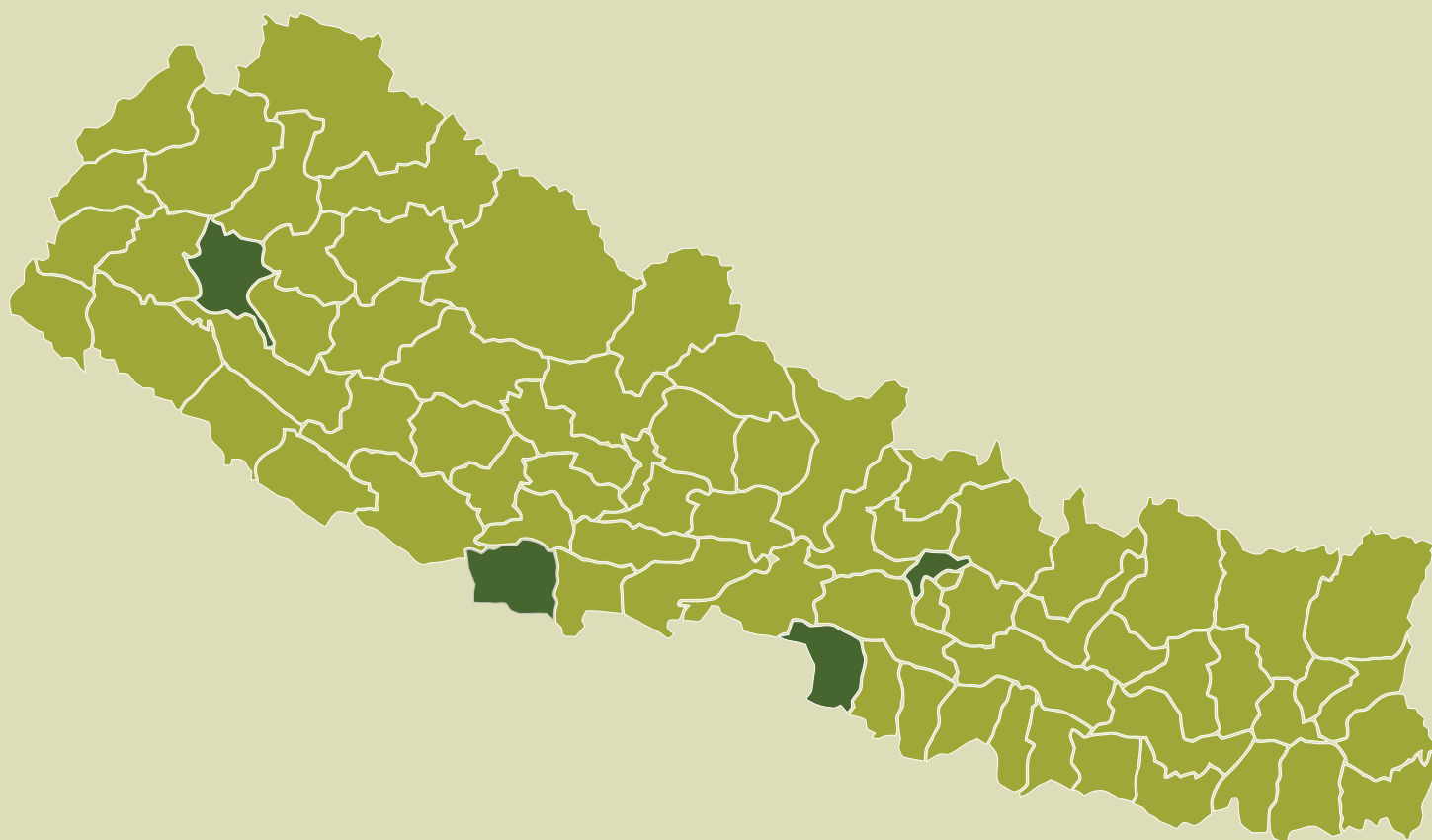


PATHWAYS TO BETTER NUTRITION
CASE STUDY EVIDENCE SERIES

Pathways to Better Nutrition

IN NEPAL

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



JULY 2016



About SPRING

The Strengthening Partnerships, Results, and Innovations in Nutrition Globally (SPRING) project is a five-year USAID-funded Cooperative Agreement to strengthen global and country efforts to scale up high-impact nutrition practices and policies and improve maternal and child nutrition outcomes. The project is managed by the JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc., with partners Helen Keller International, The Manoff Group, Save the Children, and the International Food Policy Research Institute.

