

Bangladesh Case Study

Multi-sectoral Coordination and Collaboration of the Feed the Future Portfolio

Background

In 2013, the *Lancet* released a series of papers reviewing progress toward improving nutrition around the globe. This series argued that to achieve global targets for reducing undernutrition, a multi-sectoral approach is required, scaling up proven nutrition-specific interventions and strengthening nutrition-sensitive interventions such as agriculture. This need for cross-sector collaboration was further outlined in the *USAID 2014-2015 Multi-sectoral Nutrition Strategy*, which states “Multi-sectoral coordination along with collaborative planning and programming across sectors at national, regional, and local levels are necessary to accelerate and sustain nutrition improvements (USAID 2014).” The dual Feed the Future objectives of “inclusive agriculture sector growth” and “improved nutritional status” have led to a number of different attempts at strengthening multi-sectoral coordination and collaboration of USAID Mission portfolios. It is therefore important to determine how activities and donors can better work with each other, and with national governments, to optimize their own work and improve nutritional outcomes.

Bangladesh, with a population of 162 million, is the most densely populated country in the world (Feed the Future 2011). Despite improvements in the past few years, Bangladesh still has high levels of malnutrition. A midterm evaluation in the Feed the Future zone of influence, conducted in 2015 by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) found that stunting had decreased from 43.1 percent of children under five in 2011 to 37.8 percent (IFPRI 2016)¹. Food security and malnutrition are expected to become even larger challenges due to population increases, coupled with the degradation of land, water bodies, wetlands, and forests (Feed the Future 2011).

USAID and other donors have long worked closely with the Government of Bangladesh to address food security and nutrition issues facing the country. A number of national food security plans have already been developed, including the *Food Policy Plan of Action – 2008-2015*, and the *Country Investment Plan*, which was supported by USAID and other donors. Donor coordination of food security issues and related sector activities takes place on a regular basis through the Local Consultative Group (LCG) and its sub-groups. Additionally, a *National Plan of Action for Nutrition (NPN)* is being developed to align with the National Nutrition Policy 2015. They offer great opportunities for strengthening linkages with food security partners. USAID Bangladesh’s Feed the Future portfolio includes activities aimed at addressing problems in multiple sectors including health, nutrition, agriculture, food security, and education among others. Attempts to coordinate these activities with each other, as well as with activities implemented by other donors and with priorities and programs of the Government of Bangladesh, are ongoing amidst the complexity of the context.

¹ The 2011 DHS found national stunting rates to be 41 percent of children under 5.



Approach

The SPRING project was asked by USAID Bangladesh to examine one small component of this complex picture. Looking only at the portfolio of Feed the Future activities funded by USAID Bangladesh, SPRING worked with the USAID Bangladesh Mission and its Feed the Future partners to identify ways of strengthening their vision, plans, and approaches for coordination and collaboration of technical sectors, implementing partners, and other stakeholders around nutrition. The work included the following objectives:

- Identify processes and approaches that will strengthen existing coordination practices for the purpose of improving nutrition outcomes in Bangladesh.
- Share lessons learned from and better practice toward strengthening existing coordination within the USAID Bangladesh Mission and among implementing partners.

As part of the process, SPRING conducted a document review and extensive key informant interviews with USAID Bangladesh staff and implementing partners. During a visit to Bangladesh in January 2016, the SPRING team carried out interviews with staff from three USAID Bangladesh offices: Economic Growth (EG); Population, Health, Nutrition and Education (PHNE); and Food, Disaster, and Humanitarian Assistance (FDHA). Interviews were also carried out with staff from thirteen implementing partners in Dhaka and four partners in the district of Jessore.² Due to the security situation in Bangladesh, the SPRING team was unable to carry out the fieldwork it had initially anticipated. This may have affected the depth of the findings and focused the work on Dhaka-level Mission and implementing partner staff.

