

# Scaling up nutrition through multisectoral planning: An exploratory review of 26 national nutrition plans

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## Abstract

With a growing consensus on the need to address malnutrition in a comprehensive and multisectoral way, there has been increased attention on the processes and factors for multisectoral nutrition planning to be successful. To guide countries, the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement developed a checklist that defined characteristics of *good* national nutrition plans. This exploratory review used the framework of the Checklist to assess 26 national multisectoral nutrition plans (MSNPs) developed between 2014 and 2020. The MSNPs were assessed against a subset of 31 Checklist characteristics defined as *basic* plan components. Although the level of detail varied across the reviewed plans, the majority included core components that are important to facilitate effective planning and implementation, such as an assessment of the nutritional status and determinants of malnutrition for children under 5 years of age, a commitment to global recommendations related to reducing malnutrition, actions consistent with global evidence and responding to identified issues/gaps, governance arrangements to facilitate coordination, and identification of capacity-building needs/actions to support effective implementation. Common gaps across plans included risk analysis and mitigation, defined responsible agencies for each action, an assessment of the financial gap and defined mechanisms for financial tracking and resource allocation, and mechanisms to coordinate operational research. These findings provide a high-level, multi-country review of multisectoral nutrition planning that can support future policymakers, technical assistance providers and regional and global stakeholders to consider the foundational elements of and further validate and address common shortcomings in developing such a plan.

## KEYWORDS

health planning, malnutrition, multisectoral planning, nutrition plan, policy analysis, Scaling up Nutrition Movement, stakeholder participation

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

With renewed focus on global nutrition—and the dawn of the third phase of the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement (2021–2025) (SUN Movement, 2020b)—it is an opportune time to assess national efforts to combat malnutrition across countries. Within the global effort to improve nutrition for all, it has been widely recommended that countries adopt national multisectoral nutrition plans (MSNPs) that call attention to the importance of the ‘1000-day window’ of a mother’s pregnancy to the child’s second birthday, as well as provide a framework for coordinated cross-sectoral scale-up of action (Bezanson & Ikenman, 2010; Bryce et al., 2008; Gillespie et al., 2013). Although the idea of developing national MSNPs has existed since the 1970s, early efforts had high rates of implementation failure due to ineffective coordination of actions by the multiple sectors involved (e.g. health, agriculture, social protection and education), the inability to significantly ramp up actions for nutrition, an overemphasis on elaborate and costly collection of data and overambitious sets of nutrition actions in countries with minimal capacity and resources (Berg, 1987; Field, 1987; Jonsson, 2010; Nisbett et al., 2014).

Since the 1990s, the enabling environment for multisectoral nutrition action has improved both globally and within countries. There has been growing evidence around determinants of malnutrition with an increased understanding around the direct and indirect factors that influence nutritional outcomes (Black et al., 2013, 2008; Shekar et al., 2017; Victora et al., 2021). Also, various global coordination efforts (International Food Policy Research Institute, 2015) have reaffirmed access to safe and nutritious food as a fundamental human right (FAO, 2005) and highlighted the importance of ensuring good nutrition as a ‘human capital investment’ (Shekar et al., 2017), which rekindled interest of donors to invest in nutrition. A critical milestone in this effort was the launch of the SUN Movement in 2010 (SUN Movement, n.d.; UNICEF, 2015; United Nations System Standing Committee on Nutrition, 2010).

The SUN Movement, a country-led platform, aims to strengthen multi-stakeholder efforts to develop and implement concrete political commitments and accountability measures that seek to eliminate all forms of malnutrition by 2030. To that end, the SUN Movement Strategy and Roadmap’s goals for 2016–2020 include having all member countries (62 at present) endorse MSNPs at the highest government level (SUN Movement, 2016). By the end of 2019, 42 SUN countries had developed a national MSNP, and an additional nine countries were in the development process (SUN Movement, 2019). In recent years, the increase in political momentum among countries, donors and other stakeholders to implement comprehensive nutrition plans has been accompanied by a renewed focus on the policy features and implementation processes that enable their success. As the SUN Movement’s second phase strategy period draws to a close, it is important to consider how countries are translating their nutrition agendas into planning documents and to assess the relative key strengths and gaps across these plans to inform cross-country knowledge, learning and future guidance.

### Key messages

- More than half of the 62 SUN countries have elaborated an MSNP, which contributes to strengthening an enabling policy environment for nutrition.
- Countries have come a long way in multisectoral nutrition planning, with the majority of reviewed MSNPs including core elements important for effective nutrition planning and implementation.
- Common gaps, such as risk analysis and mitigation, financial assessment and planning, and defined responsible agencies for each nutrition action, may foreshadow challenges with operationalization.
- Resource mobilization efforts and evidence-based prioritization are crucial, particularly in view of the current COVID-19 pandemic.

Although there is growing literature that explores the role of nutrition planning in advancing the nutrition enabling environment and progress on nutritional outcomes (Acosta & Fanzo, 2012; Fracassi et al., 2020; Heidkamp et al., 2021; Lamstein et al., 2016; Michaud-Létourneau & Pelletier, 2017; Ouedraogo et al., 2019; Pomeroy-Stevens et al., 2016), there is limited multi-country literature exploring how and to what extent countries are translating global guidance around nutrition into multisectoral country planning. This exploratory review assesses 26 SUN countries’ national MSNPs using a defined set of *basic* characteristics of a quality MSNP. The analysis provides a cross-country perspective on common characteristics and gaps in MSNPs, which can inform country knowledge and learning as well as global efforts and guidance.

