coordination, continuous learning and effective stakeholders' engagement are required to enhance nutrition funding, enabling environment, skills and competencies of nutrition actors.

Keywords: Multisectoral partnerships, nutrition programming, experiential learning; community of practice

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BACKGROUND

Efforts to addressing high burden of malnutrition and its consequences in Nigeria has been on for more than 30 years with the establishment of the National Committee on Food and Nutrition (1).

Government, development partners, academia, non-government organizations, community-based organizations, organized private sector, faith-based organizations and other groups have been actively

involved in these efforts. Moreover, government commitment to the efforts has prioritized creating enabling environments for all categories of stakeholders to successfully play their roles in reducing the burden of malnutrition in Nigeria (2). At the national level, efforts to bring the nutrition issues into the front burner had seen to the movement of coordination of nutrition activities from one ministry to another including the Federal Ministries of Health, Science and Technology, Agriculture and Rural Development, the National Planning Commission and ultimately to the Federal Ministry of Finance, Budget, and National Planning. In addition, the first attempt to show political commitment of the Federal Government to addressing malnutrition led to the development and approval of the first Nigeria's National Food and Nutrition Policy in 1991 and the Nutrition Strategic Plan of Action (3). These documents and the previous experience of the movement of the nutrition coordination unit and the International Resolution on the appropriate Ministry or Agency to coordinate nutrition activities in a country clearly reflect the multi-sectoral and multi-disciplinary nature of nutrition. Despite these steps and the doggedness of the various stakeholders in pursuing the nutrition goals and strategic plan of actions on nutrition in Nigeria, government laxity in provision of fund and effective coordination of nutrition activities at all levels made Nigeria's success with the first nutrition policy non-substantial. Till date, there is no published review of the performance of Nigeria's first Food and Nutrition Policy as well as the Strategic Plan of Action. This weakness is replicated across all the states of the federation and the federal capital territory, Abuja.

The second Food and Nutrition Policy was produced and approved in 2016 and the Costed Multi-Sectoral Plan of Action on Food and Nutrition was produced in 2019 (4,5). The multisectoral engagement of all the nutrition line ministries, departments and agencies, academia, professional associations, and development partners is one of the efforts to ensure the activities are funded and successfully implemented. Another interesting angle to these documents is the stratification of roles and funding sources among the stakeholders including the federal government of Nigeria, State Governments, Development Partners, Academia, Organized Private Sectors, among others. Like the earlier version, the documents re-emphasized the multisectoral and multidisciplinary approach to solving the problem of malnutrition in the country with the coordination roles residing with the Federal

Ministry of Budget and National Planning at the Federal level and the Ministry of Economic Planning or similar organization at the State levels. Furthermore, the need to ensure nutrition activities percolate to the grassroots informed the structural organizations that included the Local Government Area Committee on Food and Nutrition and Ward Committee on Food and Nutrition (4). Though many states have domesticated the Food and Nutrition Policy and developed the State Strategic Plan of Action on Nutrition, implementation largely remains poor, and these states are generally off-track in achieving the policy set goals. Despite the facts that the roles of the various Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs) are clearly defined, nutrition continues to be a complementary activity for other programmes in many states. This observation has been attributed to non-availability of funds to implement the nutrition related activities, and sometimes ineptitude of the nutrition desk officers, among others. Also, there is a wide gap in the functionality of the State Committees on Food and Nutrition and few states presently have functional Local Government Area Committee on Food and Nutrition. It is, therefore, imperative to address the organizational structure and encourage experiential learning among the nutrition stakeholders to make the best out of the current food and nutrition policy in Nigeria and across the various states.

United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF) is a major nutrition stakeholder supporting government efforts at promoting better nutrition outcomes in 19 of the 36 states in Nigeria. With 10 field offices across the federation, the organization is committed to strengthening the States and Local Government Area Committees on Food and Nutrition on sustainable and effective implementation of nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive programmes. Following the varied levels of success on system strengthening across the state, the Akure Field Office comprising of Edo, Ekiti, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Osun, and Oyo states support the creation of Community of Practice in Nutrition programmes among the SCFN actors in the zone.

