

Action brief

Inclusion of nutrition during emergencies in Viet Nam national nutrition policy

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Country: Viet Nam

Themes: Nutrition-sensitive interventions

Sub-themes: Humanitarian-development nexus: nutrition programming

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Overview



The National Target Program for Energy Malnutrition Control has been conducting an emergency response focusing on nutrition in Viet Nam since the 1990s. Activities have focused on anthropometric measurement (to detect malnourished children and monitor children's growth); water, sanitation and hygiene; and nutrition education. In 2016, a substantive project supported by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) was launched to respond to the drought and salt intrusion in six provinces of Viet Nam. The work on this project and the resulting outcomes promoted the obligation of including nutrition during emergencies as a key component of Viet Nam's nutrition policy. Though the programme from UNICEF was limited to drought and salt intrusion and focused only on six provinces, there were deliberations among stakeholders on streamlining nutrition in emergency responses across the country. Concurrently,



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the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of prioritizing nutrition during emergencies.

Based on the UNICEF programme, Viet Nam's nutritional policy saw a broader focus on nutrition during emergencies in early 2020. Subsequently, the National Nutrition Strategy period 2021–2030 was approved in January 2022 and received budget approval in May 2022.



Objectives of the action brief

This brief will highlight the process of including nutrition during emergencies in the national nutrition policy in Viet Nam.



Period covered

Early 2020 to May 2022, during the COVID-19 pandemic era in Viet Nam.



What action was taken?

Preparations for nutrition during emergency responses were not previously included in annual nutrition plans in all levels of government (national, provincial, district and commune). This changed in 2022 with the approval of the National Nutrition Strategy period 2021–2030, which made nutrition during emergencies an activity line with a corresponding budget and monitoring indicators.

Key steps taken to ensure the inclusion of nutrition during emergencies in the national nutrition policy included:

1. The National Institute of Nutrition gathered evidence from previous research and outlined interventions that had proven to be successful and yielded positive outcomes for nutrition during emergencies.
2. Meetings were held with relevant stakeholders (see step 4), alongside national and international specialists and policymakers to write a draft proposal for nutrition during emergencies. The process and submission were closely monitored and revised based on feedback from government authorities.
3. The national technical guideline for nutrition in emergencies was established to guide fundamental activities in emergency nutrition and to provide resources on advocacy and organizing effective and comprehensive responses. It also serves as a guide to establish and equip the various stakeholders in responding to nutrition in emergencies.
4. The whole planning process was led by the National Institute of Nutrition, supported by the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, local governments, the Provincial Department of Health, United Nations agencies, the SUN Movement, and non-governmental organizations. Overall, this was a multisectoral effort involving these stakeholders.

5. Emphasis on nutrition during emergencies was also included in other national targeted programmes such as the National Target Program for Social Economic Development in Ethnic Minority and Mountainous Areas, the National Target Program for Sustainable Poverty Reduction, and the National Target Program for Rural Development in the 2021–2025 period.

Key lessons learned:

- Leadership: Strong leadership is highly important to push for any agenda – in this case, the inclusion of nutrition during emergencies in national policy.
- Sustained engagement: A multi-stakeholder approach with consultations creates sustained commitment from all stakeholders.
- Adapting to the context: Though the deliberations were focused on nutrition during emergencies, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the nutrition status of Viet Nam's population was key to fast-track the inclusion of nutrition during emergencies into national policy.
- Evidence base: The results of the UNICEF project on nutrition also supported the case for streamlining nutrition policy during emergencies.
- Coordination: Complementing national technical guidelines and the national taskforce for nutrition in emergencies with planning and implementation modalities (in a streamlined and non-ad hoc basis) was critical to push for approval.

These strategies and key lessons have been applied to inform the overall response of Viet Nam to the food and nutrition crisis.



What would the country do differently?



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The challenges identified during the process include:

- Under- or overestimation of planning activities for nutrition in emergencies and a lack of key forecasting tools.
- The need for capacity-building of health staff and raising awareness in the community of nutrition during emergencies.
- Natural disasters and pandemics (such as COVID-19) challenge the health system. Initially, most of the focus on nutrition during emergencies concerned natural disasters in Viet Nam, but there is now a double burden of disasters and pandemics.
- Reduced resources were experienced, including in budgets and the health workforce.

- As the process for addressing nutrition during emergencies was only recently approved, it will take time to achieve the expected outcomes to determine how effective the policies have been and whether they need reforming.

To address these challenges, the country applied the following:

- Supported provinces with information and data collection to improve the quality of data used for planning activities.
- Organized training for health staff and enhanced nutrition education and communication for communities.
- Collaborated with other stakeholders to provide technical and financial support for nutrition in emergencies.
- Continued to engage relevant stakeholders in policy advocacy for nutrition in emergencies.



Adaptation and applicability

Five key lessons to share with other countries include:

- **Identifying a leader to advocate for nutrition during emergencies is important.**
- **A national nutrition coordinating body such as the National Institute of Nutrition (NIN) is necessary to lead the process.**
- **Generate a strong evidence base to support the case being advocated for.**
- **Implement a multi-stakeholder approach that also involves the whole of society.**
- **Mobilize local governments to support the cause. This also mitigates the challenges of adapting the approach to different geographical and social settings.**



Next steps

- Capacity-building of health staff at each health system level on nutrition during emergencies.
- Development of forecasting tools to better plan for nutrition during emergencies.
- Education, engagement and communication for increasing community awareness.
- Securing the supply of resources, including predicting what would be required.
- Formulation of an evidence-based investment case to maintain the momentum and priority of nutrition in emergencies among policymakers and decision makers.



Further information



National Nutrition Strategies 2021–2030



Report of 2016 UNICEF project responding to drought and salt intrusion in six provinces

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