The Bangladesh findings will complement similar work carried out with USAID Guatemala and USAID Rwanda. SPRING will draft a comparative report based on the use of similar questionnaires and frameworks to analyze and compare findings across all three countries. SPRING used the Garrett conceptual model³ for working multi-sectorally to formulate interview questionnaires and analyze responses (Garrett et al. 2011). Garrett states that successful collaboration relies on factors related to the internal and external context and on the nature of the mechanisms and structures that link organizations. The model also provides definitions differentiating coordination and collaboration that resonated with respondents during interviews in Bangladesh (see box).

Terminology

- Coordination - Exchanging information and altering activities for mutual benefit and to achieve a common purpose.
- Collaboration - Exchanging information, altering activities, sharing resources, and enhancing one another's capacity for mutual benefit and to achieve a common purpose.

Findings

SPRING found a high level of interest and engagement by both USAID Bangladesh and implementing partner staff around issues of collaboration and coordination, but numerous questions and challenges about how to implement those. The primary venue for multi-sectoral coordination within USAID Bangladesh Mission has been the quarterly agriculture-nutrition partners' meeting. USAID Bangladesh invites each Feed the Future partner and requests invitees to present information on how they have been collaborating with each other in the Feed the Future Zone of Influence. Discussions also sometimes centered around examples of their work that could be

² See Annex 1 for a full contact list.

³ See Annex 2 for Garrett conceptual model

better coordinated, if planned accordingly. USAID Bangladesh was clear from the outset that although they feel that multi-sectoral collaboration and coordination is important to fostering positive results for nutrition, they have not wanted to create a complicated structure that encourages coordination or collaboration for its own sake. Instead, they prefer a lighter touch approach with their implementing partners. At the time of SPRING's study, key USAID Bangladesh staff indicated that these quarterly meetings have been serving their intended purpose: to provide a venue for Feed the Future implementing partners to share information on what they are doing and where they are working, and to encourage specific shared activities that would mutually benefit the partners involved.

Given the interest of USAID Bangladesh in strengthening its efforts to support activity-level coordination and collaboration under the Feed the Future initiative, the document review and interview process revealed a number of opportunities and challenges.

Opportunities

- **Coordinating across the portfolio allows for cross learning and increases activity reach.** During interviews, partners indicated that coordination efforts have helped activity staff members know what other USAID Bangladesh implementing partners (IP) are doing and to avoid duplication of efforts. In addition to the quarterly meetings mentioned above, several IP staff touched on another example of coordination: a poster created by the Agro-Inputs Project (AIP) that included nutrition messaging. AIP shared the content of this poster with other activities at the quarterly meeting, received technical input from the nutrition-specific activities in the portfolio, and have since shared the finished poster with other interested activities to use in their own work. A few agriculture activities mentioned that this poster was a good way to extend their messages to beneficiaries they would not have been able to reach otherwise.
- **There is a collaborative working environment within the Mission** that encourages communication across offices where and when needed. At the central (Dhaka) level, implementing partners perceive that Mission offices and staff communicate freely and collaborate where appropriate on specific activities. USAID Bangladesh staff from the PHNE and EG offices mentioned that there is a collaborative spirit around nutrition within the Mission. However, others noted that there is an opportunity for Mission staff managing Title II activities to be more engaged. They have been making plans to increase cross-office efforts with the creation of a Mission Nutrition Working Group that is made up of the Nutrition points of contact from the Technical Offices of the Mission, and the preparation and approval of a Mission nutrition strategy. Although the implementing partners seemed to perceive that these efforts exist within USAID Bangladesh, none provided concrete examples of when or how these new efforts have been communicated to them or led to concrete outcomes in their work.
- **Specific and clearly defined collaborative efforts have helped implementers achieve activity goals.** The Bangladesh portfolio includes numerous cases of activities working together on collaborative interventions, such as joint trainings or the creation of a database of extension agents. Implementers and USAID Bangladesh staff explained that these interventions might help reach individual activity targets, in addition to improving portfolio outcomes. One example of a collaborate effort related to nutrition outcomes has been the Media Dark campaign run by the SHIKHA activity. Media Dark airs short videos from projectors on nutrition and hygiene practices as well as on improved aquaculture practices involving SHIKHA, SPRING, and USAID Aquaculture projects in communities where there is no regular supply of electricity and no television coverage. The USAID Horticulture project was also part of this collaboration until it ended on September 30, 2015. While not all collaboration may be specifically related to nutrition,

such efforts might further enhance collaboration on nutrition activities (as in the database example) and increase opportunities for more comprehensive reach. For example, another advantage of the collaboration under the Media Dark campaign was that by promoting aquaculture-related information, the videos also attracted men to a nutrition event