## 2 | METHODS

This assessment was based on qualitative reviews of a selection of SUN member countries’ national MSNPs. Commissioned by the SUN Movement Secretariat (SMS), this review was conducted to provide the Secretariat with information to support SUN country planning. Plans were prioritized for review by the SMS based on (1) if they were developed between 2014 and 2020, (2) if they were current and active at the time of review, and (3) if they were accessible. Some countries were further prioritized if they had plans that were recently or soon-to-be expired (with a new iteration of the plan in development) or if they were recently or soon-to-be formally endorsed (and entering into operational planning). Given no human subjects were involved in this review, an institutional review board was not needed.

To systematize the review process, the assessment was based on the SUN Movement’s Checklist on the criteria and characteristics of ‘good’ national nutrition plans—a set of guidelines for policymakers

on key elements a plan should contain (SUN Movement and UN Network, 2016). The Checklist was developed by the UN Network for SUN and the SMS, together with a group of experts in a wide range of policy areas. The Checklist is organized around five general areas considered to be the foundation of a national MSNP—including (1) situation analysis and policy/programming review, (2) stakeholder engagement and political commitment, (3) costs and budgetary

framework, (4) implementation and management arrangements, and (5) monitoring, evaluation, operational research and review—each of which is further divided into two to six criteria, resulting in a total of 17 criteria (Table 1). Additionally, each criterion lists several specific characteristics. However, the Checklist acknowledges that these are purposefully generic and not prescriptive to facilitate consideration and adaptation across country contexts.

**TABLE 1** Areas and corresponding criteria of the national nutrition plan checklist

Area	Criterion
<b>AREA 1: Situational analysis and policy and programming review</b>	<b>Criterion 1:</b> The national nutrition plan provides a situation analysis of the nutrition context at national and subnational levels (including political, social, cultural, gender-based, epidemiological, legal, governance and institutional issues)
	<b>Criterion 2:</b> The national nutrition plan sets out goals and objectives, which are associated with specific, measurable, relevant and time-bound nutrition impact targets and results for target populations that are consistent with human rights standards and international recommendations and contribute to improving equity in achieving nutrition impacts
	<b>Criterion 3:</b> The national nutrition plan provides clear links to other nutrition-relevant sectoral strategies, plans and financing arrangements
	<b>Criterion 4:</b> The national nutrition plan describes the planned priority actions aimed at achieving nutrition impacts for all forms of malnutrition and are feasible, sustainable and locally appropriate, based on evidence and good practice, and are in line with human rights priorities
	<b>Criterion 5:</b> The national nutrition plan includes an analysis of risks and proposed mitigation strategies including measures to address emergency needs
	<b>Criterion 6:</b> The national nutrition plan describes governance, accountability, management and coordination mechanisms
<b>AREA 2: Stakeholders' engagement and high-level political commitment processes</b>	<b>Criterion 7:</b> The national nutrition plan describes the multisector and multi-stakeholder involvement in the development of the final document
	<b>Criterion 8:</b> The national nutrition plan has clear indications on the high-level political commitment to the endorsement and the implementation of the plan
<b>AREA 3: Costs and budgetary framework</b>	<b>Criterion 9:</b> The national nutrition plan sets out a financial framework that includes a comprehensive budget/costing of planned actions for national and subnational levels and demonstrates efficiency and effectiveness of the included programmes and interventions
	<b>Criterion 10:</b> The national nutrition plan includes a financing analysis. If the plan is not fully financed, it highlights agreed priority options for the achievement of the set nutrition impact targets and associated results
	<b>Criterion 11:</b> The national nutrition plan describes the mechanisms to allow the tracking of budget and expenditure data for nutrition across sectors and partners for decision-making, oversight and analysis on nutrition finances
	<b>Criterion 12:</b> The national nutrition plan describes how funds and resources will be deployed to sectoral budget holders, to partners and to the subnational level
<b>AREA 4: Implementation and management arrangements</b>	<b>Criterion 13:</b> The national nutrition plan describes the operational framework, which includes the implementation arrangements, with detailed roles and responsibilities of the government and partners
	<b>Criterion 14:</b> The national nutrition plan describes the individual, organizational and institutional capacities (both functional and technical) required to implement planned actions and spells out how capacities will be strengthened
<b>AREA 5: Monitoring, evaluation, operational research and review</b>	<b>Criterion 15:</b> The national nutrition plan includes a monitoring and evaluation framework that is sound, draws from sectors' monitoring and evaluation systems and includes core indicators; sources of information; methods; and responsibilities for ethical data collection, management, analysis, quality assurance, learning and communication
	<b>Criterion 16:</b> The national nutrition plan describes the mechanism for joint periodic performance reviews on nutrition to present programmatic and financial progress and for discussion on the findings for decision-making and actions
	<b>Criterion 17:</b> The national nutrition plan sets out the processes and institutional arrangements for operational research and for the rigorous documentation and dissemination of good practices and lessons learned (including both successes and failures)

For this review, the Checklist was converted to a survey format using SurveyMonkey with dichotomous questions (yes/no) on whether each characteristic mentioned in the Checklist was met, with space for reviewers to explain their rationale for the rating and to cite specific examples. Each MSNP was assessed independently by two assigned reviewers. A third reviewer resolved any discrepancies in ratings between the two by examining the qualitative rationale indicated by the two reviewers and assessing the source document as needed to make a determination. Only the main nutrition plan document was assessed for this review; related planning documents such as corresponding monitoring and evaluation (M&E) plans, advocacy strategies or operational plans were not included in the review.

