

Part IV: Leading the Way Forward



CHAPTER 18

Championing Nutrition

Effective Leadership for Action

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THE CALLS FOR strong leadership in the fight against global and national malnutrition have multiplied during the past decade.¹ The role of nutrition champions in advocating for nutrition, formulating policies, and coordinating and implementing action in nutrition have increasingly been recognized in such countries as Peru, Brazil, Thailand, and the Indian states of Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra.² Global initiatives such as the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement, the African Nutrition Leadership Programme, and the European Nutrition Leadership Platform have invested in building up capacity for leadership among national governments, civil society, and the private sector. The World Public Health Nutrition Association's guide on competencies needed to build up the workforce in global public health nutrition identified leadership as key.³ More widely, leadership within the field of public health has been highlighted as key to moving child and maternal health higher up on the global agenda⁴ and tackling critical issues such as HIV and AIDS at the national and community levels.⁵

While evidence within the nutrition and public health arenas points time and again to the role of leadership in successfully crafting nutrition policies and movements, little is actually known about the characteristics of leaders in nutrition: who they are, how they function, with whom they work, and what makes them effective. This chapter—whose main body is extracted from the article “What Drives and Constrains Effective Leadership in Tackling Child Undernutrition? Findings from Bangladesh, Ethiopia, India, and Kenya,” published in *Food Policy* in 2015—aims to answer some of these questions.⁶ It first reviews the literature on leadership within both nutrition and other disciplines. It then draws on interviews conducted with 89 influential decision makers in four countries with high burdens of undernutrition: Bangladesh, Ethiopia, India, and Kenya.⁷ The chapter also highlights a case study on leadership from Zambia (see Box 18.1) and 10 nutrition champions (see Box 18.2) identified as part of a global selection process run by Transform Nutrition in 2015, in order to convey

BOX 18.1 The role of leadership in nutrition change in Zambia

Zambia is a complex landscape of stubbornly high poverty and hunger rates on one hand and an impending problem of overweight and obesity on the other.⁸ Child stunting rose from 1992 to 2001 and then fell by 5 percent from 2001 to 2013, but remains unacceptably high at 40 percent.⁹ Nonetheless, the country has shown some positive trends in maternal and child survival and child undernutrition indicators, and there have been several targeted efforts to bolster leadership for nutrition in the country.

Zambia has long had a formal institutional structure to provide leadership for nutrition: the National Food and Nutrition Commission (NFNC), formed in 1967 under the Ministry of Health to advise the government on nutrition matters. Although the NFNC is recognized as best positioned to lead and coordinate nutrition action for Zambia, it had been neither well supported nor highly active in the decades since its founding, and there was skepticism about its inherent leadership capacity. In recent years, however, nutrition has seen a revival in Zambia. The country adopted a new nutrition policy in 2006, held national nutrition symposia in 2009 and 2011, joined the SUN Movement in 2010 as an “early riser” country,¹⁰ and drafted the National Food and Nutrition Strategic Plan for 2011–2015. In 2011, recognizing a strategic leadership deficit, it contracted with the African Nutrition Leadership Programme to provide leadership development support for the NFNC. Beyond the NFNC as the technical nutrition arm of government, efforts are under way to improve political leadership on nutrition, and a nutrition group has been created in Parliament as a Special Committee of Permanent Secretaries on Nutrition, with members drawn from key line ministries and chaired by the cabinet secretary.

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have also played important leadership roles on nutrition issues in Zambia. With the renewed focus on nutrition since 2009, formerly sporadic action by civil society coalesced under the coordination of the newly formed Scaling Up Nutrition Civil Society Organization Alliance (CSO-SUN). In 2014, William Chilufya, head of CSO-SUN in Zambia (see [Box 18.2](#)), led the way in raising the profile of nutrition in Zambia, partly through the strategic use of media and partly by leading Zambia to become one of the first countries to analyze its budget spending on nutrition.¹¹ The CSO-SUN Alliance is treading a fine line between working with the government and holding it to account.

Since the early 1990s, the Nutrition Association of Zambia (NAZ) has provided leadership from within the nutrition profession through advocacy, guidance to the profession, and networking. With a less public face and less international backing than the NFNC or CSO-SUN, NAZ has been working largely behind the scenes. This triad of national leadership from government (NFNC), civil society (CSO-SUN), and nutrition professionals (NAZ), backed by forward-thinking donor leadership under SUN, has been key to Zambia’s ability to seize nutrition opportunities as they have arisen.