Disclaimer

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Acronyms

CSO	civil society organization
EDP	external development partner
GDP	gross domestic product
GoN	Government of Nepal
HKI	Helen Keller International
HLNFSSC	high-level nutrition and food security steering committee
JSI	JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc.
M&E	monitoring and evaluation
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
MoF	Ministry of Finance
MoHP	Ministry of Health and Population
MSNP	Multi-sector Plan of Action for Nutrition
NFSSC	nutrition and food security steering committee
NNFSS	national nutrition and food security secretariat
NNG	national nutrition group
NPC	National Planning Commission
PBN	Pathways to Better Nutrition case study
SPRING	Strengthening Partnerships, Results, and Innovations in Nutrition Globally
SUN	Scaling Up Nutrition
UN	United Nations
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VDC	village development committee
VNFSSC	village level nutrition and food security steering committee

SPRING's Pathways to Better Nutrition (PBN) Case Study Evidence Series reports on findings that emerged from this two-year, two-country, mixed-methods study on how nutrition-related activities are prioritized and funded. Please check the SPRING PBN webpage (<http://www.spring-nutrition.org/pbn>) for more information on the studies and other products in this series.

Executive Summary

A multi-sectoral approach is often thought to be the most effective way to reduce malnutrition.

With the renewed global attention on nutrition supported by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) movement, a multi-sectoral approach has returned to the forefront of nutrition programming (Levinson, Balarajan, and Marini 2013).

Nepal has a long tradition of using multi-sectoral approaches to reduce malnutrition. The Joint Nutrition Support Program of 1976 signaled the Government of Nepal's (GoN) support for nutrition as a policy priority, but momentum slowed in the 1980s and 1990s. The 2009 Nepal *Nutrition Assessment and Gap Analysis* provided the evidence-base for Nepal's *Multi-sector Plan of Action for Nutrition (2013-2017)* (MSNP). The plan was developed after a series of consultative meetings led by the National Planning Commission (NPC) with participation of key sector ministries, donors, United Nations (UN) groups, academia, and civil society organizations (CSOs).

Poor nutrition poses a great risk to Nepal's development and to the well-being and potential of its people. More than 40 percent of children were stunted in 2011, and more than 45 percent were anemic, despite improvements in the last decade and continued investment by the GoN and external development partners (EDPs) (MOHP, New ERA, and ICF 2012). We know that an estimated 2–3 percent of Nepal's gross domestic product (GDP) is lost every year because of vitamin and mineral deficiencies alone (World Bank 2012). A larger investment in nutrition will increase the health and productivity of the Nepali population. Global estimates state that every U.S. dollar spent to reduce stunting can return an average savings of \$18 through increased cognitive and physical development and improved health (Hoddinott et al. 2013). Increased nutrition financing, therefore, is a strong predictor of future improvements in malnutrition and mortality.

The MSNP signals the country's commitment and is an important first step to addressing the immediate, underlying, and basic causes of malnutrition (UNICEF 1990). However, if the activities proposed in the plan are to be completed, stakeholders must own and prioritize the MSNP. While some important research on translating

MSNP Output Areas

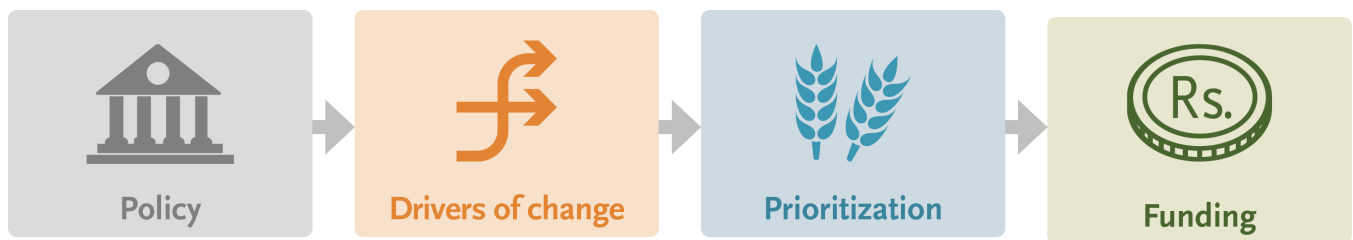
- Output 1:** Policies and plans updated/reviewed, and the incorporation of a core set of nutrition-specific and -sensitive indicators at national and subnational levels.
- Output 2:** Multi-sector coordination mechanisms functional at national and sub-national levels.
- Output 3:** Maternal and child nutritional care service utilization improved, especially among the unreached and poor segments of society.
- Output 4:** Adolescent girls' parental education, life skills, and nutrition status enhanced.
- Output 5:** Diarrheal diseases and ARI episodes reduced among young mothers, adolescent girls, and infants and young children.
- Output 6:** Availability and consumption of appropriate foods (in terms of quality, quantity, frequency, and safety) enhanced and women's workload reduced.
- Output 7:** Capacity of national and sub-national levels enhanced to provide appropriate support to improve maternal and child nutrition.
- Output 8:** Multi-sector nutrition information updated and linked at national and sub-national levels.