- **Coordinating allows activities to leverage financial resources and improve efficiency to avoid duplication of efforts.** This was mentioned as being particularly important in a country like Bangladesh, which has an abundance of activities and donors working in close proximity without always knowing what similar work others might be carrying out. For example, a number of the agriculture activities that are working with farmers, input suppliers, or extension agents in the same geographic region have been creating a “yellow pages” to compile the names and contact information of agents and sellers they work with to share more widely. This will allow activities to connect with other networks and decrease the time and cost of setting up individual networks, training separate groups of individuals, or training the same individuals in different ways.

Challenges

- **While USAID Bangladesh has an explicit strategic goal for nutrition, partners lack clarity as to how their efforts toward coordination and collaboration contribute to that goal.** USAID Bangladesh is making a concerted effort to implement the USAID Multi-sectoral Nutrition Strategy and its strategic goal of improving nutrition to save lives, build resilience, increase economic productivity, and advance development (USAID 2014). Specifically, the Mission aims to strengthen the linkages between Feed the Future, Food for Peace, the Global Health Initiative, and other donor-funded projects. The coordination and collaboration strategy described in the powerpoint presentation entitled, “Implementation of the USAID Multi-sectoral Nutrition Strategy: A Case Study of Collaboration and Coordination among Implementing Partners” provides a detailed accounting of how efforts between different Feed the Future, Food for Peace and Global Health-funded activities in Bangladesh to work together might be mapped across USAID’s [global](#) Multi-sector Nutrition Strategy results framework – down to the sub-IR level. However, apart from the Agriculture-Nutrition Linkages Group, many partners are unclear as to how these efforts to coordinate or collaborate fit the [USAID Bangladesh](#) nutrition strategy. This may be partly because the USAID Bangladesh nutrition strategy has been under development and still has not been released or shared with partners. While the partners appreciate not being asked to coordinate and collaborate for the sake of collaboration, they would also prefer concrete guidance from the Mission on what the vision and expectations are around coordinating and how they will be held accountable within each of their contracts or agreements. This would allow for a win-win among USAID and its partners as studies have found that organizing in support of a collaborative process can help participants to work together toward common goals. It has also been shown that dedicated mechanisms for coordination can help to reduce program costs by avoiding redundant activities (Himmelman 1996, Garrett 2011).
- **Coordination efforts have not been institutionalized at the USAID Bangladesh Mission,** but have been led by one person who is leaving USAID Bangladesh this year. Implementing partners would like the next point of contact identified and communicated so that they better understand what will be expected from them going forward.
- **Although there have been instances with deliberate follow up, many collaboration efforts have lacked a mechanism for follow up.** It is common for activity staff from one activity to hold trainings for staff from another activity. When this occurs, the trainings themselves are often the measured output

from the collaboration, and there are not often formal ways for follow up to ensure quality or sustained use/understanding of the education and/or materials. This is an additional challenge if the trainings focused on concepts or even sectors new to the staff being trained, such as nutrition concepts being provided to agriculture trainers.