Efforts to boost nutrition leadership have also been made at the local levels. In Mumbwa District, the District Nutrition Coordination Committee (DNCC), catalyzed by the international NGO Concern Worldwide and co-led by nutrition champion Christopher Dube (see [Box 18.2](#)), builds local leaders’ capacity to put nutrition higher on the agenda and coordinates several ministries and NGOs involved in providing nutrition-related services. Ultimately, DNCC members and their national counterparts envision that stronger strategic capacity at the local level will result in the design and implementation of innovative solutions to help address stunting. And there is evidence that this is starting to happen, as the national nutrition program reaches down to the local level in Mumbwa.¹²

The case of Zambia has shown that support of leadership development can take many forms, just as leadership itself can manifest in different ways—from championing a cause to planning policy and undertaking action. Both strategic and technical leadership are needed not only at the national level, but also at the local levels, where the real action happens. This chapter documents ways that leadership can be built, and Zambia’s experience demonstrates that more responsive and context-driven leadership development schemes are required if we are to properly support the next generation of nutrition leaders.

the depth and breadth of the experience of these remarkable leaders.

While the focus is on leaders who have contributed to national-level policy changes in nutrition, this chapter (and the literature) recognizes the importance of leadership in nutrition practice and at different levels of policy and programming. Through this approach, this chapter aims to deepen our basic understanding of leadership within nutrition and offer up ways in which nutrition champions may be identified and supported to lead the fight against malnutrition both globally and within their own countries and communities.

Evidence on Nutrition and Leadership in Development

Research on leadership in nutrition is still nascent and suffers from wide gaps in country-level data. The landmark 2008 *Lancet* series on child nutrition highlighted leadership as integral to making progress on the international and national nutrition stages. Bryce and colleagues¹³ and Morris and colleagues¹⁴ identified a lack of capacity to train and support individuals to take on strategic roles in nutrition as a major barrier to conceptualizing and guiding national and subnational nutrition agendas. Heaver¹⁵ identified three types of actors

BOX 18.2 10 leaders in transforming nutrition

The stories of 10 nutrition leaders, identified through a global selection process led by Transform Nutrition in 2015, are varied. They reveal something of the breadth of experience and contexts in which those championing nutrition find themselves in their work to tackle nutrition at grassroots, regional, and national levels around the world. Their stories resonate with earlier research on nutrition that has emphasized the practical and strategic nature of leadership. Charismatic leadership is something that a few may be born into, but most types of leadership can be built up and supported. More information on these and other champions can be found on the Transform Nutrition website: www.transform-nutrition.org/nutrition-champions/.

Manaan Mumma

Regional Nutrition and HIV Officer, World Food Programme Regional Bureau for East and Central Africa, Kenya

While working in maternal and infant nutrition and integrated management of acute malnutrition programs, Manaan Mumma witnessed how children suffering from acute malnutrition could recover when simple solutions were provided by community health workers. “The solutions are within reach. We already know what needs to be done. A lot was already happening at the community level. For me, it was how we amplify this from the subnational level to the national level. For me, that was the drive,” says Manaan. Building on her experience from a career in the HIV sector, she realized the gains that could be made in nutrition by deploying advocacy efforts and civil society. While working for the Kenya AIDS NGOs Consortium and serving as an executive committee member of the Scaling Up Nutrition Civil Society Alliance (SUN CSA), Mannan has worked to engage stakeholders and nutrition champions throughout the region to bring attention to nutrition issues at all levels. As a result, the First Lady of the Republic of Kenya, the Honorable Margaret Kenyatta, accepted the role of nutrition champion for Kenya. In 2015, Manaan led the effort to convene representatives from Burundi, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda to discuss regional nutrition issues at the East African launch of the *Global Nutrition Report*. Manaan uses the network of members of Parliament (MPs) developed through her work in the HIV sector to raise their awareness of nutrition through one-on-one meetings and “meet your MP” advocacy days, where community members at the grassroots level all over the country have face-to-face meetings with their MPs.

