

Intersectoral Coordination for Nutrition in Zambia

Scott Drimie, Subrata Kumar Chakrabarty, Christopher Dube, Marjolein Smit-Mwanamwenge, Rahul Rawat and Jody Harris

Abstract The underlying determinants of nutritional status are adequate food, health and care; the goods and services related to these will necessarily be available from a range of sectors, provided in a coordinated fashion for maximum effect. Despite this recognition, there is currently little evidence of coordination between nutrition-relevant sectors in Zambia. In Mumbwa District, a facilitated process is underway to coordinate ministries and NGOs involved in the provision of nutrition-related services. The creation of a District Nutrition Coordination Committee (DNCC) has been useful, and sustained facilitation has built trust and mutually supportive learning between diverse stakeholders. While recognising that it will take time for fully effective and implementable solutions to emerge, the DNCC is a potentially durable and effective way of addressing undernutrition over the long term. This article describes some of the theories, processes, challenges and learning from the first two years of the DNCC in Mumbwa.

1 Introduction

It has long been recognised that the key underlying determinants of nutritional status can be summarised as ‘food, health and care’ and that the public goods and services relating to their provision will necessarily come from a range of sectors – in particular agriculture and health – preferably provided in a coordinated fashion for maximum effect (UNICEF 1990; Ruel *et al.* 2013; Garrett 2008; Gillespie, Harris and Kadiyala 2012). The nutrition community, however, has not yet overcome the political and institutional challenges to fostering the coordination necessary for efficient delivery of these key elements. There is no consensus on how intersectoral solutions are best implemented or institutionalised, and there is a clear lack of evidence on how to facilitate and sustain these, particularly at the local level, where implementation actually occurs (Harris and Drimie 2012).

Based on this premise, a key question is how can such an integrated approach be implemented in practice? Some interesting and important evidence is beginning to emerge, in particular in Zambia. In response to this societal problem of undernutrition, specifically child stunting, a somewhat unique collaborative innovation has become evident which involves different sectors across government, civil society and advocacy groups coming together to learn and act in new ways. This collaboration involves the application of international thinking in a local context with tentative links to communities. It is a coordinated innovation that cuts across different levels, scales and sectors, which provides an important case study of co-innovation to address the complex and ‘wicked’ problem of stunting. This is explored below.

2 Challenges facing alignment and coordination

A key dilemma emerging from the nutrition literature is that although many of the solutions to malnutrition are relatively well known and understood, its complex and

multisectoral nature has made coordinated implementation across sectors difficult (Benson 2007, 2008). Although mutual gains can be made for different sectors, particularly agriculture and health, it has been a challenge to work together in a variety of contexts (Garrett 2008; Garrett and Natalicchio 2011). Previous experiences suggest three broad barriers to intersectoral collaboration for nutrition: (1) low political commitment and space for new ways of working; (2) existing routines and structures within sectors, not least of authority, finance and information, and weak coordinating bodies; and (3) lack of human resources and capacity, in strategic and management skills as well as technical (Harris and Drimie 2012).

In terms of the way government is structured, and the subsequent sector-specific resource flows and evaluation and incentive arrangements, there are good reasons for the sectoral structure of government. But this in turn shapes political space for working on different issues, and does have the unfortunate effect of not being sufficiently flexible to effectively address complex problems that do not fit neatly into the structure, with nutrition being one such issue (Benson 2011). The top-down nature of planning and financing processes in most government structures brings up issues around over-centralisation, and fragmentation into silo structures (Drimie and Ruysenaar 2010). An important dimension of this is that attempts to bring various government departments or ministries to work closely together must be seen in a financial context where the fiscal control and oversight of the Central State or National Treasury have to be adhered to. These arrangements do not easily allow for a ‘blurring of funds’ or alignment of plans for joint projects. In reflecting on this issue in the South African context, a former cabinet minister, Kader Asmal, argued that, ‘unless budget is allocated to the clusters – which it isn’t – then it can’t be “joined-up” decision-making’ and therefore ‘joined-up’

government for tackling cross-sector issues was an elusive reality (Calland 2007).