To focus the analysis, one to three characteristics for each of the Checklist's 17 criteria were identified as *basic* characteristics by the review team, in consultation with the SMS. These *basic* characteristics represent a subset of the Checklist tool questions that could be assessed through document review and were considered characteristics that are essential for plan implementation success regardless of country context and therefore should be specified in the main planning document (as opposed to in subsequent/corresponding planning documents). For the review, the basic characteristics were not weighted or ranked, although it is acknowledged that the characteristics do not hold equal importance. Results for all Checklist characteristics were tabulated across the 26 countries included in this review; however, the analysis presented in this publication focuses on the results for the *basic* characteristics (31 in total). Select additional results are presented in the discussion section to provide further context or detail where helpful. Analysis was conducted in Microsoft Excel over two phases, the first initiated in 2018 (15 plans reviewed) and the second initiated in 2020 (11 plans reviewed).

### 3 | RESULTS

Twenty-six national MSNPs from SUN countries were shared by SMS for this analysis (Table 2). The results highlight that 18 plans represented the first MSNP for the country, as could be determined based on the plan documents. All but six plans were considered final and/or were officially **endorsed by the national government** at the time of the review. In addition, 21 of the 26 plans had or referenced the intention to develop **supplementary plans and frameworks** that were intended to complement and add operational detail to the national plan document but were not analysed for this study.

The percentage of analysed plans fulfilling each of the Checklist's *basic* characteristics are summarized in Table 3 by Checklist Area. The rest of this section describes these *basic* characteristics and results in greater detail. The relevant criterion number is indicated in parenthesis for ease of reference to Table 3.

All 26 plans included a **situation analysis** (*Criterion 1*) that summarized the specific nutrition issues in the country. All but one plan (96%) fulfilled the *basic* characteristic of describing the nutritional status and determinants of malnutrition for children under 5, although disaggregation of this data varied. For instance, 22 of the 26 plans

(85%) disaggregated this information by either sex (58%) or region (77%). Beyond the nutrition situation, most plans presented at least some **linkages to other sectoral strategies** or planning arrangements from nutrition-relevant sectors (*Criterion 3*): 24 out of 26 plans (92%) reviewed past and current sectoral efforts, and all but one plan also included some documentation of the gaps or lessons learned from those sectors or previous national MSNPs generally. Plans varied in terms of which specific nutrition-relevant sectoral responses were discussed as follows: health (92% of plans), agriculture (77%), social protection (69%), education (65%), food security and livelihoods (58%), water, sanitation and hygiene (54%), gender and women (19%) and local development (8%).

All plans included **goals and objectives** (*Criterion 2*) that were consistent with international recommendations—with commitments to reduce hunger and improve nutrition for its population. Less than half of all plans (12 of 26 plans or 46%), however, included targets consistent with all six World Health Assembly (WHA) nutrition targets for 2025. All of the targets in 21 of the plans (81%) were specific (named the specific measure of malnutrition to be reduced), measurable, relevant (to reducing malnutrition) and time-bound (specified the year that the target should be achieved).

Regarding **nutrition actions** (*Criterion 4*), nearly all plans (23 out of 26 or 88%) proposed actions that were largely in line with global recommendations (in particular, the nutrition-specific interventions cited in the Lancet [Bhutta et al., 2013]) and included at least some actions that responded directly to issues identified in the situation analysis and were relevant to gaps indicated by the policy and programming review. Furthermore, all plans proposed at least some specific actions to overcome noted bottlenecks, including those related to planning (100%), equity (85%), regulation enforcement (81%), financial sustainability (73%) and human resource management (62%)—although plans varied in the level of specificity and comprehensiveness across these. Further, documented **risk mitigation** (*Criterion 5*) for obstacles to plan implementation, including in the context of emergencies, was noted as a gap across the plans. For instance, only nine plans (35%) considered and planned for risks to the implementation of the plan. Further, preparing for nutrition and food security emergencies was also not well-defined across most plans: Whereas importantly over half of plans noted the development or strengthening of an emergency plan (54%) or proposed a food security early warning or monitoring system (58%), only 10 plans (38%) mentioned both.

Importantly, the majority of plans detailed **governance mechanisms** (*Criterion 6*) for the plan. All but two plans described the formation of specific governance bodies at the national level to manage and provide strategic direction to implementation, and 22 out of 26 plans (85%) described the formation of similar bodies at the subnational level—but almost always with less detail than at the national level.