[\(Box 18.2 continued\)](#)

William Chilufya

Country Coordinator, Zambia Civil Society Scaling Up Nutrition Alliance, Zambia

William Chilufya spearheaded the creation of the Zambia Civil Society Organization Scaling Up Nutrition Alliance (CSO-SUN). Under his leadership, CSO-SUN has engaged with a range of stakeholders to inspire key government officials, civil society, and the media to be vocal advocates for nutrition. CSO-SUN developed “[10 Critical Steps to Address Child Under-nutrition in Zambia, Permanently](#)” through consultation among civil society, cooperating partners, and the government to identify key areas for action across sectors that are required to effectively address the nutrition situation in Zambia. William and his team have also worked with the government to ensure that both the National Social Protection Strategy and the National Agriculture Policy include nutrition objectives.¹⁶ With William’s guidance, CSO-SUN has been effective in creating strong relationships with key MPs. These include the Honorable Highvie Hamududu, chairperson for the Budget Committee of Parliament and a vocal advocate for nutrition in the Zambian parliament. CSO-SUN has also inspired the formation of the All Party Parliamentary caucus on food and nutrition. William recognizes the role the media can play in nutrition and has worked with his team to increase media interest in nutrition through regular articles in the *Zambia Daily Mail*, interviews and quotes on major Zambian radio and TV stations, and a Nutrition Media Awards ceremony to inspire and reward journalists covering issues of nutrition. Mobilizing civil society to speak with one voice is key. Says William, “The whole aim is forming alliances. When you have that critical mass, it enables the government to listen to you quite quickly for certain key issues that might be a little bit controversial.”

Debjeet Sarangi

Director, Living Farms, India

As head of Living Farms, an organization working with landless and marginal farmers and consumers in Odisha, India, Debjeet Sarangi has successfully used participatory methods to help communities mobilize to combat underlying factors of undernutrition in their area. Debjeet and his team support communities to hold monthly meetings to diagnose these factors, identify solutions, and collectively implement and monitor activities. Communities have made major changes based on this strategy; one community, for example, banned the marriage of girls under 19 years of age. Under Debjeet’s leadership, the Living Farms program also works with communities to ensure they have sufficient diverse and nutritious food, focusing on how best to use village agricultural land, forests, and other commons to grow and collect food and providing nutrition education and nutritious recipe ideas. Collaboration with local officials ensures that health and nutrition services are efficient and reach those in need, and Debjeet works to collect and share data regularly with key stakeholders. From 2011 to 2014, areas where Living Farms operates saw a 35 percent reduction in the infant mortality rate and a 12 percent drop in newborn deaths. Debjeet says, “When there is a reduction in newborn death, and in the infant mortality rate, you get a sense of peace, you can sleep peacefully.”

Christopher Dube

Medical doctor and chairman, Mumbwa District Nutrition Coordination Committee, Zambia

Christopher Dube founded the first District Nutrition Coordination Committee (DNCC) in Zambia, which coordinates from the bottom up all nutrition-related activities led by key ministries. Members of the committee include representatives from five ministries at the district level and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Under Christopher’s leadership, this committee has grown from 6 members to about 25 members. Christopher and his team engage with representatives from the ward nutrition

(Box 18.2 continued)

development committees, created by the DNCC, as well as representatives from the sub-ward level. Lobbying policy makers on the importance of nutrition and coordinating efforts is a key strategy of Christopher and his colleagues. They hold one-on-one meetings with MPs and policy makers, and they share information through the District Development Coordinating Committee (of which the DNCC is a subcommittee) as well as the Ward Nutrition Committee. The DNCC promotes one common and coordinated way of administering and monitoring nutrition issues in the district—a concept others are keen to replicate in different parts of the country. “The multisectoral approach has helped bridge the gap between stakeholders in the district and has highlighted the concept of nutrition as a cross-cutting issue. This has helped ... inform the citizens about the difference between having food and being healthy in terms of nutrition,” says Christopher.

SanSan Myint

Head, Three Millennium Development Goal Fund (3MDG Fund), Myanmar

SanSan Myint first started advocating for nutrition interventions in the health programs in which she worked with a range of population groups, including urban and rural communities as well as those affected by HIV/AIDS. These experiences, coupled with her observations of the SUN Movement thriving in countries where she had worked, led her to become the coordinator for the Civil Society Alliance for Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN CSA) in Myanmar, which successfully launched in February 2015. The SUN CSA was formed relatively quickly, owing in large part to SanSan’s efforts. She revived her network of contacts within the Ministry of Health, which she had built up during 14 years working there at the start of her career. Recognizing the top-down nature of Myanmar society, she first approached community gatekeepers to get local NGOs and other actors on board. The SUN CSA also tapped into the constituencies and networks of its Steering Committee members. SanSan says, “Working and starting up with this broad group of partners was very instrumental in getting people engaged, interested, and on board, because we each had our own constituencies. We also had our own local NGO networks. That was how we were able to mobilize a lot of people in a very short time.” SanSan also worked to ensure that the SUN CSA’s activities were participatory and inclusive, that the large media community was engaged, and that advocacy efforts were based on strong evidence.