A community of practice (CoP) refers to a group of people who share a common concern, a set of problems, or an interest in a topic and who come together to fulfill both individual and group goals. Evidence has identified several benefits of a Community of Practice (CoP) including, exchange of information and knowledge, increased collaboration, creation of new ideas/knowledge (innovation), enhanced professional development and rapid problem-solving. To this end, the UNICEF

Akure Field Office in conjunction with the State Committees on Food and Nutrition organized a two-day meeting to promote community of practice towards improving nutrition programme implementation. The objective was to engage selected members of the SCFN to share experiences on the challenges and opportunities in nutrition programming and strategies to mitigate these challenges; and develop framework for better co-ordination, effective monitoring and resource mobilization for nutrition related policies and programmes. This effort is expected to improve coordination with MDAs and development partners, unlock resources for nutrition, and promote effective utilization of resources allocated to nutrition programmes/interventions. Furthermore, the effort sought to evaluate what was working, what was not working and the whys, and use this understanding to devise game-changing strategy. Therefore, this paper document shared experiences, challenges and opportunities in nutrition programming, strategies and framework for better co-ordination and resource mobilization as envisioned by members of seven States Committee on Food and Nutrition (SCFN).

MATERIALS AND METHOD

The meeting adopted a participatory approach including technical sessions with presentations from facilitators, brainstorming sessions, group activities and plenary presentations. A total of thirty-two stakeholders across the six states of UNICEF Akure field office (Edo, Ekiti, Ogun, Ondo, Osun, and Oyo) and Lagos state participated in the programme. Participants were drawn from the states committees on food and nutrition including the Ministries of Budget and Economic Planning, Health, and Agriculture and Rural Development, States Primary Health Care Boards, Department of Agriculture of the Local Government Area, and Academia. Each state delegation was led by the Permanent Secretary of the Ministries of Budget and Economic Planning, or his/her representatives and other participants were mostly personnel in the directorate cadre. Participation across the states including one participant from Lagos state, two participants from the Federal Ministry of Finance, Budget, and National Planning, two participants from Academia, four participants each from Edo, Ekiti, Ogun and Osun states, five participants from Oyo state and six participants from Ondo state. Criteria for participation included having more than ten years working experience and been active in the nutrition space of their respective states in the last

three years. Moreover, nomination must be approved by the Chairperson of the State Committee on Food and Nutrition and submitted within the specified timeframe. All logistics arrangement was handled by Oyo state Ministry of Budget and Economic Planning and United Nations Children Fund Akure Filed Office. Funding was provided by United Nations Children Fund Akure Filed Office and the meeting was fully residential at Ilaji Hotels and Sports Resort, Akaran, Oyo State. Ground rules were set by the participants to minimize distractions and ensure full participation of all the stakeholders. The Federal Ministry of Finance, Budget and National Planning provided overview of the roles and responsibilities of the National/State Committees on Food and Nutrition and shared efforts in ensuring multisectoral implementation of nutrition programmes in Nigeria. Opinion polls on the motivating factors at work was conducted, and the achievements of the various SCFNs over the past few years were thoroughly deliberated. Presentations on nutrition programme implementation including the key achievements and challenges were made by all the seven participating states. In addition, recommendations for improved performance were developed by the various state teams and finalised at the plenary sessions. .

Data Management and Analysis

All the states presentation were delivered and submitted for harmonization. Outcomes were presented in figure, tables, and charts for ease of comparison. Opinions were summarized in word clouds, key achievements and challenges were summarized in Tables and mapped to state. Discussions at the group meetings and plenary sessions were summarized and analysed thematically to tease out major recommendations.

RESULTS

Motivation

The outcome of the opinion polls on what motivates the participants to be committed in achieving assigned tasks or roles in their offices is as indicated in Figure 1. Largely enabling or conducive environment constitutes the major motivating factor. Other major factors included government commitment and funding support, putting smiles on peoples' faces or perceived impact on the population, and encouragement for a good job. Other notable motivations included passion to excel, stability and job security, self-recognition, extra allowance, and good welfare package.



Figure 1: Drivers of Motivation at Work

Achievements of the States Committee on Food and Nutrition

The focus of the states committees on food and nutrition is similar across the states and principally tweaked towards promoting good nutrition and health for all population age groups, and particularly reducing maternal, infant and children mortality and morbidity through enhancement and promotion of early child nutrition and care with emphasis on children in the 0-5 age group and women. The key achievements across the state are summarized in Table 1. All the states had quarterly State Committee on Food and Nutrition meetings except Ekiti where the meeting was held only two times in a year. Conversely, only Edo and Ondo states currently have Local Government Committee on Food and Nutrition. All the states had current State Strategic Action Plan of Food and Nutrition, from which the yearly workplans were regularly drawn. Capacity building of nutrition personnel was conducted in Ekiti, Lagos, Ondo, Osun, and Oyo states. The area of capacity building included infant and young child feeding, the use of National Health Management Information System data tools, effective memo utility and accessing funds. These are geared towards improving the skills and competencies of nutrition officers, nutrition focal persons and desk officers in mobilizing resources for nutrition programming and effectively engage various stakeholders for efficient service delivery. All the states were involved in local production of blended and enriched complementary foods and periodic sensitization/public nutrition education. Despite the availability of approved Strategic Action Plan of Food and Nutrition in all the seven states,