Low technical and management capacity and understaffing can be major causes of institutional stress and poor outcomes. The lack of human resources and capacity for nutrition programming has been found to constrain the implementation of even the most strategic and well-resourced programmes (Swart, Sanders and McLachlan 2008). Staff at the local level often do not possess the knowledge and skills needed to design and implement adequate interventions in various sectors, and often do not receive adequate national-level guidance. In reflecting on nutrition programming in South Africa, McLachlan and Garrett argued that ‘more of the same is not enough’ and suggested that capacity development must go beyond improved technical capacity, with less tangible skills for cross-sector working being in some cases more vital (2008). Of particular importance is the culture of public officials looking towards moving onwards and upwards in terms of their careers, which encourages an attitude of ‘facing upwards’ towards the next job prospect, rather than ‘facing downwards’ towards the ‘people on the ground’ (or indeed ‘outward’ to other sectors). Further, there is often a high turnover of incumbents, and a significant number move out of the agency or department where they are located, making it difficult to create a stable body of expertise in the functioning of a specific government structure (von Holdt *et al.* 2011). These issues have not been addressed by ‘business as usual’, and different ways of thinking and working are therefore needed.

3 The Mumbwa District Nutrition Coordinating Committee

According to the most recent Zambia Demographic and Health Survey, the national prevalence of stunting among children under five years of age is 45 per cent; this has remained little changed since the previous national survey (CSO *et al.* 2009). In response to these very high rates of child stunting, an intersectoral process has been initiated by the international non-governmental organisation (NGO), Concern Worldwide, to bring together relevant ministries and civil society organisations in one district, Mumbwa, under a coordination committee aiming to improve understanding and align activities for nutrition at local level.

This has been a unique process despite the increasing recognition at national level in Zambia of the importance of addressing stunting. Since at least 2009, Concern Worldwide, working in close collaboration with the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), has been intent on developing a cross-sectoral implementation model that reduces malnutrition in young children by combining agricultural interventions with nutrition and health activities. After a wide-ranging scoping phase, Zambia was selected partly because national level institutions such as the National Food and Nutrition Commission (NFNC) indicated an interest in such a process. Similar to many other countries, the NFNC lacked the political leverage to facilitate an intersectoral process to effectively compel representatives of different sectors to work together. This was largely because of its position under the Ministry of Health with its predisposition to addressing malnutrition through health

initiatives. This situation reflects the low relative power of the NFNC, as they have been unable to persuade a political leadership to assign nutrition as a priority despite its existence since 1968. It also reflects an entrenched structural issue as nutrition has been assigned to a ministry with a very specific mandate that is much narrower than what is required to address malnutrition. Concern Worldwide’s initiative therefore provided an opportunity to see what was possible at a local level.

As such, with Concern Worldwide’s initial facilitation, the Mumbwa District Nutrition Coordinating Committee (DNCC) was established by the district commissioner and includes district representatives from the ministries of Agriculture and Livestock (MAL), Health (MoH), and Community Development, Mother and Child Health (MCDMCH), as well as other ministries and civil society organisations working on nutrition in the district. The DNCC is officially recognised under the District Development Coordinating Committee (DDCC), an existing district body, and reports to it, and through that mechanism to the district council and provincial and national bodies. In addition, the DNCC has so far established four ward-level committees within the district to enable joint planning and implementation of activities close to communities.

The purpose of the DNCC has been to establish district-level institutional arrangements to realign and coordinate the activities of different actors to effectively address the intertwined causes of child stunting. To do this, the committee has set out to build on the strengths of existing actors, systems and capacities to facilitate a shift in how stunting is understood and addressed. The result of this process would be coordinated strategies and joint interventions for stunting prevention. Ultimately, the DNCC aims to demonstrate that intersectoral coordination and alignment, bringing in health, agriculture and other key sectors, is a viable and effective approach to address stunting, and to provide a practical example of how this can be achieved, sustained and replicated elsewhere in Zambia. If the DNCC could demonstrate how it had brought different sectors together in practical ways, then this would be a clear indication of success.