Regarding stakeholder involvement, all plans evaluated were multisectoral in nature and thus likely involved a wide range of stakeholders; an explicit description of **multi-stakeholder and multisectoral involvement** (*Criterion 7*) in the plan's development was included in 19 out of 26 reviewed plans (73%). To indicate **political commitment** (*Criterion 8*), at the time of the review, 19 of the 26 plans (73%) were

TABLE 2 A list of national nutrition plans reviewed during this investigation

Country	National nutrition plan document reviewed				Status of plan at the time of review		
	Plan start year	Plan end year	Name of document reviewed	Plan iteration	Review phase <sup>a</sup>	Plan iteration	Review phase <sup>a</sup>
Afghanistan	2019	2023	Food Security and Nutrition Plan	Final	2	First	2
Burkina Faso	2018	2020	Plan Stratégique Multisectoriel de Nutrition (Draft)	Draft	1	First	1
Burundi	2019	2023	Plan Stratégique Multisectoriel de Sécurité Alimentaire et de Nutrition	Final	2	Second	2
Chad	2016	2025	Plan d'Action Intersectoriel de Nutrition et d'Alimentation (PAINA)	Final	1	First	1
Congo (Brazzaville)	2015	2025	Cadre stratégique de lutte contre la malnutrition au Congo	Final	1	First	1
Cote d'Ivoire	2016	2020	Plan national multisectoriel de nutrition 2016–2020	Final	1	First	1
Democratic Republic of the Congo	2016	2020	Plan Stratégique National Multisectoriel en Nutrition	Final	1	First	1
Ethiopia	2016	2020	National Nutrition Strategic Plan	Final	1	Second	1
Guinea	2015	2019	Plan Multisectoriel Nutrition (Draft)	Draft	1	First	1
Honduras	2018	2030	Política Nacional de Seguridad Alimentaria Y Nutricional de Largo Plazo (PSAN) y Estrategia Nacional de Seguridad Alimentaria y Nutricional (ENSAN)	Final	2	First	2
Lao People's Democratic Republic	2016	2025	Lao PDR National Nutrition Strategy to 2025 and Plan of Action 2016–2020 (NNS/PA)	Final	1	Second	1
Lesotho	2018	2022	Food and Nutrition Strategy and Costed Plan	Final	1	First	1
Madagascar	2017	2021	Plan National d'Action pour la Nutrition-III	Final	2	Third	2
Mauritania	2016	2020	Plan stratégique Multisectoriel de Nutrition	Final	1	First	1
Myanmar	2018	2023	Multi-sectoral National Plan of Action of Nutrition (NS-NPAN)	Final	1	First	1
Nepal	2018	2022	Multi-Sector Nutrition Plan II	Final	1	Second	1
Pakistan	2018	2025	Multi-sectoral Nutrition Strategy	Final	2	First	2
Papua New Guinea	2018	2022	Nutrition Strategic Action Plan	Draft	2	First	2
Sierra Leone	2019	2025	Multi-sector Strategic Plan to Reduce Malnutrition in Sierra Leone	Final	2	Second	2
Somalia	2019	2024	Multisectoral Nutrition Strategy	Final	2	First	2
Sri Lanka	2018	2025	Multi-Sector Action Plan of Nutrition	Draft	2	Second	2
Sudan	2014	2025	National Nutrition Strategic Plan	Final	1	First	1
Tajikistan	2020	2025	Multisectoral Nutrition Action Plan and CRF	Draft	2	First	2
Tanzania	2016	2021	National Multisectoral Nutrition Action Plan (NMINAP)	Final	1	Second	1
Togo	2019	2023	Plan Stratégique Multisectoriel de la Nutrition	Draft	2	First	2
Vietnam	2018	2020	National Plan of Action for Nutrition to 2020	Final	1	First	1

<sup>a</sup>Analysis was conducted over two phases, the first initiated in 2018 (15 plans reviewed) and the second initiated in 2020 (11 plans reviewed).

**TABLE 3** Percentage of analysed national nutrition plans fulfilling 'basic' national nutrition plan checklist characteristics<sup>a</sup>

Checklist area	Basic checklist criteria and characteristics	Plans meeting characteristics (N = 26)
Area 1: Situation analysis and programming review	<b>1. Situation analysis</b>	
	• Discusses the nutritional status and determinants of malnutrition for children under 5	25 (96%)
	• Disaggregates information by sex or region	22 (85%)
	<b>2. Goals and objectives</b>	
	• Consistent with international recommendations (e.g. Sustainable Development Goals)	26 (100%)
	• Includes goals that contribute towards all six WHA targets	12 (46%)
	• Are specific, measurable, relevant and time-bound <sup>b</sup>	21 (81%)
	<b>3. Links to other strategies</b>	
	• Describes past and current nutrition actions from at least one sector beyond health or food security.	24 (92%)
	• Describes priority gaps/lessons learned for the sectors included in the plan, or system-wide issues	25 (96%)
	<b>4. Nutrition actions</b>	
	• Includes actions consistent with global evidence and identified issues/gaps.	23 (88%)
	• Describes actions that address at least two types of bottlenecks in the enabling environment (e.g. equity, financial, human resource management, planning or regulation enforcement bottlenecks)	25 (96%)
	<b>5. Risk analysis and mitigation</b>	
• Identifies risks to plan implementation and approaches to mitigate them	9 (35%)	
• Includes emergency planning and development of food security monitoring system	10 (38%)	
<b>6. Governance mechanisms</b>		
• Includes description at national level	24 (92%)	
• Includes description at subnational level	22 (85%)	
Area 2: Stakeholder engagement and political commitment	<b>7. Multi-stakeholder involvement</b>	
	• Describes how the national nutrition plan was developed	19 (73%)
	<b>8. Political commitment</b>	
	• Describes how formal, high-level political endorsement has been achieved or will be pursued	19 (73%)
	• Describes advocacy/communications activities to engage stakeholders and promote implementation at national level	18 (69%)
• Describes advocacy/communications activities to engage stakeholders and promote implementation at subnational level	19 (73%)	
Area 3: Costs and budgetary framework	<b>9. Financial framework</b>	
	• Includes cost estimates of actions	17 (65%)
	• Includes cost estimates of governance mechanisms at national level	13 (50%)
	• Includes cost estimates of governance mechanisms at subnational level	13 (50%)
	<b>10. Financing analysis</b>	
	• Includes estimate of the financial gaps for costed actions	7 (27%)
	<b>11. Financial tracking</b>	
• Describes financial tracking mechanism including on- and off-government budget funding, plus allocations and expenditures	4 (15%)	
<b>12. Fund deployment</b>		
• Includes criteria for resource allocation	6 (23%)	
Area 4: Implementation and management arrangements	<b>13. Operational framework</b>	
	• Lists the lead and supporting organizations responsible for each action	13 (50%)
	<b>14. Capacity-building</b>	
• Describes capacity-building needs	23 (88%)	