only four states (Lagos, Ondo, Osun, and Oyo) had fund released for nutrition programmes at the state level and only Ondo State had funding release for nutrition programme at the local government area level. In addition, only Ondo State had increased nutrition manpower within the 2022-2023 period with the recruitment of 38 nutrition officers. All the states conducted advocacies and had series of special programmes including the Maternal, Newborn and Child Health Week, celebration of notable nutrition days including the World Food Day, World Breastfeeding Week, nutrition symposium and sensitization on early initiation and exclusive breastfeeding. Other activities are as indicated on the Table 1.

Challenges in Driving Nutrition Activities

The various challenges across the states in the coordination and delivery of nutrition services is presented in Table 2. A major challenge that is common to all the states is the poor political will of the state executive council/government. This is demonstrated by inadequate funding of nutrition programmes which cut across the political functionaries including the executive governors, their deputies, commissioners, permanent secretaries, and directors in nutrition line ministries. Furthermore, the hierarchical organizations in the MDAs which make it difficult for the nutrition professionals to head units despite the elongation of the nutrition career progression up to level 17 makes prioritization of nutrition related activities difficult. Many of the nutrition desk officers that represent MDAs at the SCFN meeting lacks decision making power and may not be at sectoral meetings where

Table 1: Key achievements of the States Committees on Food and Nutrition

Achievement	Edo	Ekiti	Lagos	Ogun	Ondo	Osun	Oyo
Quarterly SCFN meeting	✓	1/2	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Inauguration of functional LGCFN	✓				✓		
Domestication of the NPFN, State strategic action plan on Nutrition and yearly workplan	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Capacity building of nutrition personnel		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Budget line for nutrition	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓
Funding of nutrition programmes at state level			✓		✓	✓	✓
Funding of nutrition programmes at local government area level					✓		
Recruitment of Nutrition Officers					✓		
Joint SCFN and LGCFN meeting	✓						
Advocacy	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Special programmes (MNCHW, World Food Day, World Breastfeeding Week, Supportive Supervision on Infant and Young Child Feeding Practices (IYCF)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Local production of blended and enriched complementary foods to manage Moderate Acute Malnutrition	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Regular appraisal of nutrition line MDAs by MBEP			✓				
Periodic sensitization and public nutrition education	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Promotion of nutritious foods and food demonstration				✓			✓
Scale-up of home-grown school feeding and health programmes						✓	
Promotion of home gardening (demonstration plot)				✓	✓		✓

Table 2: Challenges in driving nutrition activities across the states

Challenges	Edo	Ekiti	Lagos	Ogun	Ondo	Osun	Oyo
Poor political will of the state government (Inadequate funding for nutrition programmes)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Non release / delayed release of approved fund		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Non implementation of nutrition activities in Basic Health Care Provision Fund		✓					
Lack of support for care givers of malnourished children		✓					
Delay in the buy-in of the Nutrition Policy			✓				
Lack of budgetary allocation for nutrition activities in other line agencies	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Lack of adequate knowledge on the importance of Nutrition by stakeholders in other line agencies	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Inadequate Partner support for Nutrition activities/Dwindling partners funding and technical support		✓		✓		✓	
Inadequate supply of nutrition commodities such as Ready-to-use Therapeutic Foods (RUTF) for the management of severe acute malnutrition		✓				✓	
Weak coordination within MDAs and with development partners	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Working in silos	✓		✓		✓		✓
Incessant change of nutrition focal persons/desk officers representing each MDA at SCFN meetings		✓	✓				✓

decisions on funding are made. Some of the states even had the experience of approved funds not being released or re-directed to other activities, or where releases were delayed thereby hindering optimal and timely implementation of nutrition programme. Nutrition programming across the various states is limited and many planned programmes under the state strategic plan of action on nutrition and basic health care provision fund remain unimplemented. Other cross-cutting challenges across the state included lack of budgetary allocation for nutrition activities in non-health MDAs; weak coordination among MDAs and Development Partners; and poor skills and competencies of nutrition desk officers across the nutrition line MDAs. The dwindling partners funding and inadequate partners support continue to affect many states following the withdrawal occasioned by perceived poor political commitment to nutrition. This situation has resulted in inadequate supply of nutrition commodities such as Ready-to-eat therapeutic foods and poor support to mothers of malnourished children. Other challenges included working in silo, as currently being practice by some MDAs (this should stop with immediate effect) and incessant change of nutrition focal persons/desk officers representing each MDA at SCFN meetings.