Christine Muyama

Nutrition Programs Officer, Graca Machel Trust, Uganda

Christine Muyama has held a number of roles building nutritional awareness and advocacy in Uganda and the surrounding region. As national coordinator for the Uganda Civil Society Coalition on Scaling Up Nutrition (UCCO-SUN), she and her team successfully advocated to ensure nutrition was addressed as a key issue in Uganda’s National Development Plan (NDP) II. They also motivated the King of Tooro (western Uganda) to declare a week for nutritional awareness—an important accomplishment in a region that is considered the food basket of the country yet has the second-highest level of malnutrition. Christine and her colleagues also engaged with and provided nutrition advocacy training to government officials in the DNCCs from the start. Christine currently serves as the Nutrition Programs officer at the Graca Machel Trust, where she supports civil society alliances in Malawi, Mozambique, and Tanzania to lobby leaders to prioritize nutrition at the national, district, and community levels. Through this work, she has organized nutrition advocacy training with MPs in Malawi, who are now leading the movement to ensure that funds allocated to nutrition reach the community level. In addition to providing evidence papers and statistics, Christine has found that one of the best ways to engage with decisionmakers is to provide them with firsthand human stories that illustrate the

(Box 18.2 continued)

evidence. “This real-life evidence clicks into their brains faster and helps bring life to the statistics you are showing them,” she says.

Neerja Chowdhury

Political journalist and member of the Citizens’ Alliance against Malnutrition, India

Neerja Chowdhury has used her position as a reputable political journalist to raise awareness about malnutrition issues among government officials and the media in India. Following the election of a large number of young MPs in 2004, she coordinated a visit with eight young MPs to the areas most affected by malnutrition, garnering media coverage and shaping the view that nutrition is an issue that cuts across party lines. The group became known as the Citizens’ Alliance against Malnutrition and continued to visit states ruled by different political parties. The Citizens’ Alliance has since encouraged the Naandi Foundation to carry out the HUNGaMA (Hunger and Malnutrition) Survey to help fill the wide gap in data and knowledge on child malnutrition in India. The group also facilitated a meeting between film star Aamir Khan and then–Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, which led the government to mount a multimedia campaign on malnutrition with the star.¹⁷ Neerja works with the Citizens’ Alliance to identify entry points for nutrition action and attention in the government at the senior level, building on the MPs’ connections and her own. The Citizens’ Alliance may have encouraged the government to move ahead with its 2010 decision to focus on improving child and maternal health in 200 high-burden districts in the country. The Citizens’ Alliance is an advocacy initiative with no formal structure, convener, or funding. Says Neerja, “That’s the way we wanted it, rather than become a formal organizational structure. The important thing is that there is a committed core group and they have taken ownership. When momentum flags, I give it a push.”

Frealem Shibabaw

Director, Ethiopia School Meal Initiative, Ethiopia

Frealem Shibabaw founded a school meal initiative in Ethiopia that partners with small dairy farms to feed 7,000 kindergarten and primary school students every day before class. Through a formal dialogue with cabinet members and state presidents, Frealem designed the school meal program with an emphasis on local ownership and sustainability. In less than three years, she established the initiative with 23 dairy farms in 5 regional states and an average of 10 cows and 6 dairy farm workers per school. Plans are underway to begin feeding pregnant women and younger siblings of enrolled children. The program has helped increase enrollment rates and has built interest among regional governments, which are considering scaling up the school dairy farm model. The federal government is also looking to turn this approach into a national school meal program. Critical to the success of this program has been Frealem’s engagement with key actors, including her strategic selection of top political officials to lobby for it and her focus on those interested in her ideas regardless of their sector. The school meal program team shares regular reports with local and regional officials, nonprofit organizations, community groups, and other stakeholders. Communities’ involvement in and ownership of the initiative are vital. Frealem says, “Before we prepare our lessons, I think we should sit down with the community and learn from them first.... What is there, and what is not there, and what will work, and what will not work, and why. Unless you know the community very well, it’s very hard to design strategies that work.”