TABLE 3 (Continued)

Checklist area	Basic checklist criteria and characteristics	Plans meeting characteristics (N = 26)
Area 5: Monitoring, evaluation, operational research and review	<b>15. Monitoring and evaluation framework</b>	
	• Includes nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive indicators	19 (73%)
	• Describes data sources and collection methods	17 (65%)
	<b>16. Performance review</b>	
	• Describes how the plan progress will be reviewed	21 (81%)
	• Describes feedback loops to identify corrective measures and financial adjustments	14 (54%)
	<b>17. Operational research/lessons learned</b>	
• Clearly describes the need for operational research	21 (81%)	
• Describes a mechanism to coordinate operational research	9 (35%)	

<sup>a</sup>The full list of results by Checklist criteria is provided in MQSUN+ (2020d); and high-level country briefs developed as part of this review are available at <https://mqsunplus.path.org/resources/country-briefs-from-the-review-of-sun-country-national-nutrition-plans/>.

<sup>b</sup>The Checklist included 'achievable' as a national multisectoral nutrition plan characteristic, but because only the text of the each plan was analysed and this measure could not be assessed, it was not classified as a 'basic' characteristic.

endorsed or noted that it would be endorsed and/or made official by a high-level authority or national legislative body. To sustain commitment and support uptake and implementation, 17 plans (65%) described efforts to engage stakeholders at both the national (69%) and subnational levels (73%). This included ways to increase awareness for the plan or advocate for increased funding or other advocacy measures to promote implementation, such as training subnational authorities to develop their own nutrition plans.

Regarding the **financial framework of the plan** (Criterion 9), the majority of the plans discussed costs of implementing the national MSNP, although to greatly varying degrees. Seventeen of the plans (65%) included cost estimates of the proposed actions, and an additional five plans proposed costing as a future activity or referenced that it was done elsewhere. However, only 13 of the plans (50%) clearly estimated costs for governance or coordination bodies or activities, despite almost all plans noting that they would be put into place. Beyond estimating the cost of plan implementation, only seven plans (27%) included a **financing analysis** (Criterion 10) to estimate the gap between the cost of the plan and available financial resources. Moreover, only four plans (15%) clearly described a **financial tracking mechanism** (Criterion 11) to track on-budget and off-budget government funding, allocations and expenditures for the plan's actions. Finally, only six plans (23%) described prioritization processes in the event of financial shortfalls, as part of the plan's **fund deployment processes** (Criterion 12).

In terms of detailing an **operational framework** (Criterion 13) for the coordination of the proposed actions, only half of the plans defined lead and supporting organizations for the specific nutrition actions. On the other hand, the majority of plans (23 plans or 88%) identified **capacity-building** (Criterion 14) needs or actions, such as those related to coordination capacity among its governance bodies (81%) or individual capacity-building for nutrition-related professions (85%).

The majority of plans discussed an **M&E framework** (Criterion 15) for the plan to at least some degree. Specifically, 19 plans (73%)

included indicators that measured progress on programmes to address both the immediate (nutrition-specific) and the underlying (nutrition-sensitive) causes of malnutrition. A slightly lesser number, 17 plans (65%), described data sources and collection methods for each indicator. In terms of processes for evaluating the progress or **performance of the plan** (Criterion 16), 21 plans (81%) provided at least some description, but fewer (14 plans or 54%) described processes to identify corrective measures and financial adjustments. Lastly, 21 plans (81%) made clear reference to the need for **operational research** (Criterion 17), yet only nine plans (35%) described the specific mechanism or organization that would coordinate and prioritize operational research needs.

## 4 | DISCUSSION

National MSNPs should serve as the guiding documents for multi-sectoral nutrition action at the country level. Having a robust national MSNP, including key components investigated in this review, is critical in establishing a strong enabling environment for nutrition (Tee, 2001; UN Economic and Social Council, 1997). This analysis explores the enabling characteristics of national MSNPs by providing a snapshot of whether a set of these plans from SUN Movement member countries adhered to *basic* characteristics, as defined by our review team and using the SUN's Checklist as a general framework (MQSUN+, 2020d). Underlying this framework is the rationale that plans should be assessed on a holistic and diverse set of measures that are mutually necessary to ensure successful implementation: to comprehensively assess the nutrition situation and existing gaps to identify relevant actions and implementing structures (Area 1), to meaningfully involve all stakeholders needed to carry out the plan (Area 2), to ensure appropriate use of financial resources (Area 3), to clearly state roles and responsibilities while addressing any capacity bottlenecks (Area 4) and to have a plan to measure progress and make course corrections as needed (Area 5).

