

RESEARCH ARTICLE**Tackling Zero Hunger: A View from Experts****Authors**

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Abstract

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide the blue print for overall development activities. The majority of countries, globally, have endorsed these goals. The present paper summarizes data from interviews with experts from United Nations agencies, national governments, civil society and the private sector around facilitators and constraints to achieving progress on SDG 2 – zero hunger (1).

Introduction

The sustainable development goals (SDGs) represent a global agreement on priorities for health, environment, social and economic development (1). SDG2 – zero hunger – explicitly addresses food insecurity, malnutrition in all its forms and sustainable agriculture. Countries are pursuing a range of policies and programs to achieve the targets embedded in SDG2.

The European Union has invested in 66 countries under the FIRST program (Food Insecurity Impact, Resilience, Sustainability, and Transformation); 24 of the FIRST countries are priorities for EU investments. In 2019, FAO was asked by the EU to conduct a stocktaking exercise for the 24 priority FIRST countries to ascertain, to date, the progress in addressing SDG2 (2). The stocktaking involved four related activities: 1. Country diagnostic reports 2. Literature Review of articles relevant to food security, nutrition, agriculture, social safety nets, gender and political economy 3. Quantitative analyses 4. Key informant interviews. Details on the results of 1, 2 and 3 can be found in a companion publication (2). The purpose of the key informant interviews was to capture experiential evidence that is often not adequately captured in journal articles. The interviews provided a “boots on the ground” perspective that helped elucidate the challenges at the country level in implementing policies and programs targeting SDG2.

The purpose of this paper is to summarize the information provided by thought leaders involved in various aspects of SDG2 in 24 FIRST countries.

Methods

Interviews with 23 key informants were conducted on the barriers and facilitators presented for achieving SDG2. This was a purposeful sample of interviewees involved and knowledgeable in aspects of the SDGs. The respondents included individuals from UN institutions, International NGOs, Academia, and In-Country Policy Officers. This categorization, however, under represents the richness of the experiences reflected in those interviewed, since many of the respondents fell into more than one category; for example, some of those surveyed, in prior positions, had been senior officials in national governments, including one Minister of Agriculture.

The questionnaire that was used revolved around eight questions that had been employed as a template for the country diagnostic reports (2). The open ended questions posed to the interviewees provided nuances to the information that is often not captured in more structured interviews. This framework for the interviews allowed linkages with the data provided in the country reports. The interviews were conducted between May and August 2019. It was emphasized in the preamble to the interview that there was no “right” or “wrong” answers. The comments expressed in the interviews represented experiences based mainly on in-country activities experienced by the respondents. The results presented in this paper represent a synthesis of information provided by the key informants in “their own language.”

Results

Six thematic areas emerged from the interviews:

Nutrition

The most consistent answers from interviewees revolved about the nature of the nutrition situation. All of the respondents indicated that the major problems continue to be under nutrition (stunting, wasting) in preschool aged children, micro nutrient deficiencies, low birth weight and under nutrition and anemia in women of child bearing age. In addition, all respondents acknowledged that progress has been made, yet despite this, countries are unlikely to reach the goals of SDG2 in the expected time frame. Some of the respondents asked why it is so hard to bring stunting down in the time frame proposed for SDG2. The drivers of stunting are more than poverty or income; success requires a multipronged approach.

Under nourishment, a term used to denote food insecurity, had been declining in the past two decades but this trend reversed itself in the past few years (3). Conflict and crises were identified as the main drivers of this recent, negative trend. Universal policies for food security in -country are uneven and do not necessarily reach the most vulnerable.

The term malnutrition in all its forms is part of the objectives of SDG2. The reality, however, is that almost all countries continue to place an emphasis on under nutrition. The term, malnutrition in all its forms, is “in vogue” and thus policy officials use this term. Overweight and obesity is a problem globally, including in some of the poorest countries.

Regrettably, countries are unprepared to tailor policies and programs to the obesity epidemic. The experiences, to date, are that countries have generally implemented approaches to only deal with under nutrition and micro nutrient deficiencies, in particular, in rural areas. The obesity crisis requires new paradigms which have not been tested in any country. Respondents noted that as far as they were aware, there is no national level policy focused on overweight and obesity.

