

Stories of Change in Nutrition

BRIEFING NOTE 2020

Lessons from a Case Study



Tommy Trenchard/Panos Pictures

Burkina Faso

Introduction

Burkina Faso has made impressive improvements in nutrition over the last 30 years. Stunting rates among children under five have declined (from 45% in 1998/99 to 25% in 2018) and known nutrition drivers have improved. As a sector, nutrition has risen among national priorities, enacted several nutrition-specific policies, and increased funding. Despite these achievements, many challenges remain. This brief—based on research from the Stories of Change in Burkina Faso report—aims to tell the story of Burkina Faso's success in nutrition, identify its challenges, and provide evidence-based recommendations to address challenges now and in the future.

Stories of success

What created an environment for nutrition in Burkina Faso and how did it translate at community level?

Success of the Health Sector and Local Healthcare

The health sector and locally provided health services have profoundly improved nutrition. The Ministry of Health (MOH) has been the leader in enabling nutritional change via nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive health policies that have been effectively translated into programs, from major progress in immunization coverage two decades ago (found to be a critical driver in reducing stunting) to provision of free healthcare to pregnant women and children under five (which was often cited as a driver of tangible improvement among community members). In the past decade in particular, the MOH has managed to pass several nutrition-sensitive and nutrition-specific

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laws, increase its funding for nutrition, and increase hiring of community-based health agents and senior-level nutritionists. The MOH has also provided the structural foundation for several pivotal moments, including the creation of the Directorate of Nutrition in 2002 and the National Council on Nutrition Consultation (CNCN) in 2008, and passing the first nutrition policy in 2007.

Success of Cooperation between actors

The Directorate of Nutrition (DN), housed in the MOH, has been a focal point for effective coordination between the MOH and UN agencies and international NGOs via the PTF Nutrition (Technical and Financial Partners), which was organized in 2012. Cooperation between the DN and PTF has effectively made nutrition a higher priority, streamlined definitions of nutrition, mobilized funding, and defined policy objectives. The PTF has also been instrumental in bringing international nutrition objectives to the forefront of MOH policy: as international momentum for nutrition increased, the PTF supported the DN in translating that momentum into domestic action. Pivotal moments for nutrition were born from international cooperation, particularly Burkina Faso's joining of the SUN Movement in 2011 and the passing of the first action plan on infant and young child feeding (IYCF) in 2013.

Success of sectoral awareness of Nutrition

While the agriculture/food security sector has always been involved in nutrition, following the creation of the DN, nutrition was left largely to the MOH. In the past decade, the concept of “food and nutrition security” has gained traction and, currently, sectoral coordination structures are being restructured in order to better integrate food security and nutrition. This has facilitated mobilization of funding for nutrition through the agriculture sector, which is better funded than the health sector. Multisectoral awareness of nutrition beyond the agriculture sector is now also increasing. Multisectoral cooperation is emerging and, for instance, is reflected in current President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré's initiative to create a program titled “Ensure every school-age child at least one good quality meal of sufficient quantity a day” (with FAO support), which brings together nutrition, food security, education, and community income-generation objectives.

Success of Co-location of Sectoral Initiatives leading to visible improvements

Between 1998/99 and 2010, under-five stunting declined from 45% to 35%, and child linear growth improved. A number of proxy indicators for programs and services such as immunization, parental education, antenatal care, piped water, and



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reduction of open defecation showed measurable improvements over the same period, and may explain up to half of stunting reduction. By 2018, child stunting rate had fallen to 25%. Communities appear to have become increasingly aware of drivers of nutrition—demonstrating awareness of child-feeding and caregiving practices, malnutrition, food security, care for pregnant women, and hygiene practices. Communities acknowledged improvements in nutrition and its drivers in their villages and reported positive experience with nutrition-sensitive sectoral programs, such as access to SONAGESS shops (shops selling subsidized staple foods through the *société nationale de gestion des stocks de sécurité alimentaire*), the operationalization of the policy granting free healthcare for women and children under five years and the increase of health agents in their communities.