Source: Multi-sector Nutrition Plan (GoN and NPC, 2012)

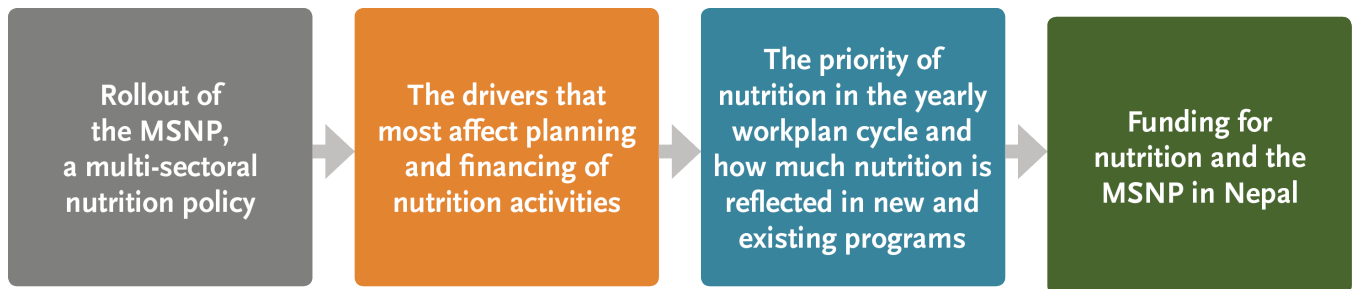
nutrition policy to action has been conducted, there are still gaps in practical knowledge about how to achieve this.

The Pathways to Better Nutrition (PBN) study in Nepal (2014–2015) aimed to close this knowledge gap. The U.S. Agency for International Development’s (USAID) SPRING project managed the PBN study, which was conducted in collaboration with NPC to support learning about the MSNP process. Over two years, the PBN study collected qualitative and quantitative data on planning, prioritizing, and funding related to nutrition-relevant activities within the context of the MSNP. Using a 360-degree view of the MSNP process, the PBN study interviewed stakeholders from the government, donors, UN groups, CSOs, private sector, and academia at the national level and in three districts: Achham, Kapilvastu, and Parsa. SPRING also interviewed nutrition and food security steering committee (NFSSC) members from one village development committee (VDC) within each of those districts.

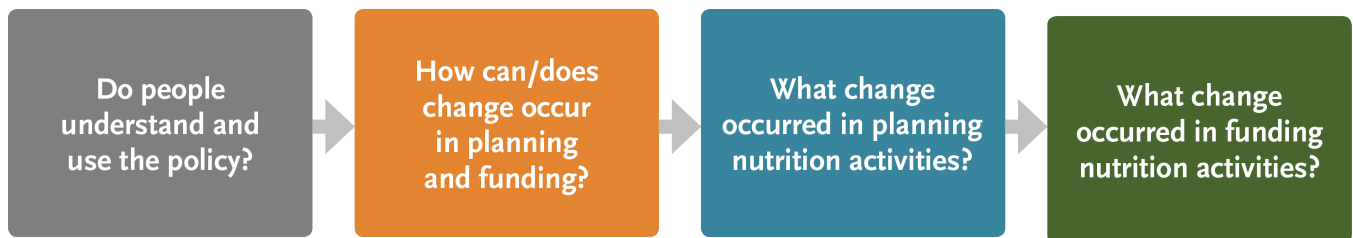
SPRING hypothesized that the **MSNP** would positively influence the **understanding of the policy, enabling processes and drivers, prioritization, and funding** for nutrition over the two years of the study.



To test this, SPRING's PBN study followed these four key study areas to assess—



by asking the following questions:



These questions necessitated a longitudinal, mixed-methods approach.

