After several years of growing political commitment, with more and more pledges and declarations and an increasing focus on data and on evidence, the international nutrition community has come to recognise the power of narrative. Knowledge that is practically useful needs to encompass a lot more than data and evidence – it needs to include experience. To meet this growing demand for experiential learning, Transform Nutrition developed the Stories of Change (SoC) initiative. The goal was to systematically assess and analyse drivers of change in six high-burden countries – Bangladesh, India (Odisha), Ethiopia, Nepal, Senegal, and Zambia – that have had some success in accelerating improvements in nutrition.

From 2014–16, country teams undertook analysis of changes over time in nutrition outcomes, in nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive drivers, and changes in nutrition-relevant policies and programs. Semi-structured key informant interviews (434 in total) were carried out with a range of stakeholders at different levels.

Main findings and recommendations
The devil is in the detail – which is available in the individual country papers (see key reading section) – but overall, SoC has highlighted the importance of a set of interlinked factors that underpin, enable and drive change in nutrition – and the way these factors manifest themselves and interact. We see that commitment, coherence, accountability, data, leadership, capacity and finance all need to be present over time, for progress to be made and for it to be sustained. These interlinked factors are the fundamental building blocks that determine how change happens, and can be (proactively) made to happen.

Major progress has clearly been made in terms of generating political attention and in many cases political and policy commitment to nutrition as a development issue. But for promises and pledges to be progressively translated into changes in incentives, new decisions and actions, different forms of commitment are needed. In this, we find that SoC countries are struggling to grapple with the challenges of turning political commitment into institutional and financial commitments, and into large-scale implementation of effective actions.

Second: coherence. This is when commitment has become embedded and reflected in institutional structures and processes that are appropriate and mutually-reinforcing – when the whole can be greater than the sum of its parts. Such coherence applies horizontally (across or between sectors) and it applies vertically (from national-level down to the grassroots community level). It also goes well beyond governmental action and sectors, to include the role of civil society and the private sector. Progress has been made in generating cross-sectoral coherence, but much remains to be done to embed coherence in action from national to grassroots levels.

Third, accountability. This addresses the question of who is responsible for what type of action, where and when – and whose job is on the line if they consistently fail to deliver? Proper accountability exists when there is clarity and cross-sectoral consensus on roles and responsibilities. Global and national accountability is key, but accountability is relevant at all levels, and ultimately should be channeled downward to communities where nutritionally vulnerable populations live. Accountability cannot operate in a data vacuum. It is crucial that timely data on trends in different forms of malnutrition and on outcomes of actions and programs (from different sectors) become available and accessible in the public domain. More data (and evidence from research) that is actionable at the subnational level is also needed. More and better evaluations are required— including those that highlight impact pathways—to help understand why, how, and where programs work or do not work.

“It is the bridge between evidence and action that helps countries learn what works and what does not that the ‘Stories’ approach seeks to build”.

Gerda Verburg, Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement Coordinator
Just as no single individual or organisation can be held accountable unless they have the power to act, nor can they be held to account unless they have the actual capacity to do what is needed. Capacity is needed at different levels—individual, community, organisational, and systemic—and for different purposes. In particular, within the new generation of nutrition professionals, we need individuals with stronger strategic and operational capacities to go along with their technical skillsets. And we need to strengthen the capacity of individuals in other sectors, to empower and motivate them to apply a nutrition lens in their work and to contribute to nutrition-relevant change through their programming and investments.

An example of transformational capacity is leadership. Leaders open doors, turn keys, and inspire others. Leaders in and for nutrition are not necessarily hierarchical; they tend to exhibit lateral leadership—the ability to successfully work across sectors, build collaborations and alliances, and communicate effectively. Nutrition champions and policy entrepreneurs are needed to catalyse social and political change and make development policy in general more nutrition-sensitive. Many stories in the country case studies shed light on how nutrition champions can spring from different quarters. We need to develop the next generation of nutrition leaders and to strengthen existing initiatives, including academies and curricula that aim to build leadership capacity.

Finally, the basic issue of financing. Past work has highlighted the importance of funding to nutrition. But more work is needed. To support countries in meeting this challenge, and it has helped bring donors together to support national development of plans. But more work is needed.

“Stories of Change in Nutrition reached some interesting conclusions that inform and inspire us regarding the possibilities of nutrition development in Senegal”. Abdoulaye Ka, National Coordinator, Unit for the Fight Against Malnutrition, Senegal

Stories of Change in Nutrition are a series of structured case studies in six countries: Bangladesh, Nepal, Odisha (India), Ethiopia, Senegal and Zambia. These ‘stories’ aim to improve our understanding of what drives impact in reducing undernutrition, and how enabling environments and pro-nutrition policy and implementation processes can be cultivated and sustained. This work is funded by CIFF and DFID through Transform Nutrition and Leveraging Agriculture for Nutrition in South Asia (LANSAs). This brief was written by Stuart Gillespie, based on the overview paper, cited above.

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