Recommendations for effective multisectoral nutrition programming

The challenges encountered by the SCFN across the states are not insurmountable, however, a careful and deliberate efforts need to be put in place. From the nutrition stakeholders perspectives, nutrition has not received the desired attention from decision makers because key nutrition messages remain abstract and are not aligned to business and political languages of these decision makers. Thus, the nutrition professionals need to learn these business and political languages and adopt same in pursuing nutrition advocacy through the multiple platforms. Secondly, nutrition advocacy and sensitization should be scaled up and advocacy templates should be tweaked to suit state specific context and demonstrate how nutrition could advance the development agenda of the current government. Furthermore, the use of key functionaries such as the first ladies as Nutrition Ambassadors has not been optimized in harnessing resources and curvy favourable dispositions to nutrition programmes in many states. With enormous influence of the office of the first ladies across the country, nutrition programming should be

marketed as a platform to reach and empower the most vulnerable populations and accelerate development at the household, community, and state levels. In addition, marginalization of nutrition unit and programmes across the MDAs has been a long-standing problem and the efforts of the Office of the Presidents in addressing this issue through the creation of nutrition departments across nutrition line MDAs is commendable. The creation of nutrition departments is expected to guarantee creation of budget line for nutrition and favour professional handling of these departments. Therefore, the successful implementation of this directive through the offices of the Heads of Service should be pursued. Furthermore, the fewness of nutrition professionals continues to constitute a barrier in nutrition programming, therefore more nutrition professionals need to be recruited and the headship of nutrition department across nutrition-line MDAs should be exclusive to trained nutrition professionals. Moreover, capacity building opportunities and supportive supervision should be provided for nutrition desk officers across the MDAs. In addition, prioritization of nutrition and prevention of marginalization of nutrition in funding across the MDAs requires the need to co-opt the Permanent Secretaries into the SCFN and ensure that personnel not below the rank of Assistant Director represent each MDA at the SCFN meeting. Such categories of personnel participate in sectoral decision-making meetings and would be able to defend nutrition budget and support adequate funding. Likewise, the increased interest in nutrition occasioned by the constitution of the National Council on Nutrition reflect the potential influence the State Council on Nutrition may achieve in accelerating nutrition inclusion and investment at the state level. Lastly, the success story of the Local Government Committee on Food and Nutrition in Ondo State with dedicated minimum funding of five hundred thousand per year (N500,000) has resulted in piloting demonstration plots to produce fruits and vegetables across the 18 local government areas of Ondo State. This scheme has been successfully implemented in three phases and private individuals have started replicating the process. This portrays the potential of the local government areas occasioned by the commitment of the staff and the political will of the administration in scaling up and increasing the coverage of nutrition programmes and promoting enabling environment for increased physical and economical access to nutritious foods.

DISCUSSION

In this report, conducive environment constitutes the major motivation for improved productivity for the nutrition stakeholders. These observations suggest the need to intensify efforts at ensuring a good working environment, sustained funding of nutrition activities and incentivizing good performance in the nutrition space to promote commitment and sustain stakeholders' motivation and commitment. Studies across the globe have shown investment in employees' motivation as a veritable pathway to enhance work performance (6,7). This finding is also in agreement with the submission that rewards, and both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation impact on employee performance (8). In Nigeria, innovations that reward health workers inform of increased monetary gains and improved working environment have been shown to improve job performance (9,10). The ongoing accelerating nutrition results in Nigeria project is a notable programme that has adopted the use of performance-based financing in nutrition programming, however, reports of the impact on this approach is not yet available. The similarity of programme focus across the states committees on food and nutrition provide opportunity for inter-state collaboration in learning of best practices to promote successful implementation of nutrition programme. An earlier study documented challenges to effective multisectoral coordination to include limited openness in sharing of workplans and implementation strategies across sectors, working in silos, and duplication of nutrition efforts (2). Instituting a Community of Practice will contribute in overcoming these challenges. Evidence from nutrition in the United States of America has identified the benefits of this approach to include integration across public benefit programs and streamline access to services, modernized technology and shared missions among agencies, creation of human-centered experiences and enhanced access to additional resources (11). This suggests multiple benefits that these nutrition actors may derive from Community of Practice as they learn about programming in other states. Another key highlight is the variation in the compliance to the provided institutional framework for delivery and coordination of nutrition activities across the state. Only two states had functional local government committee on food and nutrition, and none present has ward committee on food and nutrition. This portends that our progress towards improving nutrition coordination is slow as nutrition coordination at the grassroot remains poor in many