4 Underlying framework: learning and doing

At the outset of the project, it was recognised by Concern Worldwide as convenors of the process that the very nature of stunting would defy attempts to address it by simply combining approaches. Malnutrition, and in particular stunting, can be described as exhibiting many elements of a ‘complex social challenge’, which requires different ways of understanding and responding than have previously been employed (McLachlan and Garrett 2008): under-nutrition is *socially complex* because there are many players required to address it and many perspectives about how to do so. This is abundantly clear in the nutrition literature (Bhutta *et al.* 2008, 2013). The people involved see things differently, so perspectives become polarised and resolutions are not easily found. Stunting is also *dynamically complex* because people have difficulty grasping the consequences of not dealing with it as the causes and effects are often intangible in space or time. Addressing stunting is *generatively complex*, as its causes and

consequences are unfolding in unfamiliar and unpredictable ways. Therefore a first step to dealing with stunting is to acknowledge its complexity.

As such, the convenors agreed that a process would be facilitated to develop social innovation among key partners. This process was strongly informed by Theory U, which promotes a creative, learning approach that moves from changing the perceptions of participating actors, through experiential learning and sharing, to transforming their own sense of responsibility for change through dialogue and reflection, to ultimately acting on this (McLachlan and Garrett 2008; Senge *et al.* 2004). This approach has been used with success in the Southern Africa Food Lab, which was initiated to engage the similarly complex question of food insecurity in South Africa (SAFL and PLAAS 2013). In practice, applying Theory U has involved bringing together relevant actors in Mumbwa to share, understand and learn from their diverse perceptions of stunting. This process has meant deepened conversations and shared promises within a carefully selected group who have committed to addressing the issue. As the DNCC meets and learns more about malnutrition in the district through facilitated field visits, workshops and dialogue, the intention has been for creative and mutually supportive thinking and learning to emerge. Ultimately it is envisaged that the strengthened capacity, confidence and commitment of the actors involved in the committee would translate into the design and implementation of innovative solutions to help address stunting.

This process is therefore different in nature to other intersectoral committees that may have been established in the past. Intersectoral committees had been established before, for example to address HIV and AIDS. The intention here, however, was generally to convince actors of the need for all sectors to address HIV and AIDS and to coordinate sectors in the fight against the epidemic, rather than shifting the deep understanding and resultant action of the actors in meaningful ways. The intention of the DNCC, however, has been ultimately to initiate innovation. Three kinds of innovation are possible for realising change in the interests of addressing stunting in Mumbwa: the formation of new relationships; the development of new insights; and the generation of new commitment, vigour or energy to take risks to do something different. Out of these, new and creative actions are more likely to grow. The argument essentially pivots on the notion that individual change evident through new relationships, insights and commitment will translate into institutional change, which can ultimately lead to system change – necessary to nurture and sustain new ways of working.

Although establishing a committee that meets to share and learn may appear relatively simple, it has involved careful engagement with the political and bureaucratic power in the district. This is because officials report directly to line managers within ministries according to agreed upon and budgeted development priorities. Stepping away from this may have caused tensions without the support of the most senior official in the district, the district commissioner, who agreed to (symbolically) chair the DNCC. Similarly, the DNCC has received recognition

from the District Development Coordinating Committee (DDCC) as part of its structure and is required to report on activities quarterly. Having secured this political space, the DNCC could begin its learning process with the intent of translating this into new ways of working that would ultimately address stunting. This reflects an important lesson from the nutrition literature that the alignment of interests around nutrition improvement would inevitably need to be achieved through negotiation, contestation and settlement (Nisbett *et al.* forthcoming).

5 The experience of the DNCC

What then has been the experience of the DNCC with these broader issues in mind? When the committee was established in February 2012, after careful consultation with all the relevant stakeholders in Mumbwa, the agreed intention was to develop a model for sectoral integration for tackling undernutrition. As noted above, an early success was the rapid integration of the DNCC into the existing bureaucratic system; the DNCC was mandated by the politically appointed district commissioner, chaired by the most senior district official in the Ministry of Health, populated by officials from ministries and organisations with potential impacts on malnutrition, and constituted as a member of the DDCC. Creating a new structure is relatively straightforward; creating and sustaining a structure that effectively aligns and coordinates activities to address undernutrition is, however, somewhat different. Although it is too early to ascertain any effective impact on the ground, some key lessons have emerged around the process, which are discussed below.

