



## Technical Note 5

### Learning from Efforts to Cost Country Plans: Priority Technical Issues to Address

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The past few years have seen considerable progress in the adoption of national nutrition plans around a common results framework (CRF). In 2013, a review of the costed plans submitted by 20 countries to the UN SUN Movement Secretariat revealed that plans primarily revolved around the sector that led the costing process, which was most often the health or agriculture sector.<sup>1</sup> As more countries adopt a CRF and planning and costing are moved to a higher, more centralized governmental authority, plans are becoming more harmonized across sectors within countries. In addition, as countries plan around common goals, plans have started to include the activities and funding of nongovernmental partners.<sup>2</sup>

However, even as efforts are being made to synchronize activities, national nutrition plans still vary considerably across sectors. The types of activities that are included, the methodology employed in costing, and the level of detail of the cost estimates can vary significantly depending on each sector's involvement and understanding of their contribution to the national nutrition effort. While plans have become more inclusive in their scope, sector nutrition contributions are still being pulled directly from existing budgets rather than as a thoughtful contribution to a CRF.

One major barrier to developing a comprehensive multisectoral nutrition plan is the lack of common understanding among policymakers about what activities to include as nutrition sensitive and how much of the activity cost should be allocated to the nutrition plan as nutrition related. The majority of nutrition-sensitive funding in national plans is allocated to support food security programming, with only a small portion attributable to health, water, and sanitation activities, with a very small portion going to support improving the care environment. Plans by Uganda<sup>3</sup> and Nepal<sup>4,5</sup> include activities relating to improving the care environment including promotion of girls' enrollment in school, promotion of social mobility, and activities emphasizing the need for time- and labor-saving devices for resource collection. The Gambia plan has three sanitation activities, two of which are related to development of information, education, and communication materials,<sup>6</sup> while the Malawi plan highlights advocacy tasks to improve sanitation conditions in health and education facilities.<sup>7,8</sup> Activities to empower women are largely absent from most plans. The difficulty in costing nutrition-sensitive interventions compelled at least one country to prioritize health-based nutrition-specific interventions over a more comprehensive engagement of key sectors.

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<sup>1</sup> Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN), Planning and costing for the acceleration of actions for nutrition: experiences of countries in the Movement for Scaling Up Nutrition, <http://scalingupnutrition.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Final-Synthesis-Report.pdf>, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Nongovernmental participation in the planning process has come mostly from select donors and CSOs within the country. No plans reviewed to date have included private-sector activities.

<sup>3</sup> The Republic of Uganda, Uganda Nutrition Action Plan 2011–2016: Scaling Up Multi-Sectoral Efforts to Establish a Strong National Foundation for Uganda's Development, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Government of Nepal National Planning Commission, Multi-Sector Nutrition Plan for Accelerating the Reduction of Maternal and Child Undernutrition in Nepal, September 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Government of Nepal, National Food and Security Plan of Action, in the Agricultural Development Strategy for 2013–2023, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> The Government of the Republic of the Gambia, National Nutrition Agency, Strategic Plan 2011–2015 for Implementation of the Gambia's National Nutrition Programme, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Republic of Malawi, Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology, National Education Sector Plan 2008–2017, June 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Republic of Malawi, Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security, Malawi Agricultural Sector Wide Approach: A prioritised and harmonised Agricultural Development Agenda: 2011–2015, September 2011.

Difficulties with incorporating nutrition-sensitive approaches have led countries to request guidance in identifying and costing nutrition-sensitive actions.<sup>9</sup>

When it comes to costing plans, countries (and individual sectors) generally choose from among the variety of available approaches depending on use of existing methodologies and the country's specific implementation context. Usual costing methods include program estimation, ingredient approach, marginal budgeting, or a mix of methods. One clear issue is that few plans contain information about the methodology, assumptions, calculations, and other supporting documentation that would allow for the understanding, replication, revision and scaling up of the interventions in the national plan. Especially in cases where consultants are used to help with or complete the costing, it is important to ensure that the country team responsible for the plan implementation, budget, and revisions has a thorough understanding of the methodology and that documentation is sufficient to replicate the process.<sup>10</sup>

In some cases, documentation is better but the costing methods included some clear gaps. For example, some countries, such as Madagascar, excluded existing government expenses (personnel, operating costs, and infrastructure) in costing their plan.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Nepal excluded existing personnel and facilities in costing parts of their plan but included them in some sectors. For countries to make cost-effectiveness assessments for prioritization of interventions across sectors, consistency in costing across sectors is essential. Further, to assess the true costs of scale-up, all costs must be included so as not to underestimate the true costs of implementation.

Most plans do not explicitly consider the cost implications of scale-up over time. Costs are frequently represented as constant over years even when the plan narrative includes scale-up. It is also rare for plans to explicitly account for regional differences in costs. Clear implementation targets by year in conjunction with complete intervention costs would allow for a more accurate representation of scale-up and better decisionmaking around priority setting and gaps in implementation and financing.

As countries begin to rally around a CRF for nutrition planning, a window of opportunity awaits for national and global experts to get a consensus on standard methods or approaches so as to help guide and assist country efforts. National policymakers are calling for standardized guidance that includes the following:

- How to identify and include nutrition-sensitive interventions
- How to identify the portion of the cost of nutrition-sensitive interventions that should be allocated as nutrition related in the nutrition plan
- What components and inputs should be included in costing interventions (and the trade-offs and implications for inclusion and exclusion of factors)
- How to include nongovernmental costs (and players) in the nutrition plans
- How to prioritize interventions and develop scale-up plans that take into account both effects on outcomes and limited resources

Approaches and tools now need to be developed to address these needs, with priority given to these areas in research and technical assistance calls, driven by country needs and country technicians.

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<sup>9</sup> Results from country discussions and presentations at the Workshop on Costing and Tracking Investments in Support of Scaling Up Nutrition, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Nairobi, Kenya, November 12–14, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> MQSUN interviews with country officials, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Repoblikan 'I Madagasikara, Plan National d'Action pour la Nutrition 2012–2105, Antananarivo, July 2012.