Overweight and obesity have a dramatic effect on precipitating non communicable diseases (NCDs). Yet, while NCDs are on the agenda of many countries, there is little concerted effort to implement specific policies or programs. As a result of lack of attention to NCDs, it is impossible to say what success looks like. To repeat an earlier observation, most countries continue to concentrate on under nutrition. Indonesia is one example; the country has gotten significant funding from the World Bank to deal with malnutrition in all its forms, yet, the actions have not been comprehensive, and focus disproportionately on under nutrition (2). Another example to illustrate this point is the case of the African Union which despite the magnitude of the obesity epidemic does not mention overweight or obesity in their most recent strategy (4). Finally most low and middle income countries(LIMC)have accepted the recommendations from the Second International Congress of Nutrition, where overweight, obesity and NCDs figure prominently (5) yet these specific recommendations are not taken seriously as evidenced by the lack of attention in national plans to obesity and NCDs.

The issue of healthy diets is rarely mentioned in national nutrition plans. Apropos to this is the fact that none of the 24 Country Diagnostic reports for the FIRST program included a discussion of diet (2). What is needed is a logical approach on how policies and programs can promote healthy diets. Examples of where we have moved people from unhealthy to healthier diets are needed; at the moment there are not many success stories. As noted by many of the respondents, even UN institutions with commitments to the recommendations of ICN2 have not done a lot in promoting healthy diets.

Agriculture

Growth in agriculture as a goal in and of itself is critical for a country's economic growth. The agricultural sector will continue to be key for economic development in low and middle income countries (LMIC).

There is ambiguity beyond food security as to what agriculture is expected to do. In addition for some of the agricultural strategies that are in place, it is not clear that they will enhance nutrition. For example there is the assumption that producing more micro nutrient rich foods will improve the consumption of these products; we do not know, in all cases, if this assumption is correct.(6).

Agriculture is now expected to do more; the global dialogue has focused on nutrition sensitive agriculture as one way to effectively address SDG2. The term nutrition sensitive is vague and indeed, the dilemma is that few countries know specifically what this means from a specific implementation point of view. While most low and middle income countries have national nutrition plans, there is not even

a general consensus on what “nutrition” means. For years nutrition has been a secret language. Ministries of Agriculture think of nutrition as food security, while Ministers of Health equate nutrition with targeted interventions such as infant and child feeding programs, anemia prevention and alleviation, and prenatal nutrition, to name a few. There is no consensus in countries as to what a nutrition sensitive policy or program would entail. A number of those interviewed commented that they could not think of any country that currently has a successful, national, scaled up, nutrition sensitive program. There was general agreement among respondents that the evidence on the effectiveness of nutrition sensitive agriculture is very limited. The opinion of experts is reflected in published literature (7).

The agriculture sector in LMIC has been successful in improving food security over the past twenty years. For many in agriculture, this success is not acknowledged. In addition, agriculture is now expected to do more –but it is not clear what this “more” is. Agriculture has historically stressed cereal production; the dominant view from those interviewed is that agriculture needs to quickly beyond this narrow perspective.

Many respondents indicated that a food systems approach can be useful in transforming agriculture. Indeed, the UN Decade of Action on Nutrition has identified food systems as one important mechanism for reaching the SDGs (8). However, interviewees also pointed out that governments have limited experience in employing a food systems approach. Very little progress has been made, to date, on using

a food systems approach; a big question that was articulated was “What are we going to do differently?” While a food systems strategy is conceptually elegant, there is a scarcity of evidence-based research to guide decisions on policy formulation. Few countries are looking at the entire chain from production to consumption using a food systems approach; agriculture has tended to focus exclusively on production. It is not clear what needs to be done in employing a food systems approach. Before scaling up a food systems approach policies and approaches need to be tested.