states. This means opportunity to ensure nutrition coordination and presence of nutrition stakeholders across 774 local government areas and 8,813 wards in Nigeria is presently undermined. Likewise, the availability of the State Strategic Action Plan of Food and Nutrition in all the states is commendable and reflects policy back up for nutrition programme implementation. However, actual implementation remains limited. Although this may be attributed to funding challenges, it reflects poor priority presently accorded to nutrition activities in these states. It is imperative that the effort and investment geared towards ensuring availability of State Strategic Action Plan of Food and Nutrition be extended to ensure full implementation for these plans for improved nutrition outcomes. Special programmes which often enjoy the support of development partners constitute the major programme nutrition programmes in many states. This re-emphasizes the observed low level of implementation of the State Strategic Action Plan of Food and Nutrition and the need for the states to commit resources to improving nutrition across the seven states. The ongoing efforts on nutrition budget tagging is a welcome development to enhance prioritization of nutrition activities for funding at the state and federal levels. The recommendations of the stakeholders are considered germane. The multisectoral dimensions of nutrition demand the fluidity of nutrition professionals including the skills and competencies to effectively engage different categories of stakeholders in promoting nutrition. This includes the use of context-relevant advocacy tool and alignment of key nutrition messages with the government priorities. Adeyemi et al identified the significance of improving political and governance structures and wider systemic capacity in promoting multisectoral coordination for better nutrition outcomes in Nigeria (2). Transforming the framework of nutrition coordination including the use of political functionaries and the creation of State Council on Nutrition appear promising. Adeyemi et al documented the creation of Kaduna Emergency Nutrition Action Plan (KADENAP) in 2016 headed by the first lady and coordination Steering Committee in Jigawa including the commissioners (2). This reflects the relevance of the political actors and other decision makers in changing the nutrition landscape in Nigeria. Recently, Bauchi state also inaugurated the State Council on Nutrition. Permitting flexibility in the nutrition coordination framework to enable adoption of innovations that could fast-track nutrition financing and inclusion at all levels is

therefore necessary.

Continuous capacity building of nutrition actors is a necessary investment to promote performance too. This can be in form of seminars, conferences, workshop, continuous professional development courses, among others. Evidence from Nigeria has reported extensive gaps in knowledge and practice in nutrition workforce (12). The limited in-service training opportunity in the Nigeria nutrition sector is a barrier to nutrition programming. There must be deliberate efforts to institutionalize in-service trainings and promote acquisition of soft skills and management skills that would improve the performance of the nutrition actors. This effort will strengthen collaboration and linkage with the development partners, academia, government MDAs, and other stakeholders as demonstrated in the nutrition capacity building in the Nigerian agricultural sector (12). This could also promote openness and prevent working in silos which is common with nutrition activities in Nigeria. Finally, the media complicity in underreporting the burden, severity, and consequences of malnutrition need to be addressed. Adequate media coverage of nutrition activities and the essentiality of nutrition consideration in government decision-making. The nutrition professionals, the development partners, community-based organizations, academia, and professional associations should effectively engage the media professionals in sensitization of the public and calling the policy makers attention to the issue of malnutrition and how it impedes development at all levels. Evidence has shown that increased availability of scientific information has not always increased people's knowledge and this calls for the media to present balanced information from credible sources and communicate in ways in which the general population can understand (13).

CONCLUSION

Several progresses have been made in nutrition programmes across the various states under UNICEF Akure B field Office and the challenges in the nutrition space in these states are not insurmountable. With experience sharing, better coordination, continuous learning and engagement of various stakeholders, nutrition funding, enabling environment, skills and competencies of nutrition desk officers and commitment of staff and policy makers can be improved. The need to work together to share experience is vital for successful nutrition programming in these states. To this end, there is a need to constitute Nutrition Community of Practice to promote networking, ensure effective

communication including debriefing after successive meetings and strengthen multisectoral collaboration among nutrition line ministries, departments, and agencies.

Conflict of interest

The authors have no competing interest to declare.

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