Why should we adopt a nutrition sensitive approach?

The latest Lancet Series on Maternal and Child Nutrition (2013) – further confirmed that nutrition is crucial to both individual and national development. However, acknowledging the importance of nutrition is just the first step, and the challenge today is to ensure that all children can grow to reach their full potential. It is feasible -some countries, such as Brazil or Malawi, have been able to achieve impressive declines in stunting over the past two decades.

**Proven and effective interventions exist**, yet in some parts of West Africa, nearly half of children under five years old remain stunted.

**Why?** The answer to this question is quite simple: malnutrition is a multi-faceted problem, with causes across a number of sectors. Household food security, adequate care and feeding practices, as well as a healthy environment and access to health services are all important factors for optimal growth. Each one is necessary but not sufficient alone.

Implementing nutrition-specific interventions solely is not enough; according to the Lancet Series, the ten proven nutrition-specific interventions -if implemented together at large scale- could only reduce stunting prevalence by 20%. **Achieving a sustainable decrease in malnutrition rates requires an integrated response.**

Working together across different sectors is challenging but necessary.

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**Nutrition-sensitive VS nutrition-specific interventions**

Nutrition-specific interventions are interventions whose primary objective is to address nutrition and that target the immediate causes of undernutrition. Examples of nutrition-specific interventions are:

- Targeted Supplementary Feeding to treat moderate acute malnutrition
- Blanket Supplementary Feeding to prevent acute malnutrition
- Complementary Feeding to prevent chronic malnutrition
- Distribution of micronutrient powders to address micronutrient deficiencies

Nutrition-sensitive interventions are those whose primary objective is not nutrition, but that have the potential to improve the food and nutrition security of beneficiaries (as defined by the SUN framework).

There is no consensus yet on which interventions are covered by this definition, but most often these are activities that impact nutrition by addressing the underlying causes of undernutrition, e.g. agriculture and food security, health, care, education, water and sanitation etc.

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*“We require nothing short of transformation in our humanitarian and development thinking and in our performance of our actions. If our efforts remain fragmented, we will fail; fail to take advantage of the enormous opportunity that exists not just to tackle the problems but to begin providing the durable and sustainable solutions required. A 360-degree approach is required that brings together all our efforts from food to health to water and every other necessary sector for the sustainable food and nutrition future the world needs and wants.”*

Opening Remarks by the Executive Director on the Occasion of the 2014 Annual Board Session — Ertharin Cousin — 3rd June 2014

**Therefore nutrition sensitivity is one of the emerging challenges and a priority identified in WFP new Strategic Plan for 2014-2017:**

“It [the plan] further positions WFP to [...] reduce undernutrition by adopting a nutrition-sensitive approach across all programming and addressing chronic undernutrition as a specific priority, building on the results of the latest research on the importance of and best means for promoting nutrition, particularly for children in the first 1,000 days.”
Keeping nutrition in mind during the planning cycle

The Lancet identifies several ways to ensure that nutrition-sensitive programmes can effectively contribute to achieving nutrition outcomes:

⇒ Targeting on the basis of nutritional vulnerability

**Examples:**

- Target groups with the highest malnutrition rates
- Target groups that are the most vulnerable to malnutrition (children under five, pregnant and nursing women, prioritize the 1000 days window of opportunity)
- Target populations facing stress related to food security or other shocks

⇒ Identifying nutrition goals to maximize opportunities

1. identify which activities can impact on nutrition
2. detail a pathway to nutritional impact (how are the planned activities going to lead to a change in the nutritional status?)
3. design appropriate indicators and objectives to monitor and evaluate the impact

**Examples:**

- Example for school feeding activities: include in the project log frame an objective related to decreasing micronutrient deficiencies, and indicators to monitor dietary consumption and access to safe, diverse, and nutritious foods for school aged children
- Example of indicator: average number of school days per month when school children received foods from a minimum of four different food groups

⇒ Engaging women and including interventions to protect and promote their nutritional status, wellbeing, social status, decision making and overall empowerment as well as their ability to manage their time, resources and assets

**Examples:**

- Distribute food/cash transfers in a gender sensitive way
- Focus on food crops grown by women
- Investing in technologies to ease/reduce women’s workloads (typically women’s tasks include weeding, harvesting, cooking etc.)

⇒ Using nutrition-sensitive programmes as delivery platforms for nutrition-specific interventions

**Examples:**

- Link food/cash transfers to health and nutrition services
- Incorporate nutritional behaviour change communication into agriculture programmes

⇒ Integrating interventions from different sectors so that they reach the same communities, households, and individuals

**Examples:**

- In Niger, the “communes de convergence” project brings a number of actors together to implement nutrition, food security and other types of intervention in the same communities
- Initiatives such as SUN (Scaling Up Nutrition) and REACH (Renewed Efforts Against Child Hunger) are helping the countries to apply an intersectoral approach to the fight against malnutrition. 15 out of the 19 OMD countries have joined the SUN movement, and 9 have adopted the REACH approach.
How to unleash the potential of WFP nutrition sensitive interventions?