The changes in food systems that are being made are marginal and are not considering the links between production and consumption. The Committee on World Food Security (CFS) has issued voluntary guidelines on food systems; it is unclear whether countries have actually adopted these to develop prototypes for policies (9). The dominant view from respondents was that governments and international organizations are not articulating the case that food systems must be transformed; a stronger “one voice” is needed to create the message of the essentiality of transformed food systems. A food systems approach is one critical approach that can be utilized for effective solutions to malnutrition in all its forms.

The dialogue on agriculture has expanded to focus on a broader agenda of people and planet, in large part due to the SDGs. The reality at county level is that most Ministries of Agriculture (MOA) still emphasize crop production as a driver of GDP. The agriculture sector is still very narrowly focused. This is reflected in the Myanmar country diagnostic report where although production diversity is

promoted in country agricultural plans, yet a “rice bowl” policy dominates the agenda. Rice production in Myanmar is viewed as essential for continued agricultural sector growth. However, the Myanmar Rice Federation exerts significant political clout. This federation has continued to emphasize a “rice bowl” policy at the country level. Many farmers are not interested in producing rice but are forced to do so by the government. The land title is conditional on what the government tells farmers to grow.

The narrow focus of the agricultural sector on basic staples will continue to dominate unless there are success stories in nutrition-sensitive agriculture. Countries are giving lip service to nutrition sensitive agriculture, in part, because this is seen as politically correct. The reality is that few countries have changed agricultural policies. An added complication is that UN agencies do not agree on the definition of nutrition sensitive agriculture, making it challenging to present a cohesive UN view.

Climate smart agriculture is receiving a lot of attention because countries now are clear about the negative effects of agriculture on climate. Here again, there is a disconnect between the acknowledgement of climate smart agriculture compared to what is being pursued at the country level.

The ability to transform the agricultural sector is affected by the political stability of a country; many countries, including some FIRST countries, are unstable and therefore, policy officials need to be realistic about what can be accomplished in the short to medium term. African countries such as Ivory Coast, Senegal and Ethiopia have made significant progress in improving the role of agriculture

in addressing SDG2. It would be valuable to evaluate from an historical perspective what policies have been implemented, the reasons why, who were the actors, and how was momentum maintained. With an information void on successes, there is a tendency to fall back to old solutions. Collectively those involved in transforming the agricultural sector need to identify innovative strategies that have proven successful.

Multi Sector Perspectives

A multi sector approach to advancing progress on SDG2 has become popular with many countries. The rationale is that both nutrition specific and nutrition sensitive policies and programs are needed to meet the targets of SDG2. Most of the respondents indicated that a multi sector approach to food security and nutrition could potentially be a significant strategy for fast forwarding progress towards SDG. While popular, however, there is limited evidence of success.

Some of the challenges identified for a multi stakeholder approach included coordination/collaboration, budgets, vested interests and the breaking down of silos across ministries. Sectors have historically concentrated on their own domains, reflected in plans of action at the national and local levels. Coordination mechanisms need to be established for a multi sector orientation to succeed; in most countries these do not exist or have not been successfully launched. In addition, the new structures to emphasize collaboration do not exist in a majority of countries.

The allocation of budgets is often a contentious issue. A number of respondents

indicated that a specific line item in each sector budget would be helpful in avoiding “turf” battles around budget.

A number of coordinating bodies have been established to circumvent the challenges that arise in the implementation of multi sector plans. Nepal, for example, has set up a coordinating body chaired by the Minister of Finance; this avoids the competition that is often seen between agriculture and health.

While most interviewees cited the essential role of the private sector in a multi sector strategy, they also commented that progress has been slow in establishing public-private sector partnerships. This is reality yet surprising since SDG17 specifically notes partnerships and collaborations as critical for the SDGs. The conclusion was that SDG17 has been ignored, and as described by one respondent, is the “orphan” of the SDGs.

Civil society organization should have a role in collaborating on multisector platforms. Many respondents, however, felt that civil society was underrepresented in the dialogue on multi sector approaches. Why has civil society not been more involved in breastfeeding promotion or programs focused on stunting? The answers to these questions are not clear.