Stories on Challenges

Maintaining Fair Weight for Nutrition in the Balance of National Priorities

Maintaining Fair Weight for Nutrition in the Balance of National Priorities

Nutrition has increased in priority domestically, but given other threats—insecurity, migration and displacement crises, food insecurity, and climate change—the press of other priorities may make it difficult to ensure that nutrition continues to be attributed a fair weight in the balance of priorities. The challenge now is to holistically consider and understand how nutrition outcomes and new security and food crisis threats could negatively or positively affect each other, and maintain adequate priority for action and funding. It is imperative that the government of Burkina Faso continue to prioritize objectives that empower and enable communities, such as children's education, economic opportunity for women, modernization of family farming, and clean water—all of which are also considered to be drivers of positive nutritional change.

Future food security policies could also potentially reduce nutrition's standing in the balance of priorities. For example, in other parts of West Africa, nations have injected significant resources into single (cash) crop production. Changes such as these, although potentially positive for food security, may not directly align with nutrition objectives if additional measures do not reinforce pathways to nutrition and if sustainability is not carefully considered. Respondents stated that although there has been some increase in nutrition-sensitive agriculture, namely through vegetable gardens, at the same time, there has also been movement away from sorghum and millet and into maize and rice (confirmed by quantitative data); some associated changes in traditional diets (including shift in

consumption toward less micronutrient-dense staple crops) could damage nutrition in the long run.

Stabilizing the fragile power of Nutrition within and across the Health and Agriculture Sectors and further integrating nutrition across sectoral policies and programs

Nutrition has grown in importance while anchored at the MOH. But new challenges include stabilizing nutrition's fragile power within and across the health and agriculture sectors, increasing integration of nutrition across sectoral policies and programs, and promoting dynamic dialogue within coordinating bodies. Currently, the Ministry of Agriculture (MOA) presides over the National Council of Food Security (CNSA), and the MOH presides over the CNCN. Action is underway by the MOH, PTF, and civil society organizations to consolidate CNCN under a new coordination body, to be piloted at the supra-ministerial level. Some respondents also call for merging the CNSA and CNCN. Other respondents expressed concern that, if the coordination of nutrition is anchored at a higher level and/or the MOA is given greater power within the body, actors who are influential in nutrition but not active in food security could lose influence. Other sectors (including education, employment and social protection, environment, water and sanitation, trade, industry, and research) should understand better how nutrition can contribute to their outcomes and/or how they can contribute to nutrition outcomes, as well as reinforce efforts to formalize these notions into policies and programs. As the National Economic and Social Development Plan (PNDES) is the guiding policy document for structuring policy, its revision in 2020 is a critical opportunity to elevate nutrition. If nutrition, currently categorized as a subsector of health, were to be recategorized as a “cross-cutting” theme within the PNDES, it would necessarily be integrated into relevant sectors.

Increased availability and overconsumption of non-nutritious (high-fat, high-sugar, high-salt) foods is an emerging challenge (acknowledged in the community), and could potentially lead to compound problems of malnourished and overweight individuals. Because non-nutritious food is often processed and/or foreign, this issue may complicate the multisectoral responses required for effective action and will necessitate increased coordination with the trade and processing sectors.

Building Capacities and ownership at decentralized and community levels to catalyze action in Nutrition

Challenges persist in translating the central level policy structure into effective action at scale. This calls for smoother vertical coordination. Decentralization requires greater inclusion of communes and provinces into planning activities,

better interlevel communication, and a fair distribution of funding, expertise, and human resources. Currently, communities do not advocate for themselves and the advocacy agenda is set largely by international actors, leaving a power imbalance between grassroots and international influences. Greater local involvement in advocacy could mobilize resources to be directed to decentralized levels.

Poverty also remains a challenge, as it hinders communities in meeting basic needs (many of which are drivers of nutrition). More attention to literacy, financing for education, and provision of social services could therefore build community capacities.

Data, Data Use, and Accountability

Data collection and accessibility have improved, primarily through annual national nutrition surveys (since 2009), which use the SMART methodology. Data gaps remain, notably in the existence, processing and/or use of data to inform local action, to improve programs, to link malnutrition and mortality, and to weigh other sectors' contributions to nutrition and understand how nutrition contributes to other sectors' outcomes. Currently, no single platform brings together all nutrition data for Burkina Faso, although one is currently under construction.