(Box 18.2 continued)

Basanta Kumar Kar

Senior Advisor, Coalition for Food and Nutrition Security, India

Basanta Kumar Kar has led or been involved in many successful nutrition initiatives in South Asia while working at National Dairy Development Board in India, ActionAid International, CARE, and the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN). For example, Basanta and colleagues at GAIN helped to roll out a pilot program in Bangladesh on vitamin A fortification of refined vegetable oil; the program ultimately reached 45 million people.¹⁸ Under Basanta's leadership, GAIN partnered with the Bangladesh Ministry of Primary and Mass Education and others to pioneer the Community Led Integrated School Nutrition Program, an innovative school feeding model that emphasized both delivery of high-quality nutrition-rich meals and strong community engagement. Basanta's involvement in nutrition issues has been driven by efforts to build institutional partnerships, for example, with the government, while advocating for the poor and marginalized. As a state program representative at CARE, he served as a member secretary to the first-ever State Nutrition Advisory Committee in Chhattisgarh, India, which set the nutrition agenda in a newly formed tribal-dominated state. He also contributed to the development of a 10-year National Strategy on Prevention and Control of Micronutrient Deficiencies as a member of the strategy's Expert Working Group. Demonstrating context-specific evidence and impact through programs has been key to Basanta's influence on policy makers in South Asia. He says, "Every country wants their policy to be unique ... so you have to bring out or contextualize the policy with the country, with the context, with the local political economy."

V. Ramani

Director General, Mother–Child Health and Nutrition Mission, India

V. Ramani brought nutrition to the forefront of public policy concerns and promoted involvement at all levels of government and civil society to address child malnutrition in Maharashtra. The Mother–Child Health and Nutrition Mission led by Ramani scaled up efforts across the state to significantly reduce malnutrition among young children. Between 2006 and 2012, Maharashtra's stunting rate among children under 2 years of age reportedly declined by 15 percentage points—one of the fastest declines in stunting in the world. Two existing channels were used to address child undernutrition in Maharashtra: the *Integrated Child Development Services* (ICDS) and the public health system. "Our efforts were really aimed at making these two wings of the government work together, centralize their working, and ensure there was collaboration between them," says Ramani. He made it a priority to motivate staff in the ICDS and public health services. Under Ramani's leadership, the Mission sensitized different stakeholders to the various issues in child malnutrition and created confidence that the problem could be tackled in a systematic, time-bound manner by improving public service delivery systems and measuring accountability for outcomes. This model has since been replicated in other Indian states including Gujarat, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh.

within nutrition: *decision makers*, such as heads of ministries, who are most traditionally nutrition champions; *influencers*, such as donors, mid-level bureaucrats, or civil society actors, who can create networks of nutrition champions and supporters; and *clients*, who rarely have input into policy but can elevate accountability in nutrition

programming, thus becoming leaders themselves. A summary of country case studies by the Mainstreaming Nutrition Initiative¹⁹ looks at how these different types of leaders operate within the actual policy process, depending on the context. For example, the analysis contrasts Bolivia, Guatemala, and Peru, where political leaders espoused rhetoric



Panos/G. Pirozzi

Local clients of nutrition interventions, like these women in Cameroon, can play a leadership role by strengthening accountability.

during national elections, with other leaders' less politically visible work in Bangladesh and Vietnam.

Also relying on country case studies, the *Analysing Nutrition Governance* series compares nutrition policy process in six countries (Bangladesh, Brazil, Ethiopia, India, Peru, and Zambia).²⁰ The Zero Hunger campaign in Brazil (see Chapter 11), for example, was tied closely to the administration of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, while the Child Malnutrition Initiative, an advocacy coalition in Peru, converted political leaders to the cause by persuading presidential candidates to sign onto a pro-nutrition pledge (see Chapter 14).²¹

Beyond these studies, many experts in the nutrition literature have called for more and stronger leadership, but these lack a substantial conceptual or empirical base. Reviews of the larger

international development field have found a generally poor state of research on leadership and an excessive focus on the personality attributes of leaders in wealthy countries within other fields, such as business studies and organizational and development psychology.²² The state of the literature makes it difficult to apply these conclusions to political processes related to nutrition in low- and middle-income countries.