To contextualize our results, in the following section, we explore the key elements assessed in this review based on the SUN Checklist Areas alongside relevant literature.

#### 4.1 | Situation analysis and policy and programming review (Area 1)

Area 1 of the SUN Checklist centres on the importance of establishing and prioritizing clear goals, objectives and actions informed by a comprehensive situation analysis. Multisectoral nutrition literature from across the decades has highlighted the importance of a common understanding of the nutrition situation and policy framework (Berg, 1987; Bose et al., 2019) and well-defined objectives and actions (Darnton-Hill et al., 1998; Lamstein et al., 2016) for the success of multisectoral nutrition efforts.

Clearly documenting a situation analysis that describes the key malnutrition problems and groups or areas most affected by them is instrumental to establishing consensus and priorities, as well as informing development of a comprehensive plan that will address them (Acosta & Fanzo, 2012; Pelletier et al., 2012). As noted in the results, given variation in country context and priorities, nutritional status of children under 5 was the only population group assessed as a *basic* requirement, which most reviewed plans met. Beyond this, whereas 19 out of 26 plans (88%) described the nutritional status of women of reproductive age, only 8 plans did so for adolescents and even fewer (5 plans) for children aged 5–10. Although these results may reflect the fact that not all countries collect this data, it does highlight an area for improvement given the importance of capturing data related to target populations (Christian & Smith, 2018; Galloway, 2017). Furthermore, though the majority of plans (over 60%) included at least some sex-disaggregated data or discussion of how gender norms and roles impact nutrition in the country, the level of detail varied, and no plans referenced conducting a gender assessment or analysis. Assessing gender differences and considerations in health policies and programmes is important to adequately address and target interventions (Ostlin et al., 2006; UN Women, 2018).

Also, given the multisectoral nature of these plans, conducting a comprehensive review of programmes by sector is key to shaping a plan's proposed priorities and actions. Insights from the 'fill the nutrient gap' assessment emphasize the importance of a systems approach to conducting a nutrition situation analysis to ascertain barriers and factors across different levels (Bose et al., 2019). As indicated in Section 3, plans varied in terms of the number and variation of nutrition-related sectors discussed in the plan and the level of detail included. Though variation is expected given different country contexts, further consideration could be given as to whether the information included for a given country was the most relevant to that country's nutrition situation, or if gaps indicate issues with data availability/quality or other factors, such as the level of engagement of specific ministries and partners.

The goals, objectives and actions of a plan represent the core foundation and body of a planning document. Each country's situation

will have different priorities, which will be reflected in the planned actions and objectives of a national MSNP (Darnton-Hill et al., 1998). As noted in the results, the majority of plans demonstrated a commitment to global recommendations related to reducing malnutrition (Bhutta et al., 2013) through their identified goals and objectives. However, plans varied in the inclusion of all six WHA targets for 2025: Childhood obesity was the most commonly omitted target (only 58% of plans included this), whereas 25 plans included stunting targets (WHA 1), and 21 plans included anaemia targets (WHA 2) and childhood wasting targets (WHA 6). Though these omissions may be a form of prioritization, given country commitments to report on WHA targets, their inclusion may support cohesive and consistent tracking and reporting of these key indicators.

Although this review did not analyse in detail the individual actions proposed across plans, the assessment largely found that plans aligned with global evidence and their specific country context. However, for reviewed plans with limited detail in their situation analysis, it was not possible for the reviewers to assess whether the included actions were prioritized according to the country's specific nutrition needs and population groups or if they simply reflected a list of possible evidence-based recommended actions. To ensure appropriate contextualization, further prioritization and adaptation is critical as part of operational and subnational planning. More broadly, further context-specific review of the planned actions across country MSNPs would provide additional insights on effective evidence-based planning and prioritization (Nguyen et al., 2020).

Additionally, just over a third of the reviewed plans purposively identified or addressed potential risks to the plan implementation or included emergency planning and monitoring measures. Of the 26 countries whose plans were reviewed, 20 currently have a risk classification of high (15) or very high (5), with the remaining countries classified as medium (6), according to the INFORM risk index for 2021 (European Commission, n.d.). This suggests that for all of the included countries, having these *basic* risk assessment and emergency planning/monitoring measures in place is pertinent and is an area that may warrant additional guidance and individual country assessment. This is important to further review and strengthen across countries, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic (SUN Movement, 2020a) and on top of existing and recurrent risks (MQSUN+, 2020c).

#### 4.2 | Stakeholders' engagement and high-level political commitment processes (Area 2)

Area 2 of the SUN Checklist focuses on overall factors to ensure inclusive development and high-level endorsement of a plan. Securing high-level political commitment and involvement is an important component of successful multisectoral coordination and action for nutrition (Acosta & Fanzo, 2012; Ayele et al., 2020; Heidkamp et al., 2021). Even though all plans had an effective year within or before the review period, six of the plans (23%) had not yet been



formally validated or endorsed by a high-level political body (as could be determined by the document). This was true even of some plans that were considered final and official documents. Literature over the past several decades has continuously pointed to the importance of high-level (e.g. executive branch) commitment and political will to facilitate cross-sectoral coordination and elevate nutrition publicly (Acosta & Fanzo, 2012; Darnton-Hill et al., 1998; Field, 1987). Although it is unclear whether explicit high-level endorsement is required for multiple ministries and/or local governments to move forward with implementation, at the very least, it signals to all stakeholders—who may not be accustomed to collaborating in a multi-sectoral fashion—that they are expected to integrate the plan in their existing responsibilities. Other reviews have similarly found gaps across some country MSNPs in clearly documenting stakeholder involvement and commitment, which may impede accountability and buy-in for the plan (Nguyen et al., 2020; WHO, 2018). The lengthy process for developing and formally adopting a national nutrition plan or strategy may be a limitation (Nguyen et al., 2020).