The goal of this study was to document how nutrition is prioritized and how that prioritization, in turn, influences the funding of nutrition. The lessons from this study can help Nepal and similar countries further institutionalize nutrition into the regular policy and planning cycle.

PATHWAYS TO BETTER NUTRITION

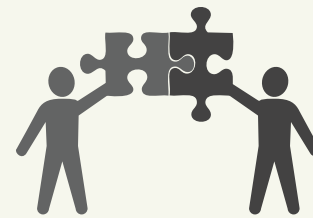
Nepal – Findings

For each study area, we assessed qualitative change by its intensity:



The PBN study found that the MSNP has helped to create an identity for nutrition, and has **increased priority and funding** for nutrition-related activities in Nepal.

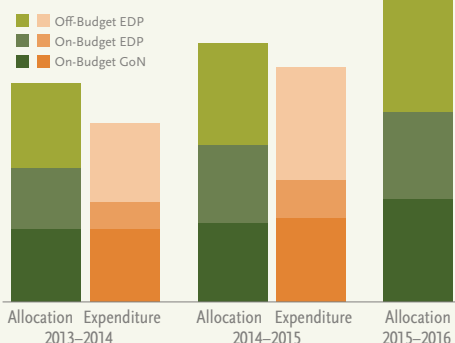
Evidence points toward widespread improvement in involvement, understanding, and knowledge of the MSNP and multi-sectoral nutrition actions, both nationally and in three MSNP priority districts. There were also small improvements in knowledge of stakeholder roles and responsibilities, but work should continue to cover all stakeholder groups. In the three VDCs visited, it appears the MSNP has not yet penetrated that level.



The study found six key drivers that the MSNP needs to affect to move prioritization forward. Of these, MSNP has positively affected three (advocacy, coordination, and sustainable structures) primarily through behavioral and structural changes, though some key implementation changes occurred during the study. Human resources, bottom-up planning, and ownership will need continued improvement.

Nationally, increases in priority of nutrition were found in several, but not all, key ministries and a few EDPs. The government ministries that improved mentioned MSNP as a positive influence (EDPs cited the global nutrition agenda just as often as MSNP) and included nutrition in their strategic sector documents. We documented widespread behavioral and structural changes as well as implementation changes, which included several major new and on-going projects that support MSNP. Evidence suggests the overall priority of nutrition has increased since 2014.

Sector	Gov.	Donor	UN	CSO	Private
Agriculture	↑	↗	→		↘
Education	→		→		
Federal Affairs/ Local Government	↑	→			
Health	↑	↑	↑	↗	
Gender & Social Welfare	↗				
WASH/Urban Dev.	→	could not be assessed			



Increased priority in the sector ministries and EDPs has resulted in real yearly increases in nutrition-related funding of about 17 percent. Around one-fourth of this funding in 2015–2016 was due to projects specifically related to MSNP. GoN expenditure of nutrition-related funding is close to 100 percent, but on-budget EDP spending could be improved.

To capitalize on the positive influence of the MSNP and sustain the commitment to reduce malnutrition in Nepal, the barriers identified in this study must be overcome. The GoN will continue the good work it is already doing, but a few areas would benefit from improvement. SPRING based the following recommendations on study findings and suggestions from stakeholders.

#1

All partners should **continue advocacy and education campaigns** at the district and community levels.



Although we documented significant progress in understanding of the multi-sectoral causes of malnutrition at the national level, significant gaps in understanding remained in the three districts and VDCs we visited. We heard from the national ministries that some VDC sector officers did not demand nutrition activities following the bottom-up process, e.g., in the urban development and education sectors where physical infrastructure was more desirable.

GoN and partners can continue investment to increase awareness of multi-sectoral nutrition through multiple channels (mass media, household, etc.) for all target groups at the community and local levels. Local-level policy and decision makers are key assets to help increase understanding of the importance of nutrition across multiple sectors, especially related to urban development and education. Their increased awareness will help generate demand for nutrition in the local planning process.

#2

GoN and EDPs can move forward by **strengthening nutrition capacity and reducing turnover** at all levels within all sectors.



During the course of the study, more than half of the national-level nutrition focal staff people who we interviewed turned over. By the end of 2015, four positions at NPC and the national nutrition and food security secretariat (NNFSS) went vacant. Turnover also affected EDP nutrition staff. This turnover, combined with low technical capacity in nutrition among some ministries, strained national efforts to convene for the MSNP. In three districts and selected VDCs, government staff reported that nutrition activities were hard to support because of staff shortages, especially in hard-to-reach areas.