Borrowing from the fields of systems science and adult development yields more insights. A systems model presents leadership as an interactive process, rooted in context and history, that changes over time rather than as a top-down managerial concept.²³ Individuals with high levels of adult development—that is, the ability to understand and manage complex situations—can appreciate how to influence and reshape the different perspectives

and connections among stakeholders in order to build up a social network that can effect changes in policies or programs.²⁴

In summary, wider reviews outside the field of nutrition emphasize the need for a contextually situated—and therefore political—understanding of how leaders operate. In looking at leadership across diverse contexts, our focus on leadership needs to go beyond what leadership is or what it accomplishes to look at how leadership operates.

What Motivates Nutrition Leaders, and What Are Their Capabilities?

The interviews with 89 nutrition leaders yielded interesting insights about their motivations and

capabilities (see [Table 18.1](#) for a summary of the findings). Regarding initial motivation, several champions came to their leadership positions by chance, entering nutrition early in their careers and deliberately staying engaged. A few individuals with a clinical practice background had entered nutrition as a result of seeking evidence on the underlying causes of child and maternal health issues. Still others were motivated to make a positive change by the dire situation in their home communities or because of career placements in rural areas. Regardless of their initial intent, nutrition seems to have become an issue about which they care, making the case for exposing potential leaders from other disciplines to both nutrition data and firsthand experience as a way of

TABLE 18.1 Summary of findings from nutrition leader interviews and implications for leadership

Research question	Findings	Implications
What motivates people to become leaders in nutrition? Are there common elements in their backgrounds that lead them to champion nutrition?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No common origin/catalyst drivers, but several common pathways, including exposure to situations of high malnutrition and desire to understand the root of health problems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nutrition is “sticky” for some; need to expose as many potential leaders as possible to the realities of under-nutrition
What enables leaders to operate effectively in the nutrition policy sphere? In particular, what are their analytical and political capabilities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most effective leaders are able to deal with complexity, are systemic thinkers, and have reached postconventional levels of adult development • Roles depend on networks: in fragmented networks, they may be boundary spanners; in less fragmented but not cohesive networks, they may be co-creators; individuals may change roles depending on need and capacities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Find ways to support these capabilities and build them up in others • Encourage development of networks
What are the external challenges and barriers to their effective operation?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Donor/civil-society politics • Fragmentation and lack of coherent frames • Lack of executive-level political commitment (rhetoric not backed by reality) • Knowledge and data gaps (see below) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote consensus building • Develop accountability mechanisms for top-level commitment • Consult identified leaders on political constraints
What do leaders assess as the knowledge gaps? How do they employ their existing knowledge?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gaps: effective multisectorality, timely data, operational research • They employ existing knowledge by using locally sourced and/or translated knowledge to reach policy audiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consult identified leaders on knowledge and data gaps • Support local research supply and demand, local knowledge brokers

Source: Authors’ interviews with 89 nutrition leaders.

garnering cross-sector support for nutrition in the future.

The interviews also uncovered a relationship between effective leadership and higher levels of adult development, underlining the need to attract individuals with advanced analytical or “sense-making” capabilities to the field through incentive structures and rewards. Furthermore, the types of leaders and leadership activities that were found to be effective depended on the shape and maturity level of the nutrition social network. Fragmented networks benefited from leaders who could cross boundaries; more mature networks benefited from individuals who could generate an environment of co-creation. This paradigm can also be applied more broadly to the national context: leaders working in countries with high levels of fragmentation could change the shape of the social network rather than try to work within it.

The wide diversity of contexts in which leaders must operate makes the case for helping individuals within the nutrition community increase their levels of adult development. Coaching or participation in programs has been shown, experimentally, to increase adult development levels over long periods of time (nine months or longer).²⁵ Other options are to increase group-level adult development at the time of engagement with nutrition, such as through participatory stakeholder mapping exercises or support programs that aim to develop broader leadership qualities in nutrition. Examples include the African Nutrition Leadership Programme or summer school run by the UK’s Institute of Development Studies and the International Food Policy Research Institute. There is also a need to support existing leaders, financially or institutionally, so that they have the capacity and power to help the nutrition network over which they preside overcome challenges.²⁶

What Challenges Do Nutrition Leaders Face?