Accountability, although beginning to show signs of improvement, remains a large problem in Burkina Faso, according to respondents. Gaps in integrated data, lack of easy access that would allow for monitoring progress, and lack of a culture of accountability all contribute to the problem. The lack of accountability may help explain why the central level does not effectively decentralize; so increasing accountability might also improve decentralization.

Maintaining Inclusion

Women have become increasingly involved in gardening, crop sales, and food transformation. Without formal access to credit, it is often women's groups that enable individuals to find credit and finance purchases of inputs or to engage in other income-generating activities. Given the positive changes attributed to these activities, it is important that the national government both contribute to supporting actions that enable women and provide educational talks, access to credit, job trainings, and trainings in agriculture.

Women and youth are more likely than men to do gardening, but lack of water installations and market access keep women from successful gardening. In practice, women do not own land but grow food on their husbands' land. Young people also face challenges in accessing land, and as the population continues to increase, access to land is likely to become more competitive. Because the majority of

Burkinabe people rely on agricultural activities for income, it is imperative that policies in agriculture not only include women, but elevate women, and that they not only focus on production of food, but also ensuring that food production is nutrition-sensitive. Food production and purchases, which directly drive nutrition outcomes, depend on agricultural extension services, access to agricultural inputs, water installations, infrastructure, access to markets, and the social and financial empowerment of women.

Children over five, teens and youth, men, and elderly women appear to receive less attention in nutrition policy, and could be better included. Increasing programs intended to support young men—who often abandon agriculture and migrate—could also strengthen communities and provide income-generating activities.

Writing the Future **How can we begin to address future challenges?**

Maintain momentum and funding in Nutrition

The president's initiative to «ensure every school-age child at least one good quality meal of sufficient quantity a day» signals that Burkina Faso's central government is maintaining momentum in nutrition, but it is critical that this momentum also be maintained within ministries. Furthermore, momentum in cooperation between other relevant sectors and the nutrition sector needs to be maintained. We recommend national food security surveys be better integrated with national nutrition surveys and national Demographic and Health Surveys, so that the impact of nutrition on sectoral objectives and that of sectoral policies on nutrition can be assessed.

Foreign contributions continue to constitute the bulk of financing for nutrition, but there is no guarantee that foreign donors will maintain their contributions. It is imperative that the national budget commit a portion toward nutrition to ensure sustainable financing. We recommend that the national government identify budget lines across ministries that cover nutrition-sensitive action, thereby ensuring a more efficient use of state funding.

Political momentum could also be better maintained at the community level if nutrition objectives and nutrition-sensitive activities with relevant funding were incorporated into communal development plans. Currently, nutrition is dominated by national actors, and communities have little influence in defining nutrition priorities.



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Improve Agriculture, Markets, and Value Chains

Producers face innumerable challenges including soil degradation, land speculation, lack of access to inputs, and lack of access to credit for modernizing operations; but improving smallholder family farms' agricultural operations, including through modernization of inputs and methods, has shown to improve food security and nutritional outcomes. Producers who received trainings cited using the new methods, but demand for extension services and other forms of support outweighs supply. Allowing producer organizations more power to carry out agricultural extension service activities, improve subsidies, improve water management systems, and provide farmers with tools to understand market prices and techniques to store harvests could greatly improve farmers' production capacity.

Producers struggle with understanding market prices, accessing markets, and accessing capital to invest in animal husbandry or cash-crop production. To address this, Burkina Faso may consider strengthening a variety of value chains, which would allow producers to diversify foods in their local marketplaces, increase incomes, and purchase food to diversify diets. Improving value chains would also require strengthening of infrastructure, processing capabilities, and access to markets beyond Burkina Faso. Furthermore, accumulation of assets such as communication means, transportation means, housing improvements, and refrigerators could lead to better knowledge of and connection to various public and private services, better living conditions, and better food conservation.