The GoN (and EDPs) should ensure continuity and institute handover protocols to keep institutional MSNP memory in each ministry and organization. The GoN could do this by building nutrition curriculum into the civil servant training period. NPC began working with the Ministry of General Administration and the Ministry of Finance to reduce transfers and create new positions for nutrition officers, and this could result in concrete guidelines in this area. At the district and VDC levels, we suggest creating a designated focal person for nutrition activities; GoN can discuss the feasibility of financial incentive schemes to keep those positions filled in hard-to-reach areas.

#3

NPC should consider **revitalizing the parliamentary, cabinet, and high-level nutrition and food security committees** to help advocate for and establish ownership of the MSNP effort.



Educating parliamentarians, lawmakers, and other high-level leaders about the importance of nutrition should be a prime agenda items for MSNP. In the original support structure plans, provisions for parliamentary and cabinet-level sub-committees and a high-level (Ministry Secretary-level) nutrition and food security steering committee (HLNFSSC) were made. Yet we were told that the parliamentary and cabinet-level sub-committees may not have ever met, and the HLNFSSC only met once or twice in the last two years.

Revitalizing the HLNFSSC and activating the sub-committees for advocacy on the MSNP could increase government ownership within the sector ministries. This could also motivate EDPs

and the private sector to increase alignment of activities with the MSNP, especially if advocacy by these committees could link nutrition to the country's future economic development. In addition, creating better communication among all levels of nutrition and food security committees will help unify advocacy efforts from the HLNFSFC down to the VDCs.

#4 NNFSS should keep working to **involve academia and the private sector** in the MSNP coordination structure.



The MSNP support structure must include all stakeholders at every level. In our interviews, we were told that academia and the private sector had, so far, had much less engagement in MSNP coordination activities. Formal recognition of the academic coordination platform within the NNFSS had stalled, and a coordination platform for the private sector had not yet been formed by the end of the study.

Efforts to activate the academic platform should restart. In addition, academic stakeholders sit on the HLNFSFC, so restarting this convening mechanism means academia could provide the evidence needed to fuel advocacy at the highest level. The private sector will need a clear business case for engaging, which could be developed by reframing the argument for nutrition in terms of increased labor productivity and improved market opportunities for products that align with the national nutrition standards. Creating a private sector coordination platform would facilitate this discussion.

#5 GoN should **implement the MSNP monitoring and evaluation framework** as soon as possible.



By the end of the study, an MSNP monitoring and evaluation (M&E) framework was in final draft after review by all sector ministries, but approval stalled, possibly due to vacancies in the national MSNP support structure. Yet stakeholders at every level reinforced the need to coordinate monitoring data and evidence on the impact of the MSNP on nutritional indicators.

The GoN will need to approve and implement the draft M&E framework as soon as possible. The NPC may want to consider including nutrition financing indicators in this final plan. National ministries, districts, and below need an accompanying set of implementation guidelines to define exactly how sectors and districts are to collect this information. Technical assistance may be needed to pull all sector nutrition indicators into a national reporting structure.

#6 All stakeholders should **adhere to bottom-up planning processes for nutrition activities** to better meet needs at the local level.



Bottom-up planning is not unique to nutrition, but it is critical for understanding which nutrition programs will work best in each community. While some stakeholders felt that bottom-up planning was working for MSNP activities, others felt that bottom-up planning had been in name only and not in practice. Indeed, various stakeholders from three VDCs told us that they were not given enough time to make the plans and send up their proposals.

Central ministries, CSOs, and EDPs should build capacity to strengthen the planning process at the community level. This includes creating clear implementation guidelines on how to plan, budget, and conduct MSNP-related nutrition activities. As capacity is strengthened at the local level, the national ministries need to consider the local plans and proposals seriously. Where possible, the districts should be given some unconditional funding to help them fulfill local needs. Within the districts, the district development committee should lead efforts to plan for MSNP activities. Bottom-up planning schedules should give the VDCs sufficient time to assess community needs.

#7

GoN and EDPs should consider intensifying efforts to **revitalize nutrition and food security committees at the VDC level** and into new MSNP districts



While the GoN—via the MSNP line-item funding—and EDPs (for example, USAID, the World Bank, and UNICEF) have made significant progress in rolling out the district nutrition and food security steering committees in the six MSNP priority districts, much work is still needed to ensure that every VDC in those districts has an operating nutrition and food security committee. In addition, the new MSNP expansion districts—28 are listed in the MSNP—will need to develop nutrition and food security committees. We heard from every level that this was both a serious challenge and an absolute necessity for the long-term success of the MSNP. These committees are excellent platforms for all stakeholders to share data, generate evidence-based programming, and coordinate bottom-up planning for nutrition.

