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SUMMARY:

A Multi-sectoral approach to nutrition: Assessing USAID's progress

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In 2014, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) launched its first-ever Multi-Sectoral Nutrition Strategy (MSNS). The Strategy's goals are to make nutrition a priority in all of USAID's work, to integrate nutrition into all relevant USAID projects as well as its overall mission of ending extreme poverty, and to support partner countries in achieving their development goals and becoming self-reliant.¹ The Strategy spans the years 2014-2025, with a main objective of scaling up "effective, integrated nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive interventions, programs, and systems across humanitarian and development contexts."² Improving maternal and child nutrition is the MSNS' main purpose.

What has the USAID Multi-Sectoral Nutrition Strategy accomplished in its first four years?

In the four years since its launch, the MSNS has encouraged increased efforts to coordinate nutrition activities among USAID's most directly relevant bureaus and offices, including the Bureau for Global Health, the Bureau for Food Security, and the Office of Food for Peace. These efforts, mainly carried out at headquarters in Washington, DC, have to some extent made nutrition a higher priority in other USAID strategies. In some contexts, they have also supported implementing partners in coordinating more closely with each other in order to improve nutrition outcomes.

One coordination initiative was to establish a formal Technical Working Group, consisting of representatives of all bureaus at USAID/Washington that oversee the implementation of the MSNS and provide guidance and support learning opportunities for USAID missions. In USAID missions, less formally structured ways of coordinating nutrition-related efforts, such as monthly meetings among staff representatives, have also proven effective. In some missions, coordination is more ad-hoc. It has been helpful in some USAID missions to identify points of contact for coordination – a staff member from each team or office who oversees nutrition-related work and represents the interests of those teams at meetings. It is also easier to ensure that nutrition is a priority when it is reflected in work plans and project designs.

Two important enabling factors were identified for the success of the MSNS, particularly its efforts to coordinate nu-



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trition actions. These are the support of USAID senior leadership, and political will within partner countries. Securing the endorsement and engagement of top USAID officials, both in Washington and at the mission level, is critical to the adoption and success of the MSNS. Support from Mission Directors is particularly useful to coordination efforts since they direct staff activities in carrying out nutrition programs in-country. It is important to ensure that USAID nutrition activities are aligned with each host country's nutrition priorities and plans, and this can be done by working with the national government and cultivating political will.

What have been the challenges?

Insufficient funding is one of the main obstacles to planning and implementing nutrition projects. While Congress rejected the proposed cuts to nutrition in the president's 2019 budget,³ the final funding level is still not enough to fulfill the goals of the MSNS. The reality is that increasing nutri-

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tion funding significantly, to the amount needed, will require commitment and engagement in nutrition from additional members of Congress who can “champion” the issue. Even delays in congressional appropriations that do not ultimately cause a funding shortfall for the year prevent proper planning and interrupt activities. Often, too, there are technical financing problems such as uncoordinated funding streams in USAID missions that do not address nutrition.

Other barriers to the success of MSNS appear during the project design phase—for example, not sufficiently incorporating specific nutrition objectives and activities into programs where participants could benefit, or staff not fully understanding and embracing the importance of nutrition because they needed additional or more appropriate educational resources.

A final potential pitfall, as with any mission program, is the need to navigate the host government’s structures and priorities and make the best use of available USAID resources.

The next four years

The United States has a role to play in supporting the efforts of countries with high burdens of malnutrition in improving their people’s nutritional status. The U.S. government endorsed the 2025 global nutrition targets⁴ and the 2030 goal⁵ of ending hunger and all forms of malnutrition, so USAID must reinvigorate its commitment to fully implementing the MSNS with adequate financial and personnel resources to accelerate progress on nutrition.

The following is a summary of recommendations:

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

For USAID/Washington:

- Continue high-level engagement in the SUN Movement
- Engage and educate USAID missions, especially Mission Directors, on nutrition efforts
- Establish permanent positions for nutrition focal points or coordinators
- Study MSNS education efforts and adjust them according to the findings
- Ensure that budget requests for nutrition are sufficient and that funding is well-targeted. This should be based on an equity analysis of disbursements: which activities and geographies need additional resources for equitable outcomes?
- Include the rate of childhood stunting among the metrics used to assess a country’s progress on the Journey to Self-Reliance
- Set and monitor SMART targets for nutrition across the agency
- Identify and offer case studies on best practices in planning multi-sectoral nutrition programs
- Provide analysis and guidance on the impact of co-location, coordination, and integration of programs for improved nutrition, including a decision tree or matrix tool

For USAID missions:

- Establish permanent positions for nutrition focal points or coordinators
- Use the MSNS goals and principles to develop projects
- In missions with funding relevant to nutrition, establish multi-sectoral nutrition action plans
- Ensure equitable and well-targeted funding for nutrition

For Congress:

- Propose and appropriate increased investments for global nutrition programs
- Establish a common understanding with USAID of how its appropriated funds are used in nutrition-sensitive ways
- Engage in ongoing conversation with USAID on the implementation of the MSNS

For further analysis, see Bread for the World Institute’s briefing paper #37, *A Multi-sectoral approach to nutrition: Assessing USAID’s progress*. Available from: <https://www.bread.org/library/briefing-paper-multi-sectoral-approach-nutrition-assessing-usaids-progress>

Endnotes

¹ USAID (2018). What is the Journey to Self-Reliance? <https://www.usaid.gov/selfreliance/what-journey-self-reliance>

² USAID Multi-Sectoral Nutrition Strategy 2014-2025 <https://www.usaid.gov/nutrition-strategy>

³ Department of State (2018). Congressional Budget Justification Fiscal Year 2019 <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/277155.pdf>

⁴ World Health Organization (2014). Global Nutrition Targets 2025 https://www.who.int/nutrition/publications/globaltargets2025_policybrief_overview/en/

⁵ 2030 Sustainable Development Goals <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>