Understanding the causal chain

First of all, it is important to understand how WFP’s interventions can have an impact on the underlying causes of malnutrition and consequently the nutritional status of children. **Agriculture and social safety nets are two of the sectors in which interventions can have the greatest impact on nutrition:** they address crucial underlying factors (supporting livelihoods, food security, diet quality and women’s empowerment), they are implemented on a large scale and can reach poor and malnourished populations (*Lancet Series 2013*). WFP programmes that can contribute to improved nutrition outcomes include General Food Distributions (GFD), School Feeding, Purchase for Progress (P4P), and food for work/asset/training (FFW /FFA / FFT):

Making WFP’s non-nutrition interventions improve nutrition outcomes

While a programme may have positive consequences on one or several underlying factors of undernutrition, these are not necessarily translated into an improvement in mother and child nutrition status*. For example, because WFP’s school feeding programme or livelihood assets activity can have an impact on food consumption and dietary diversity does not mean that improvements will be observed in weights of children from households of targeted beneficiaries.

**Planners need to think through how their programmes can improve nutrition and achieve nutrition objectives and explicitly and adequately integrate actions that will enable this to happen from the planning stage.**

*It is often said that a picture can tell a thousand words. Sometimes the same can be said for an indicator. Stunting – a measurement of chronic malnutrition – is one such indicator. [...] Stunting is a complex biological indicator but it is one that uniquely captures the deep rooted causes of childhood malnutrition. It reflects the persistent poverty of a country, the disruptive wars it has undergone, the inflictions of infectious disease, the poor health care access, sanitation, hygiene and child care, as well as the lack of access to and consumption of nutrient dense foods.”*  

Jessica Fanzo, Director of nutrition policy at the Center on Globalization and Sustainable Development, Columbia University
Examples of selected nutrition sensitive interventions that have been proven to be effective

There is a lot of ongoing research to review evidence of impact of past interventions. However, further research is still required to better understand how nutrition sensitive interventions can impact nutrition, and pilot projects with rigorous monitoring and evaluation can help enrich the evidence database. The table below presents selected findings from the Lancet review (Marie T Ruel et al., Lancet 2013) that are of particular interest for WFP and their implications for our work in the region.

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<th>Impact on the underlying determinants</th>
<th>Evidence of impact on maternal &amp; child nutritional status</th>
<th>Implications for WFP</th>
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| Agriculture Bio-fortification of staple crops | * Helps prevent micronutrient deficiencies  
* Strong evidence on the significant increase in child vitamin A status for orange sweet potatoes  
* Evidence that iron bio-fortified rice and beans improve iron status  
* Delivery capacity in terms of scale yet to be shown | ”Bio-fortification is a promising avenue for improving the micronutrient content of populations’ diets. In selected countries, WFP will explore the possibility of linking partners that promote the uptake of newly developed varieties to farmers’ organizations and other WFP vendors under the P4P pilot.” WFP Nutrition Policy  
* Possible partner: HarvestPlus |
| Social Safety Nets Conditional cash transfers | * Mixed evidence  
* Evaluation studies too poor to draw definite conclusion (quality of the study, small sample sizes, few studies, possible effect of other factors not being addressed) | Programme design should be more nutrition sensitive, since some aspects of it can dilute the nutritional effect including poor timing and short duration of maternal and child exposure, absence of clear nutrition goals, etc.  
* Ways to ensure the income increase translates into better nutrition include: providing frequent and small amount payments, increasing women’s access and control over resources, providing nutrition education in parallel, targeting the most vulnerable populations and the critical 1000 days window of opportunity, etc.  
* Pilot project s to contribute to the evidence base |
| Social Safety Nets School feeding | * Schooling directly increases individual earnings. It gives the individual the opportunity to acquire information and nutrition knowledge, and has positive effects on several other basic determinants  
* School feeding increases individual food consumption and dietary diversity | Positive effect on weight gain in the context of undernutrition  
* Might also benefit younger siblings (school meals or take-home rations)  
* Improved iron nutrition especially for adolescent girls (iron-rich school meals)  
* Education level of parents is consistently associated with child nutritional status: positive relationship between maternal level of instruction and child nutritional status  
|   | Point-of-use fortification with micro nutrient powders, increases the intake of essential micronutrients and contributes to enhanced cognitive and learning capacity among school-age children. WFP currently implements point-of-use fortification programmes for school-age children in four countries of the region, and this should be scaled up since micronutrient deficiencies are widespread in West Africa.  
* The school is also a good delivery channel for other nutrition specific/sensitive interventions. |
References and further reading


[4] FAO (2014), Synthesis of guiding principles on agriculture programming for nutrition


The immense potential of programmes addressing the underlying determinants of undernutrition to complement and enhance the effectiveness of nutrition specific interventions is real, but is yet to be unleashed. Investments in nutrition-sensitive programmes can have a pivotal role in prevention of the excess stunting, wasting, and impaired child development that the scale-up of nutrition-specific interventions cannot resolve on its own.”

Marie T Ruel et al., Lancet 2013