Private Sector

Public -private sector (PP) collaboration is seen as critical for the success of multisector approaches to SDG2. The overwhelming consensus from the interviewees was that public private linkages are not happening, or not happening in sufficient numbers. An interesting observation was that “they (public

private sectors) do not know each other. There has been a conversation, globally, that public-private initiatives are vital for success but there has not been enough progress. Many organizations carry the torch of “no private sector.” Different models of PP are needed. These are beginning to emerge.

GAIN supports the expansion of healthy foods at lower prices and also has helped established cold chains. The Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) business network has emphasized PP, resulting in more private sector participation at the country level. The FRESH network has a commitment to revitalizing food systems to improve sustainability and health; their efforts are geared to the transformation of food systems.

What is clear from the comments of respondents is that the private sector needs to more effectively be brought into the dialogue with governments to make progress in advancing SDG2.

Go Local

Decentralization of activities has an inherent logic given that policies and programs are implemented at the local level. Devolution of responsibilities and authority, however, has been difficult. Similar to challenges at the national level, and maybe even more so, lack of structures at the local level create problems with a local approach. Kenya is an example of this; the government has found that decentralization has been more difficult than originally planned due to lack of experience on multisector approaches at the local level and poor linkages between national and local policies (2).

There are some success stories in decentralization as noted by comments from those interviewed. In El Salvador, the municipality is in charge; this involves setting FSN priorities and oversight of budget allocation to particular programs. Accountability nests at the local level. Where local level implementation happens, there is more transparency and accountability since communities see what is happening. The El Salvador case highlights the fact local government, not donors, set priorities.

An aspect that was particularly flagged by respondents was that many agricultural and nutrition policies are not being applied successfully at the local level.

Governance

Effective governance at the country level is essential for making progress towards SDG 2, and indeed, for achievements in the targets for each for the SDGs. The term good governance encompasses a range of factors. One essential element for success is buy-in from governments. This includes creating an environment where governments take ownership of the process to advancing the SDGs. One way of doing this is to create champions at the national and local levels. These individuals need to be acknowledged so that other individuals will come forward. This approach then begins to generate momentum.

The SUN movement has taken a major step in generating buy-in by requiring that the process be country owned. This country ownership has meant that individual countries request to be part of SUN; the process is not top-down from the international level but a

response to the articulated desire of a country to participate.

Creating awareness about food security and nutrition is critical for advancing the SDG2 agenda.

The targets for multi sector plans need to be specific and realistic. Policy is complicated. It should be stressed that solutions to SDG2 need to be country specific; there is no “boiler plate” approach that is appropriate at a global level.

Political Economy

The comments by key informants on political economy were commonly mentioned and more expansive than those contained in the country diagnostic reports (2). Technical solutions to food insecurity and malnutrition are typically insufficient to generate policies and programs that are implemented. Understanding the factors that fall under the umbrella of political economy is essential in order to go from paper to action.

Political economy (PE) factors include formal and informal institutional arrangements that influence the day-to-day activities and strategies of social actors, serve as structural elements that both reflect and influence the outcomes of political and economic competition (10). The interest-driven behavior of stakeholders, pressures and lobbying from specific groups; conflicts over access to finance, natural resources and other productive assets as well as the influence of global processes on local activities; all these PE factors shape and influence the way policies are elaborated and implemented, and

determine the probability that they will successfully achieve their objectives.

Governments need to be clear on how the FSN agenda is set. SDG2 may not be the top priority and in many cases competes with other SDGs for attention and resources. For example, SDG1 – eliminate poverty, often take more precedence than SDG2 – zero hunger. In addition, countries are at varying levels of development; this is critical in influencing policies and programs that can be realistically pursued.

Political will for FSN has been reported as a key element for success. However, as pointed out by some respondents, the question should not be political will, but rather leadership. Where there is strong leadership, progress on FSN happens. PAHO was very effective in working in the Caribbean to improve nutrition. PAHO “opened doors” to high level officials that then, paid attention and implemented programs for FSN. An essential element of the PAHO strategy was to help advise on FSN issues on a country-by-country basis. There was not one template that worked. Political commitment has to be more than what is stated on paper; political commitment has to be translated to action.