Leaders’ ability to effect change is determined partly by the policy and political environment, which can either promote or hinder nutrition progress.²⁷ The interviews yielded a view of leadership as a political process²⁸ during which leaders must navigate such challenges as siloed ministries; inappropriate roles for donors or the private sector; a bias toward food production to the detriment of nutrition; and lack of local knowledge, evidence, and data to inform policy, programming, and advocacy. Even where there was support for nutrition from the prime minister or a cabinet minister, it was often explained as political rhetoric without action to back it up, accompanied by a lack of real commitment and understanding of nutrition at high levels. This finding underlines the importance of creating mechanisms for holding ministers and bureaucrats accountable for meeting their commitments in nutrition. Initiatives such as the Hunger and Nutrition Commitment Index are key in this regard.²⁹

Of the four target countries, only respondents from India noted the role of civil society in influencing and driving change, mainly due to the Right to Food campaign and placement of nutrition advocates within the then-ruling Congress Party and its National Advisory Council. In Bangladesh, researchers, pediatricians, and multilateral donors were viewed as being able to shape policy, especially in light of donor pressure to mainstream the National Nutrition Service into existing community health provision. In Kenya, key government officials backed by technical support from donors within government were influential in convening disparate stakeholder groups. Leaders from Ethiopia did not refer to any particular individuals as influential, perhaps reflecting the country’s more authoritarian political structure.

A common theme across all the countries (with the exception of India) was disproportionate donor power. Interviewees reported that donors focused solely on their own programs or collected large amounts of data without sharing it. Many interviewees, however, praised particular donors for spurring support for nutrition in their countries. Some interviewees from India did express concerns about donor collusion with the private sector, though there was little reflection overall across the four countries on the role of the private sector.

These reflections do not necessarily paint an accurate picture of the four countries studied. They do, however, reveal a fragmented nutrition

landscape that may affect the ability of the nutrition sector to create a cohesive narrative on effective action, both internally within the nutrition community and externally to key decision makers.³⁰ For example, in Bangladesh and India, the nutrition community reportedly suffers from a rift between breastfeeding advocates and those advocating for a wider range of nutrition-specific interventions, including micronutrients and ready-to-use therapeutic foods for the treatment of severe acute malnutrition. Other splits in the framing of nutrition in Ethiopia and Kenya have occurred between advocates of food-based approaches or food-based emergency nutrition efforts on the one hand and advocates of other nutrition actions such as



Panos/A. Loke

A woman in the state of Bihar, India, talks about health care at a community meeting.

improvements in water and sanitation or infant and young child feeding on the other hand.

What Do Leaders Assess as the Knowledge Gaps?

Leaders in nutrition seem to have a thorough understanding of the latest evidence on nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive determinants and interventions, and the more capable ones translate this knowledge into messages that can be understood by the greater public and that can potentially influence decision or policy makers. The leaders also identified some knowledge gaps, including knowledge about how to coordinate multisectorally and particularly how to commission, collect, and interpret timely and localized research, knowledge, and data.

Generating evidence locally was viewed as critical to getting decision makers to pay attention to research, since many decision makers are perceived as wary of being unduly influenced by foreign donors. Interviewees called on researchers to produce locally applicable frameworks or systems of analysis, to use rapid-fire assessments tailored to specific states and decision makers, and to undertake monitoring and operational studies based on district and regional-level data.

Leaders are the individuals most likely to turn evidence into action, so consulting them before commissioning research can help ensure that the research has a long-term impact. An internally neutral, “unimpeachable” research body that can produce credible research was seen as critical. At the same time, some external arbitration of data

and evidence was seen as helpful in forcing difficult decisions.

Conclusion

Leadership is a common factor in successfully promoting action on nutrition globally, regionally, and within countries. At the same time, the nascent and exciting field of leadership in nutrition still suffers from a number of knowledge gaps. We need a deeper understanding of leaders’ motivations and how to develop nutrition champions from the wider field of influential decision makers. More case studies are needed describing the impact of individual champions on nutrition success stories, such as those referred to here and in Boxes 18.1 and 18.2.

Equally important, more research is needed to develop the next generation of nutrition leaders and to evaluate existing initiatives in nutrition leadership. These include the REACH partnership (established by the FAO, UNICEF, the World Food Programme, and the WHO), the SUN Movement, and regional initiatives such as the African Nutrition Leadership Programme and Action Against Hunger’s support for nutrition champions in West Africa. Quantitative and qualitative work can assess whether investments in leadership pay off in terms of changes to program or policy coverage and impact, quality of services, and program costs. More work is also needed to increase the capacity of leaders to operate within an enabling environment for nutrition policy,³¹ connecting these studies to political economy research to fully understand leaders as they operate in complex and adaptive real-world political systems.