5.1 Experiential learning and sharing

An important aspect of the coordination process has been the acceptance of the DNCC meetings as a space for learning and sharing, that part of the ‘business of the DNCC’ has been to learn and reflect, and that multiple perspectives are something of value. The process that has unfolded has not been led by preconceived solutions to addressing undernutrition but rather an approach that has developed incrementally, with inputs including prior evidence of what works and the perspectives of different parties involved, allowing real learning and a growing understanding of stunting among those involved in the DNCC. In this way, a common understanding about stunting and responses has emerged; although sector-specific views still pervade proceedings, actors have come to see stunting from several of these different perspectives.

This was exemplified when the DNCC developed both a ‘problem tree’ analysis of stunting in Mumbwa, as seen from a multisectoral perspective, as well as a ‘solution tree’ to guide responses, a potentially useful tool for fostering multisectoral understanding of an issue. The problem tree was created by first developing sector-specific analyses of the causes and consequences of stunting and then integrating these as a group. The exercise revealed a number of overlapping themes that enabled the DNCC to identify areas of possible collaboration. Having reviewed and agreed this analysis, the DNCC embarked upon a learning journey to a village two hours by road from Mumbwa town. A learning journey is a way of exposing a group of people who are united in their interest in a particular issue but diverse in their

positions and perspectives on that issue to the current realities, experiences and stories of people most directly affected by that issue. This exposure is an entry point into a deeper understanding of these realities and into a deeper engagement with one another about how to address these realities. Towards the end of the exercise, the DNCC engaged with a large group of community members in a village meeting space and a report-back exercise pivoting on the problem tree analysis was undertaken. After an animated exchange, the community and the DNCC adjusted the tree to reflect important changes including an emphasis on power relations, particularly that between men and women; inadequate government presence in terms of agricultural extension support; and the centrality of cultural norms that limited access to some nutritious foods. In this way it was recognised that the perspectives of officials should be tempered with the realities of people most affected by stunting. It also raised the issue of 'power in the system', which is explored in Section 5.2.

5.2 *Advocating upwards*

Despite some favourable structures and policies at the national level, particularly through a new nutrition policy and strategic plan and a resurgent emphasis on nutrition through the emerging Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) movement,¹ there is currently little coordination between the sectors on nutrition in Zambia (Harris and Drimie 2012). The country is not alone in having difficulty with bringing action to its plans; many countries in Africa and beyond are struggling with similar issues. However, with the high-level momentum created by SUN, the NFNC as the national steering body for nutrition is in an opportune position to become a force for nutrition advocacy, planning and implementation. There are hopes from organisations such as the World Bank and other international donors that the NFNC will assume the important role of facilitating intersectoral dialogue and advocating for increased resourcing towards nutrition.

Having acknowledged this as a potential opportunity, the DNCC prioritised a national level forum whereby the emerging experiences from Mumbwa could be shared. Apart from distributing the early lessons, it was hoped that such an interaction would galvanise support from national level institutions, including line ministries. This national event in October 2012, facilitated by Concern Worldwide with support from the DNCC, was carefully choreographed with the NFNC chairing the meeting and included speeches by the permanent secretary of the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock, and the district commissioner of Mumbwa. In this way the experiences of the Mumbwa DNCC were given an important political opportunity. By engaging national level structures, the DNCC was in a position to generate lessons at a local level to contribute to national and international learning, including feeding into SUN.