- **There is no formal coordination mechanism in place at the field level.** While the number of interviews held with field-based staff was extremely limited, several interviewees in Dhaka and in Jessore noted that field staff know each other well and communicate informally. However, there is no formal meeting at the field level comparable to the quarterly agriculture-nutrition partners meeting held in Dhaka. This lack of structure was mentioned as an obstacle to conducting concrete collaborative activities beyond those agreed to at the Dhaka level. Additional field work is necessary to better understand both formal and informal mechanisms for coordination and collaboration in the Zone of Influence. It should be noted that UNICEF is supporting the government of Bangladesh to try Upazila-level coordination around nutrition. However, Feed the Future partners were not clear as to the regularity or usefulness of this effort.
- **There is a need for a portfolio-based understanding of how and where nutrition fits** into Feed the Future and how each activity contributes to that larger picture. Implementers explained that while USAID Bangladesh sees the big picture, the activities themselves do not always understand where they fit and instead focus on their own siloed work plans. Having a clear understanding of the full puzzle of activities would enable them to see where they fit and how they could better connect to other activities.
- **Partners perceive a conflict between their awards and their interest or obligation to coordinate.** Only one IP, the Women's Empowerment Project, indicated that their contract or agreement included a responsibility or obligation to support coordination (they have been asked to lead a regular gender coordination meeting). While partners agreed that coordination and collaboration can be helpful in achieving common goals, the fact that they are not being held accountable within their contracts to spend the time and resources required to work with others in a collaborative way means that IPs do not always prioritize such efforts. The lack of clear objectives and indicators for collaboration combined with the fact that various funding streams support nutrition-related programming complicates coordination efforts, making them inefficient from a cost and time standpoint.
- **Collaboration efforts are not measured.** Activities often provide updates related to collaboration during the Agriculture-Nutrition Linkages Group meetings. However, numerous interviewees pointed out that this is the primary way that they are held responsible for reporting on collaboration efforts. Collaboration and coordination take up a significant amount of time, often before any return in time saved is seen. But, because activities are not being recognized – through their indicators - for investing this time, partners view collaboration as something that is ad hoc or, perhaps, pursued only opportunistically. They do not necessarily see it as something that is a strategic part of their work plans or the “real work” being conducted by their activity.

Recommendations

During the desk review and interviews, it became clear that the Bangladesh Mission is not looking to create additional work for Mission or partner staff. The Mission supports coordination and collaboration efforts where they naturally emerge by identifying and strengthening natural areas of linkage and coordination. Therefore, SPRING structured its recommendations to be in line with the request from the Bangladesh Mission to improve current efforts, but not to create a new and separate structure.

Short-term recommendations

- 1. Identify a new coordination lead within the Mission** and communicate the change with partners. Partners indicated that they would be more likely to prioritize coordination efforts if they were sure that they would continue to be a Mission priority. Clarifying what the future expectations are likely to be, and that there will be a continued point person supporting coordination efforts, would facilitate the transition.
- 2. Use good meeting protocols** to maximize time during meetings and incorporate protocol for following up on action items (i.e. include a structured agenda, note taker, facilitator, etc.). Partners generally appreciated the opportunity to meet and share information on their activities, but felt that there was not always a mechanism or accountable party whose role it was to follow up on decisions made during these meetings. Guidance from the Mission and communication of expectations immediately following and with adequate advance notice of meetings would help to get all players on the same page, ensure accountability, and enable partners to know when and how to take next steps, as needed.
- 3. Conduct a half- to full day workshop with partners to refresh the coordination and collaboration strategy and promote inclusiveness with other key stakeholders in the Zone of Influence.** As noted above under “challenges”, many partners did not feel that there were clear expectations related to coordination and collaboration, and therefore, did not feel a sense of ownership with USAID Bangladesh’s current strategy. Without a clear set of outcomes related to USAID Bangladesh’s CDCS (and the nutrition strategy that underpins the CDCS) and in line with all implementing partners’ planned outcomes coordination and collaboration efforts will continue to be ad hoc. USAID Bangladesh is already working towards the USAID Multi-sectoral Nutrition Strategy and its strategic goal for nutrition. Through a participatory process (e.g. a half- to full day workshop), the Mission could expand this effort, conveying how coordination and collaboration may contribute to USAID Bangladesh’s goals. This could also outline how agriculture and nutrition partners are specifically expected to undertake coordination and collaboration (i.e. joint site visits and work planning, shared nutrition messages, mutual trainings, etc.) in a discrete timeframe. Identifying achievable, specific activities related to coordination and collaboration – which may require more advance planning – would allow for more time and cost efficient efforts across the board. It would also ensure that the partners have a common understanding of their contributions and USAID’s expectations of their efforts toward nutrition as well as how they and USAID might better leverage investments of other donors and governmental/non-governmental stakeholders. USAID could also consider sharing the strategy and objectives of collaboration with government and other stakeholders to ensure a good fit with their work and plans.
- 4. Define realistic coordination and collaboration short- and long-term goals.** There is consensus between the Mission and the implementing partners that not everything should be coordinated. SPRING recommends that the Mission work together with its partners to establish common goals of coordination efforts in support of projected nutrition-related results, perhaps building from the Mission-wide nutrition strategy. These outcomes should be directly related to the coordination and collaboration efforts outlined during the strategy refresh (per the point above) and defining how, when, where and why coordination and collaboration might best take place among or between partners. The strategy refresh, recommended in point 3, above, should also emphasize the development of doable, measurable actions that fit the Mission CDCS and/or one or more PADs that are also in line with partners’ contracts or agreements.