To move beyond the initial creation of the local committees, the human resource constraints noted in recommendation #2 must be reconciled. In addition, committee membership should be spread out to ensure that the same people at the VDC level are not overburdened with multiple meetings for different programs. EDPs should also engage and support VDC committee members—we heard from stakeholders in one VDC in Parsa that the Sunaula Hazar Din project has recently made progress in activating the VNFSSC. Finally, we heard anecdotally that the proposed district support agency could be another channel to support these committees.

#8

All partners working in nutrition should **align planned activities with MSNP** objectives.



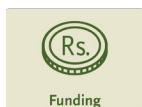
Evidence indicated that while EDPs—particularly donors and UN groups—gave substantial support to nutrition activities, they seemed to primarily follow their own global agenda for nutrition. While many referred to the MSNP for planning, it was often a secondary or tertiary document. This was also true of many (but not all) EDPs in the districts and VDCs we visited. Some partners, like the private sector, did not make any reference to the MSNP.

We heard from donor and UN stakeholders that they see increased coordination as the biggest potential benefit of the MSNP. Because of the amount of funding coming from these sources in Nepal, it is essential that these organizations communicate their plans, not only with the government but also with other EDPs. Increased coordination of nutrition activities is just as important for ministries, the private sector, and CSOs. It is, therefore, critical to embed all stakeholders into the MSNP coordination structure to ensure they are active and engaged.

At the national level, GoN could use the existing national nutrition secretariat and the national nutrition group (NNG) to encourage regular sharing of the draft sector and EDP plans for nutrition activities early in the budget cycle. At the local level, EDPs could work closely with the district and VDC committees to decide how to add more activities based on locally identified needs to their programs.

#9

GoN should consider **increasing financial resources for MSNP support structures** described in the plan.



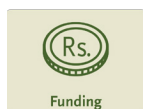
MSNP support structures—such as the NNFSS, other steering committees, and NPC—are essential for oversight and management for nutrition planning in Nepal. These committees operate from the national to the VDC level. The evidence demonstrated that these structures were well received at the national and district levels—for instance, many stakeholders cited the NNFSS as helping them understand the MSNP, increasing their knowledge of multi-sectoral nutrition, helping them coordinate with other stakeholders, and learning how to prioritize nutrition. Currently however, all NNFSS positions are externally funded. At the time

of our interviews, the nutrition and food security committees in our three VDCs had been formed but had never met.

Nationally, the GoN must start providing dedicated funds for NNFSS to ensure its continued existence, and/or greater funds for NPC staffing and involvement in coordination activities. GoN could provide additional dedicated nutrition funds to the VDCs (via the VDC block grants or another mechanism), or require that some percent of existing VDC block grants be used for this purpose to activate the below-district-level nutrition and food security steering committees.

#10

EDPs and GoN should work together to **reduce bottlenecks in spending** of EDP on-budget funding, **and increase the timely reporting** of off-budget EDP disbursements.

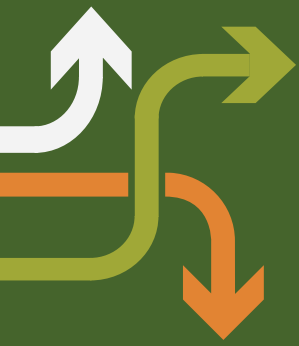


EDPs contributed about two-thirds of all nutrition-related funding, both on-budget and off-budget (outside the GoN systems). On-budget EDP funding was tracked with equal accuracy to GoN funds, but only about 50 percent of these funds were expended, on average, each year. For off-budget funds, the Ministry of Finance (MOF) increased donor reporting into the Aid Management Portal since the start of the study and it appears that projects are being updated regularly. However, even by the end of the study, only about one quarter of the listed projects included actual yearly commitments and disbursements, which made it difficult for stakeholders to incorporate this information into regular work and budget planning.

To reduce bottlenecks, EDPs and their partner ministries need to reduce delays in the release of funds, and they need to address procurement delays to give implementation-level staff enough time to spend these funds effectively. To improve timely off-budget reporting, EDPs must adhere to the MOF quarterly reporting schedule.

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