



Regional workshop on Nutrition Capacity Building: Dissemination of results and way forward

Bangkok, 16 May 2013

Executive Summary

Responding to the need for a viable approach to the persistent problem of stunting and anaemia in children and women in South and Southeast Asia, the EU has partnered with UNICEF to support a new initiative: the Maternal and Young Child Nutrition Security Initiative in Asia (MYCNSIA). One of the four interrelated Result Areas of that initiative is to develop an approach for capacity building of decision-makers, service delivery personnel and communities. To begin the process, UNICEF contracted an international consultancy firm to do a nutrition capacity assessment in three of the five countries targeted by MYCNSIA: Nepal, Indonesia, and Bangladesh. A team of two international nutrition consultants working with the local UNICEF office assessed nutrition capacity in each country through literature review, key stakeholder interviews, and institutional visits to academic and other training venues. A written report was prepared with recommendations to government counterparts and other stakeholders. Reports were consolidated into a Regional Overview Report and summary presentation. A meeting was organized to discuss the summary report and summaries of each country report, attended by donor agencies, academia, NGOs, and representatives of government and the United Nations. The results of the assessment were organized around capacity needs at the individual and community, workplace, organizational and systems level.

At the individual and community level, the most immediate need is for raised community awareness around the prevalence, prevention, mitigation and seriousness of undernutrition, particularly stunting and anaemia, and a recognition that their causes go beyond food alone. A focus on the community is essential as this is where inequalities have their greatest impact; capacities at this level dictate those needed at each level of the system. At the workplace level, there is a need to define job competencies needed for public nutritionists, along with those needed for supportive supervisors. Adequate job descriptions would capture these. At the organizational level, multisectoral coordination and collaboration among involved sectors through a mandate from the highest authority in the government is the greatest need; using the authority of a line ministry has not been successful. All countries are in need of a professional work force in public nutrition; even where a work force exists, large numbers of nutritionists are not being used appropriately for public nutrition. Considerable effort is needed to train and coordinate the enormous community workforce that exists across sectors in each country. At the system level, there must be greater academic and other institutional support for public nutrition. Most training in nutrition is clinical and individual based; there are no courses or institutions with accreditation in public nutrition; certification of public nutritionists through a formal licensure process is absent. The kind of regulatory councils that exist for medicine and nursing do not exist in public nutrition. These functions will take on new significance with the inauguration of the ASEAN Economic Community in 2015 with easy cross-border movements of professionals from member countries.

Initially, since countries will have to outsource training from regional institutions, a capacity assessment was done of educational institutions in Southeast Asia for nutrition training. Most courses surveyed, though under the name 'nutrition,' provide clinical nutrition, food sciences and dietetics courses. A local list of five institutions in South and Southeast Asia and one in Australia are imminently available. The group were told about hybrid distance learning models that combined on-line learning with episodic face-to-face encounters.

Recommendations are organized according to their impact horizon: impact in 2-3 years (short term), 4-6 years (medium term) and 7-10 years (long term). All are to be started now if they are to be implemented in a timely and efficient manner. A key recommendation is to develop area based programs in focused districts where capacity in all spheres of the analysis could be developed and applied. This would require: in-service training of available staff and supervisors initially by outside trainers; placement of a District level nutrition professional under the District government to plan and coordinate multisectoral inputs; improvements in logistics and infrastructure; the development of a nutrition monitoring system. Simultaneously, each country needs to develop its own academic capacity in public nutrition through collaboration with regional institutions by sending a significant group of national staff to participate in 3-4 month graduate certificate programs, and a smaller group of promising junior professionals to enrol in 1-2 year Master's level courses in public nutrition. The senior government chairperson of the multisectoral steering committee should assign accountabilities in nutrition specific and nutrition sensitive interventions to appropriate sectors, and then ask for direct periodic progress reports. Additionally, policies will be needed that regulate the marketing of breast milk substitutes and the importation of highly processed and calorically dense foods, that protect the poor from food price fluctuations, and that protect women for the six months of exclusive breastfeeding. Involvement of the ASEAN community was recommended.

There were two additional presentations:

Menzies School of Health Research reported on the major findings of a desk based review of nutrition capacity development issues and activities in 30 countries across Asia and the Pacific. The presentation included findings on nutrition profile data, currency of nutrition policies, strategies and plans, existing in-service and pre service nutrition courses and some of the content of these courses available to countries in the region, nutrition capacity needs assessments and other reported issues related to nutrition capacity.

The review found that while there are similarities in nutrition capacity needs and issues across Asia and Pacific Island Countries (PICs), there are unique challenges to both. Positioning PICs to address the double burden of undernutrition and overweight and obesity will require targeted investment in the development of appropriate and accessible nutrition training and supporting the development of realistic nutrition policies strategies and plans. With an exception of a few, most countries in Asia had updated nutrition strategies and plans. The on-going issue of underweight and the emerging issues of overweight and obesity in many countries requires attention and capacity developed to address both issues. While a range of pre-service and in-service nutrition training is available, the quality and relevance is unknown with many courses focused mostly on clinical nutrition

Capacity development in the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) movement was presented to differentiate between 'supply' driven training programs and those driven by 'demand'; it was anticipated that

SUN member countries would make their needs for capacity development known, and that programs to respond to those needs would be planned accordingly.

A final Panel Discussion of participants from academic institutions discussed the viability of developing a regional network for capacity development. The lively discussion resulted in agreement on the following: enriching existing curricula made more sense than developing a new regional Public Nutrition curriculum; regional structures like ASEAN or SAARC should be enlisted for regional coordination; short courses offered by regional institutions made more sense initially than longer diploma level courses; joint courses between regional institutions including student exchanges should be explored; development of a hybrid distance learning model was advocated.

The workshop concluded with a sense of urgency to get work on the recommendations started but with caution to dedicate the same depth of analysis used for this capacity assessment to developing a regional approach. Convening a small working group that can start developing a regional approach was recommended as a logical first step to moving things forward.