General recommendations

- 1. Take a portfolio approach for nutrition** to maximize nutritional outcomes from a multi-sectoral portfolio of activities. This would entail incorporating coordination and collaboration goals and expectations into activity designs and proposals, or potentially establishing a Project Appraisal Document (PAD) with an over-arching results framework for coordinating multi-sectoral investments toward improved nutrition (other missions such as USAID Rwanda have done this). It would also allow activities to focus on their own comparative advantages and leverage the expertise of other activities, instead of each activity being required to have a nutrition objective or outcome on its own. This type of approach would strive for portfolio-level performance around nutritional outcomes and would clearly state how, where, and what nutrition-specific or nutrition-sensitive interventions are expected to be implemented by whom, whether in coordination with another activity, or not. This should bear in mind that resource sharing and joint design and implementation of interventions is particularly challenging if not explicitly outlined in project documents and contracts.
- 2. Plan collaborative efforts more strategically to affect nutrition and other outcomes.** There is a good opportunity to strengthen and multiply outcomes if there is careful programming that ensures that interventions carried out by activities from different sectors complement each other. For example, setting up a referral system for beneficiaries who fall into the target categories of other activities could expand this reach even further by allowing beneficiaries from one activity to access available resources or training from other activities in their region.
- 3. Incorporate clear guidance for holding activities accountable for coordination and collaboration efforts from the design stage.** This could include clearly defining each collaborative intervention, including information about how defined outputs will be measured and how these interventions and outputs fit into the larger results expected under the USAID Bangladesh portfolio strategy. For example, this could include specific indicators measuring the process of collaboration or language in contracts and cooperative agreements outlining expectations and monitoring plans around coordinated efforts.
- 4. Create a system of robust technical assistance** to ensure quality implementation of the USAID Bangladesh nutrition strategy, including linking nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive interventions, outcomes, and objectives. The Bangladesh portfolio includes activities that are both nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive; however, most of these activities focus on implementing their own work plans with little clarity regarding how nutrition-sensitive components link to or support nutrition-specific components. For example, current nutrition interventions (e.g. SHIKA and SPRING) are focused on their own outputs without a clear idea about how these outputs might strengthen or be strengthened by nutrition-sensitive interventions under other activities (e.g. AIN, AIP, LPIN, etc.). Cross-portfolio technical assistance (TA) for nutrition, whether provided directly by USAID staff or by a separate activity that is designed to provide nutrition-related TA, would enable partner staff to leverage expertise across activities and support a consistent yet multi-sectoral approach to nutrition across all USAID Bangladesh investments/sources.
- 5. Establish a mechanism for follow up from collaboration efforts.** Currently, collaboration efforts are often one-off activities such as staff of one activity training staff of another activity. Incorporating methods and funding for follow-up on these efforts would make them more sustainable and allow activities to continue building on relationships. This could enhance outcomes of activities that received substantial support in the start-up phase.