Although the direct impact of the meeting is difficult to measure, it is likely that the exposure led to the NFNC and its donor partners identifying the DNCC as a possible model for coordination on nutrition in the future. The NFNC visited key ministries and NGOs in Mumbwa in mid-2013 to conduct a nutrition situation gap analysis,

which resulted in the drafting of a Nutrition District Plan with one key objective being the inclusion of 'support for promoting multi-sectoral coordination on nutrition, through a to-be-established District Nutrition Coordinating Committee under the DDCC' which would provide 'robust stewardship, harmonization and coordination' (SUN 2012). Taking the DNCC as a model, the NFNC intends to replicate the committees in a similar vein to ensure a coordinated response to stunting at a local level, initially in 14 pilot districts (including Mumbwa). The SUN focal point within NFNC later informed the DNCC that their structure had influenced much of the thinking behind the roll-out of SUN across the selected pilot districts. Clearly the model was eliciting interest and being taken seriously as nutrition became a more prominent feature in the broader political economy of Zambia.

5.3 *Innovations*

The three kinds of innovation that might create new possibilities for addressing undernutrition (new relationships, new insights and new commitment) can only be truly effective if new and creative actions arise. When reflecting on their achievements after almost two years of existence, members of the DNCC argued that the establishment of the committee itself was an innovation, particularly that it was unique in Zambia.² Other innovation has emerged from the DNCC. There is, for example, a clear commitment to working together, to sharing ideas and information, to keeping each other informed, and to attending meetings. These issues cannot be taken for granted, as numerous disincentives exist within government structures to avoid 'blurring the boundaries' between line ministries and working outside of core ministerial mandate. Another innovation is an energetic attempt to recognise and include new stakeholders in the district that may have a bearing on addressing undernutrition. Part of this innovation is that it transcends not only government sectors but crosses civil society and the state, with emerging attempts to bring in grass-roots community-based organisations. An example of this was the recognition that women's land rights, or the lack of them, had a direct impact on undernutrition; the DNCC therefore resolved to bring in the Ministry of Lands to join the committee, certainly a non-traditional partner for nutrition. The DNCC had become a forum where members from different sectors could address problems articulated by others they did not normally engage with in routine activities.

An example of the impact of sharing information has been the DNCC's decision to institute ward-level committees to develop plans that could be funded by a community development budget within the Ministry of Health. Without the DNCC, this fund would have remained largely untapped and certainly unknown to other ministries and NGOs. Thus at community level, the DNCC has constituted four ward-level versions of itself (Ward Nutrition Coordinating Committees, WNCCs). Each WNCC has been invited to submit plans for activities and has been supported by a sub-group of the DNCC to develop these with appropriate budgets within the stipulated framework of the ministry. Similarly, the establishment of the WNCC has allegedly enabled government extension workers, other organisations and

the community itself to talk about nutrition in their community, although the quality and depth of these discussions is so far uncertain.

One tangible example of activities to come out of the DNCC has been the sharing of vehicles, fuel and staff for cooking demonstrations, which each ministry was undertaking separately and are now combining. While seemingly small, it is the very real everyday issues such as resources to get out to communities that often hamper activities. These are all important examples of how the DNCC has enabled its members to work differently in attempting to address undernutrition. However, they are also initiatives that have taken over a year to realise, raising a question of priorities, leadership and commitment within the DNCC.

Despite these achievements, the DNCC has acknowledged that the formation of a committee is not enough to automatically lead to solutions to undernutrition. This reflects a view that although much had been achieved since February 2012, the DNCC has had little to show in terms of actual alignment and coordination to affect change on the ground. Although this may appear a stark judgement after so much effort, it should be remembered that the issue of undernutrition is socially, dynamically and generatively complex and that it will take time for effective and implementable solutions to emerge. This process is not a 'quick win', but rather a potentially durable and effective way of addressing undernutrition over the long term; the process is ongoing, and is generating learning as it goes.

6 Learning from Mumbwa

It is clear that a big challenge facing the implementation of nutrition policy in Zambia is the absence of any effective coordination mechanism that aligns different responses across sectors. This has been compounded by existing structures giving a lack of real power or authority to work differently at a local level. A key question, therefore, is how to elevate the issue of coordination and alignment to address undernutrition in the list of complex issues facing government. Part of the answer may lie with the emergent SUN, while another lies with securing high-level champions within the key line ministries such as health and agriculture to provide the space and compulsion for attempting change. Another potentially important process expected to continue over the coming months and years is decentralisation of some spheres of government, with some on the DNCC hopeful that this might open up a space for innovation at a local level.