Previous literature has also indicated the critical role of advocacy and engagement to facilitate resource mobilization, prioritization and implementation (Darnton-Hill et al., 1998; Field, 1987; Lamstein et al., 2016; Ouedraogo et al., 2019; Pomeroy-Stevens et al., 2016). In this review, although the majority of plans did include at least some advocacy-related actions at national and sub-national levels to promote implementation, engage stakeholders, or mobilize resources, the level of details varied and were missing completely in nearly a quarter of the plans—indicating this as an area for further strengthening.

#### 4.3 | Costs and budgetary framework (Area 3)

Represented by Area 3 of the SUN Checklist, a clear financial framework for a national MSNP that includes costing of planned actions, an assessment of the financial gap, and a plan for financial tracking and disbursement is crucial to support operationalization. A sound financial framework was a core gap across most country plans in this review. Other literature has similarly found insufficiencies around funding, financial allocation and resource tracking for nutrition across countries (Acosta & Fanzo, 2012; Manorat et al., 2020; Sodjinou et al., 2014). In this review, although more than half of the plans estimated plan costs, plans rarely estimated financial gaps between the cost of actions and existing financial resources, provided details on a finance-tracking mechanism or established criteria for prioritizing actions in the event of a budgetary shortfall. Another cross-country review of SUN country plans found that only four out of 58 reviewed plans included budget for resource tracking (Manorat et al., 2020), which, in addition to our findings, indicates this as a potentially persistent gap that may continue beyond the planning documents. Literature has indicated a lack of financing-related data as a barrier (Lamstein et al., 2016) that may contribute to these factors.

Our analysis found that financial gaps, when estimated, were universally significant—which is noteworthy given that sufficient

funding is pivotal to the success of nutrition plans (Acosta & Fanzo, 2012; Lamstein et al., 2016). Managing financing shortfalls of MSNPs has long been noted as a challenge (Berg, 1987). This suggests that all plans will need to prioritize resource mobilization efforts, at both domestic and international levels, and determine a process to prioritize interventions, key populations and/or vulnerable groups (Acosta & Fanzo, 2012; Berg, 1987; Heidkamp et al., 2021). Beyond mobilizing resources, the few reviewed plans that included prioritization approaches proposed varying methods: For example, one country costed out a scenario that would target the region with the highest burden of child stunting, whereas another proposed prioritizing certain interventions depending on their estimated impact on the specific types of malnutrition within each region. Given the ambitious and large number of actions proposed in each plan, having a process in place to define and support prioritization will likely prove crucial, particularly as the SUN Movement enters its third phase. Based on the varying levels of detail on disparities—particularly at subnational level—and vulnerable populations in the reviewed plans, some countries may be more primed to make these decisions than others.

#### 4.4 | Implementation and management arrangements (Area 4)

The importance of governance for effective multisectoral implementation has been emphasized since the onset of multisectoral nutrition action (Bump, 2018; Field, 1987; Kennedy & Fekadu, 2016). Area 4 of the SUN Checklist centres on the implementation and management systems, arrangements and considerations that facilitate the effective governance necessary to operationalize the planned actions. The second phase of the SUN Movement (2016–2020) dedicated considerable attention and advocacy efforts towards this aspect, and it will remain at the core of the third phase of the Movement (2021–2025) (SUN Movement, 2020b). Strong governance bodies are key to support cross-ministerial coordination for implementation, as well as effective monitoring and funding disbursements (Acosta & Fanzo, 2012). Although the level of detail varied in the reviewed plans, most plans noted the creation or strengthening of governing bodies at national and sub-national levels. Descriptions of subnational governance mechanisms were typically less detailed, although this may be elaborated more explicitly in corresponding operational documents or subnational-level plans. A synthesis of case studies from 14 SUN countries found that in the majority of the countries, the national-level governance structures were replicated at provincial, district and, in some cases, lower levels as well (MQSUN+, 2020b). Most described separate committees for governance (typically led by the head of state), a coordination body and/or technical committees. Elevating plan oversight to the highest governance level and ensuring clear mandates and responsibilities have been noted as important factors to ensure sufficient inter-sectoral coordination and implementation success (Acosta & Fanzo, 2012; Nishida et al., 2002).

Beyond broader governance, a key gap across many of the reviewed plans was designating the responsible agencies and actors for the proposed actions (only half of the reviewed plans did so). Ensuring clearly defined roles and responsibilities for accountability and effective prioritization was indicated as one of five core elements for effectively ‘translating plans into action’ as part of the 17th International Congress of Nutrition (Nishida et al., 2002). Although it may be that some countries choose to elaborate these elements within operational planning documents, gaps across the reviewed plans in these areas could potentially impede effective implementation, coordination and results.