Corruption is a reality in almost all countries, both developed and developing yet this is rarely discussed in open forums. One respondent commented that corruption is present in about 45% of the countries in which they work. In order to move forward, we can’t wait until corruption is gone. People need to learn how to operate in a flawed system. As one respondent commented, the key is to “Keep calm and carry on.”

Vested interests exist in all countries. These can be competition around different ministries and competition for funding. Vested interests also are present in the private sector. The Myanmar Rice Federation mentioned earlier is a classic example of a private sector group that wields enormous political influence.

Civil society can effect change. In Brazil, the zero hunger movement did not emerge from government but arose from community groups who did not feel that the government of Brazil was taking food security issues seriously. This movement was used to embarrass the government. Eventually the government implemented a zero hunger program; a food security council was established to oversee the zero hunger movement. Unfortunately this council was eliminated by the current government. The current government in Brazil no longer has the same priority for FSN issues. The Brazil example highlights two factors. A cohesive community movement can be the fulcrum of change in government; secondly, with changes in government, there needs to be a way to advocate for the continuation of successful mechanisms aimed at food security and nutrition.

Genuine political commitment, when it exists, is highly visible. One person noted that in India, they have never seen so much enthusiasm for nutrition; as noted, “This is political commitment in action.”

Pakistan is another example. The current President has a campaign emphasizing that the brains of children that are malnourished will have irreversible damage. This is a powerful bully pulpit to communicate this issue.

There are misconceptions about how to effectively influence governments. Medium level government officials can be effective as change agents. Often it is not possible to interact with Director Generals of MOA or MOH; intermediaries can facilitate changes in policies and programs. Civil society is becoming more active in advocating for SDG2. In Latin America civil social participation has increased over the past decades. In Peru, the changes precipitated by civil society were dramatic. Before becoming President, he had to sign a pledge that food security and nutrition would be priority issues for Peru.

Use of social media was flagged as another method for emphasizing transparency; the media can also be a powerful tool for advocacy. Given the increasing youth population in most countries, a youth movement could be another way to “push nutrition” higher on the development agenda. An intriguing adolescent movement in Bangladesh has provided pocket money to the poor (not the poorest of the poor); adolescent pledge to use the pocket money of about ten cents to purchase healthy foods. Approximately one million adolescents signed on to a march on government to demand that food vendors provide healthy foods at a reasonable price; this has been one visible way to emphasize healthy diets in a large population.

Increasingly, media is viewed as a valuable method for mainstreaming messages about healthy diets and nutrition. One specific suggestion from an interviewee was to train development agency staff as journalists; this

would be yet another way to provide more visibility to nutrition.

Respondents called for a realistic perspective and concentrate on issues over which we have control. Civil wars, corruption, and a weak civil service are difficult to handle, at least in the short term.

Timor L'este has strong political support for food security and nutrition but the political economy issues are critical for implementation. If Timor focuses only on technical issues, this will probably not be successful. Timor has a very fragile peace at the moment, and clearly this unstable situation has a huge impact on what policies and programs are feasible; basic and fundamental issues should be addressed first. Another example is Palestine where the new agricultural policy is unlikely to work given the current Israel/Palestine situation.

Cambodia is further along in development. Access to food is not so much of a problem as in the past but institutional capacities are strained and a key factor in retarding process towards SDG2.

PE analysis clearly shows that some groups in societies are more favored than others.

Failure to consider PE factors is a limiting factor in progress towards advancing SDG2.

Conclusion

The interviews with key informants elucidated issues that are critical for advancing progress in achieving SDG2. The responses provide experiential evidence that is often not reflected in peer reviewed publications. Experiential evidence is often given less attention and/or dismissed because it is viewed as subjective rather than unbiased. Increasingly, however, this type of experiential evidence is viewed as providing critical information about context specific issues related to SDG2.

The countries, including FIRST countries, are at varying levels of development. This is critical in deciding what policies and programs are realistic in addressing SDG2. Strategies must be country specific; a one size fit all approach will not be effective. It would be a mistake to ignore experiential evidence in advancing efforts focused on SDG2.

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