Within these systems and structures, attention to the individuals involved is critical. Intersectoral partnerships of this nature require patience and persistence, but, when managed well, can build the cross-sector stability needed to address challenges such as undernutrition. Any attempt to initiate, implement or facilitate such cooperation processes is an intervention into a fragile and often controversial system of actors. So, it requires careful attention to the quality of the process, the quality of relationships, and interaction among stakeholders; although the approach underpinning Theory U is both intuitively appealing and supported by evidence of impact, the realities confronting diverse actors in working in an aligned and

coordinated way are striking. Continuous reflection and opportunities to 'retreat' from DNCC activities are necessary components of this process; this then affirms the ongoing strategy to deepen conversations to build commitment and ultimately create and drive innovative responses to the complex nutrition problem. It also, however, reveals a gap in the strategy, in that higher-level power is required to ensure that the plans and ideas to work together in new ways are actually translated into action.

The qualities of the structures and relationships that have been created to make the cooperation work are crucial. Structures such as the DNCC require individuals to lead them; they also require individuals to trust each other, which requires putting a particular emphasis on building and maintaining relationships between the different actors involved in the cooperation process. In turn, individuals undertaking this process require structures and support to enable emerging leaders to effectively guide the process, and to allow different actors to follow the process. Without concerted support and commitment of an external agent – Concern Worldwide – from the outset, it is not clear whether so much progress would have been made with the DNCC in the absence of this support from line ministries or national level institutions.

Simultaneous attention to both formal structures and the support of individual agency is therefore vital in formulating a functioning coordination committee with space for innovation in working. There is a possibility that the roll-out of new committees in pilot districts could be a replication of a technical structure within existing systems based on the DNCC experience, rather than a process with emphasis on the mechanisms of learning and understanding for actors within such a structure that would enable real alignment and coordination that would ultimately lead to the innovations to address undernutrition. As these committees are replicated under SUN, both the structures and the underlying mechanisms by which the committee has proceeded deserve attention. In addition, the role of convening and facilitating by an entity or individual outside of the line ministries will be a necessary part of the structure if such an intensive process that the DNCC has experienced cannot also be replicated. These will be key points to address in attempts to scale up intersectoral coordination for nutrition in Zambia.

7 Concluding comment

The process of creating and sustaining an intersectoral committee is a slow and at times difficult one, but this article has presented several tools and ideas for future similar processes, and several insights from the current process. In reflection, the DNCC has become a space for intersectoral dialogue and communication, and the first important steps towards local coordination across sectors have been taken. Representatives of sectors have been able to share and understand what each are doing to address malnutrition in Mumbwa, and place this in the context of a 'sea-change' in nutrition in Zambia more generally: SUN has begun to mobilise increased investments in nutrition, and started to change the discourse around nutrition in Zambia, a move towards creating the political space for undernutrition to be addressed. The DNCC believes that within this changing

landscape, it has been innovative in responding to the issue of undernutrition, particularly in terms of establishing an entity that is committed to meet regularly and that is characterised by genuine sharing and learning. They have, however, also acknowledged that this is not enough to substantially address the issue, and that commitment would have to be elevated and innovation allowed by existing structures for real change to occur.

Notes

1 Zambia signed up to the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) movement in 2010, and this has begun to strengthen over the past year. SUN aims to guide national action on nutrition by providing a framework of key considerations, principles and priorities for action to address undernutrition with a particular focus on the

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Both of these critical issues may be partly addressed by SUN, which is bringing attention to the issue and promoting the implementation of the emerging prototype DNCC as a priority. As attempts at coordination for nutrition continue within the DNCC in Mumbwa, much is still to be learnt from a process that is actively engaging the reality of addressing undernutrition in new and important ways.

- '1,000-day window of opportunity' for malnutrition reduction between conception and two years of age.
- 2 District Nutrition Coordinating Committee (DNCC) (2013): minutes from a capacity-building workshop, Lusaka, Zambia; minutes from a leadership retreat, Lusaka, Zambia.