- 6. Establish a stronger environment for Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA).** Learning is always taking place, but it is not necessarily systematically planned for or adequately supported. As a result, learning is infrequently facilitated and not typically viewed in ways that are strategic or can maximize results (USAID Learning Lab, 2014). Emphasizing learning within the Mission could improve the process of creating, documenting, and disseminating knowledge about what works for collaboration to improve development outcomes. Creating and maintaining an internal knowledge portal is one way that USAID could ensure this learning is captured across the Mission. The collaborative environment in the Mission may provide an opportunity to analyze monitoring data across offices and then share findings and results with the various partners. Currently, planned activities among implementing partners, such as the common GIS mapping platform, could facilitate cross learning. This common platform could involve mapping the different activities and creating a central repository of information, using GIS technology to overlay relevant data sets on both agriculture and nutrition. Using this data in real time provides an opportunity to avoid duplication of efforts and adjust activities as necessary. Numerous partners mentioned ACME, the M&E mechanism supporting Feed the Future activities, as a potential convener and facilitator that could play a role in CLA activities.
- 7. Operationalize the nutrition coordination strategy in the new Country Development Coordination Strategy (CDCS).** As noted above, the development of the new CDCS provides a good opportunity to incorporate the key components of the (yet-to-be-released) nutrition strategy into at least one multi-sectoral project/PAD. This project could explicitly draft expectations for coordination and collaboration among partners, in line with USAID Bangladesh's desire to support and link both nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive interventions.

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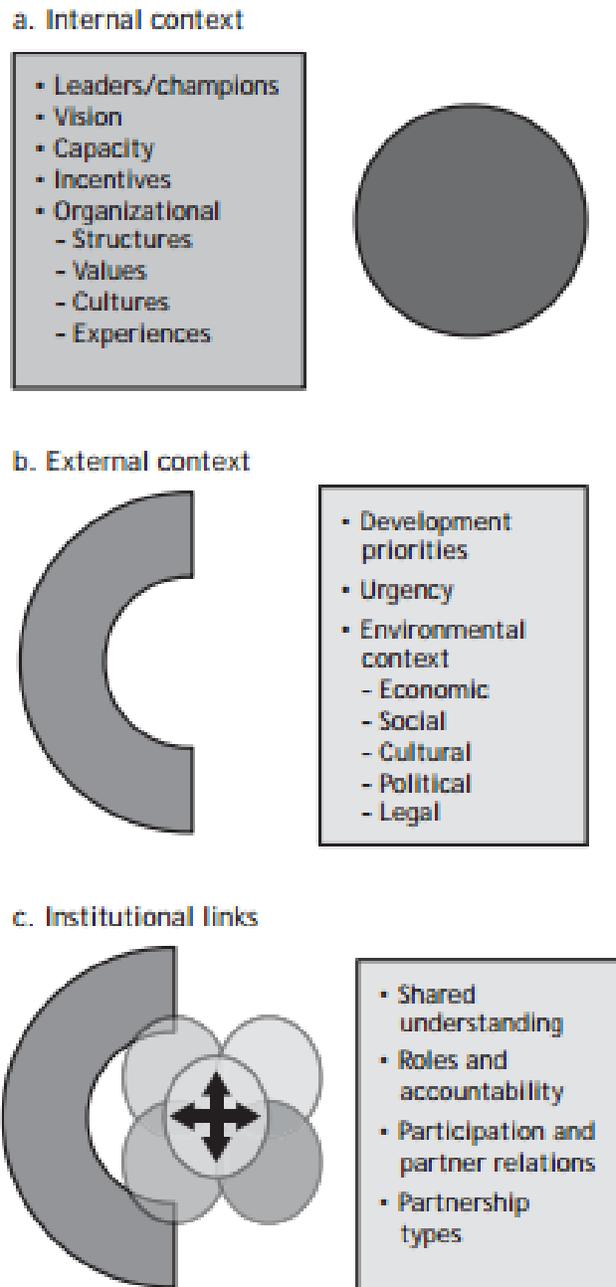
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Annex 2. Garrett Conceptual Framework

Figure 3.1 Conceptual framework: Working multisectorally



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