Most plans in this review acknowledged technical and governance/organizational capacity as a key factor in the plan success. Literature highlights gaps in capacity and human resource constraints—both regarding technical and functional capacities among both individuals and institutions—as a common barrier in the successful implementation of national MSNPs (Jerling et al., 2016; Lamstein et al., 2016; Marasini & Mugenyi, 2016; Meerman, 2008; Nishida et al., 2002; Pelletier et al., 2012). Given that this is cited as a persistent challenge, exploration into the specific capacity gaps that exist and how to facilitate effective operationalization, funding and implementation of capacity-building efforts requires further attention.

#### 4.5 | Monitoring, evaluation, operational research and review (Area 5)

Lastly, Area 5 of the SUN Checklist highlights critical elements of monitoring, accountability, evaluation and learning. Planning and investment to facilitate systematic collection, monitoring and analysis of nutrition indicators (both direct and indirect) and data has been suggested to contribute to improved success in achieving nutrition targets (Acosta & Fanzo, 2012). Importantly, whereas most plans in this review discussed M&E to at least some extent, just under half defined processes to identify corrective measures based on plan reviews and monitoring. Relatedly, a review of 58 SUN country plans found that only about a third included cost estimates for nutrition data and M&E sections and noted that few countries included costing for M&E functions, such as planning and coordination as well as information synthesis and decision-making (Manorat et al., 2020). Ensuring mechanisms are in place to translate data analysis into evidence-based decision-making is key (Acosta & Fanzo, 2012; Darnton-Hill et al., 1998), alongside governments’ commitment to promoting data-driven accountability (Nutrition for Growth, 2019).

#### 4.6 | Limitations

Although this review illuminates key strengths and gaps related to the content of MSNPs, there are noted limitations to this analysis. As previously noted, this review only looked at the main MSNP planning document; supplemental and corresponding plans or

policies were not reviewed, nor did reviewers have knowledge of the plan development process. The definition of basic characteristics was intended to prioritize key items that should be included in a main planning document; however, these components are subject to debate, and it is recognized that plan structure and content vary across countries. Therefore, for some countries, gaps identified in this review could be elaborated elsewhere. Also, for the purpose of this review, plans were classified as either having ‘met’ or ‘not met’ a basic characteristic, versus being classified across a spectrum, to ensure applicability across a range of country contexts and to limit additional subjectivity.

It should also be noted that assessing the operationalization of these plans was beyond the scope of this review, and as such, the relative comprehensiveness of the plan should not be conflated with implementation success. Furthermore, findings from this review may not be generalizable to the full set of SUN countries, given that the review included 26 out of the 62 countries within the SUN Movement. The methodology utilized and selection of countries was informed in part by the authors’ experience with the SUN Movement; despite this, all efforts were made to minimize bias in the interpretation of results.

## 5 | IMPLICATIONS OF THIS REVIEW

Within the global effort to improve nutrition for all, governments’ ownership and leadership in adopting national MSNPs are critical. Planning, financing and scaling up multisectoral nutrition interventions are today—more than ever—essential to protect hard-won gains in the fight against all forms of malnutrition and achievement across the Sustainable Development Goals.

To this end, though this review demonstrated both strong attributes and areas for growth within SUN country MSNPs, further guidance on the multisectoral nutrition planning process could support more effective operationalization of these plans (MQSUN+, 2020a). The findings from this review provide an important foundation to inform areas for further research and where additional such guidance may be beneficial. For instance, further exploration into key identified gaps around risk mitigation and emergency planning, financial analysis and detailed operational planning will be critical. The findings can also serve as an important baseline through which to consider progress in multisectoral nutrition planning across countries.

More broadly, although this review cannot comment on the success and impact of the plans reviewed in reducing malnutrition and establishing a robust enabling environment for nutrition, previous literature has suggested an association between the existence of national MSNPs—and other evidence of institutional commitment to nutrition—and nutrition outcomes (Fracassi et al., 2020; Sunguya et al., 2014). For example, after the development of their multisectoral nutrition strategic plan, Burkina Faso continued efforts towards operationalization, which led to the creation of a nutrition budget line and the establishment of a nutrition technical

secretariat to lead nutrition implementation (Ouedraogo et al., 2019). In Nepal, their MSNP led to improvements in the coordination, advocacy and sustainable structures for nutrition action (Pomeroy-Stevens et al., 2016). Though such achievements are not universal across countries, and both countries may still face certain barriers, this positive progress demonstrates the potential importance of having an MSNP in place to accelerate efforts to reduce malnutrition.

This review serves as a foundation for further research assessing to what extent the inclusion (or exclusion) of certain characteristics in a plan contributes to effective operationalization and impact of a plan—which is critical to further inform effective multisectoral nutrition planning. The review framework can also serve as a useful tool to consider and evaluate gaps in MSNP during plan development or at the mid-term of implementation to facilitate improvements, foster dialogue on gaps and support needs, or act as a mechanism to evaluate operational progress on addressing malnutrition based on the country's plan.

Going forward and into a post-COVID-19 world, SUN countries' capacity to continue to develop, prioritize and implement national MSNPs in a cost-effective way will be vital. The findings from this analysis can be leveraged by current and future policymakers, technical assistance providers, and regional and global stakeholders to advance multisectoral nutrition planning, budgeting and implementation towards a conducive, enabling environment for improved nutrition.

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## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

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## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

AC, JW, MK and PF designed the research study. AC, JW and MK led the research with support from the reviewers noted in the acknowledgments. JW and AC analysed the data with strategic inputs from MK, PF and DD. CH led the literature review. AC, JW, CH and MK wrote the paper with strategic inputs from PF and DD.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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