Address WASH issues and Understand Malaria

Based on our analysis of nutrition drivers and their improvement over the past several decades, there are still large gaps to be addressed regarding water, sanitation, and health (WASH) issues. Given the large positive effect suspected on child linear growth, and the potential to reduce open defecation, expanding the coverage of community-level sanitation programs should be a high priority in Burkina Faso. Water programs that improve access to running water at home should be maintained and developed in settings where they are cost-effective. Pilot programs to improve water storage should be developed and assessed as well. In the meantime, it is urgent to collect data at the national level on appropriate drinking water storage (in addition to appropriate water source and appropriate water treatment) in order to properly assess how this practice may impact health and nutrition in Burkina Faso.

We were unable to assess the effect of the introduction and extension of malaria control programs on child linear growth. This link needs to be researched, as it is possible that decreasing malaria has a positive effect on nutrition.

Address education and knowledge gaps in children and caregivers

Significantly increasing schooling duration for both girls and boys could directly affect their nutrition outcomes. Nutrition services at school may provide an incentive to improve schooling coverage and duration and may improve school performance. We suggest that nutrition returns might even be higher if curricula for primary school included strong nutrition, health, and hygiene components, as currently planned in Burkina Faso's Multisectoral Strategic Nutrition Plan 2017-2020.

Burkina Faso should continue to improve caregivers' knowledge and practices on important issues such as IYCF, health, hygiene, gender, and nutrition, and create and maintain community demand and supply for these services. For coverage and sustainability, these capacity building activities should use multiple channels including mass media, particularly radio. Opportunities for integration into other trainings across sectors (such as agriculture trainings for example) and/or onto existing platforms (such as women's groups or producers' groups) should be identified.

Build Resilience

Agricultural extension services should build farmers' resilience to drought and soil degradation with water management systems, trainings on composting/organic fertilizer, and techniques such as half-moons, *zai*, crop rotations, stony bunds, and shallow wells. Producers do not have access to information that could help them plan cultivation and sales, and would benefit from tools for understanding weather conditions and price information. Better access to these tools may help farmers maximize their food access and revenue, particularly during shortages.

Population growth also contributes to the mounting challenges in land access. It is imperative that the government of Burkina Faso develop social protection programs that support the growing population and ensure food security, and maintain successful programs, like free care for children and pregnant women and stable food supply through the SONAGESS. Family planning programs that aim to optimize family size and encourage interpregnancy intervals, as well as an expansion of appropriate antenatal care coverage, might also lead to further measurable positive impacts on child linear growth.

The rise in extremist violence currently sweeping West Africa is a critical issue that must be addressed immediately. Insurgents have targeted local government officials, schools and teachers, and marketplaces, and turn to local communities for recruits. It is imperative that action be taken to protect communities and provide citizens with livelihoods, so that joining terrorist groups is not the only economic option, especially as population growth has and will continue to leave many young people without job opportunities.

Conclusion

Burkina Faso's nutrition story is a relatively new one. Nutrition, as a stand-alone sector and field, has only garnered meaningful national attention in the last decade, leaving much of the narrative yet to be determined. Burkina Faso has accomplished impressive progress in nutrition, and can be proud of its successes within communities, within its government, and on the international stage. Moving into the future, Burkina Faso should concentrate on maintaining momentum in nutrition at the national level and in relevant ministries, allow for better integration of nutrition into other sectoral policies, operationalize nutrition-sensitive policies into effective programs, empower decentralized authorities to act in nutrition, build the capacity of communities to produce and purchase more nutritious diets, increase nutrition awareness of communities to raise grassroots demand for nutrition, and work to alleviate the dangers caused by climate change and security threats.

Take-away messages

- Between 1998/99 and 2018 in Burkina Faso, under-five stunting declined from 45% to 25%.
- The Ministry of Health (MOH) and its technical and financial partners have made the most visible commitment to and action in nutrition in Burkina Faso. The MOH, where the Directorate of Nutrition is anchored, has passed numerous nutrition laws, increased hiring of (community) health agents and nutritionists, improved rates of immunization (which was strongly associated with large improvements in child stunting outcomes between 1993 and 2010), and executed a policy of free healthcare for pregnant women and children under five.
- The Ministry of Agriculture was described as the most influential ministry working in the domain of food and nutrition security.
- Communities perceived the nutritional change. Community members spontaneously cited known nutrition drivers as having improved their nutrition outcomes, including improvements in community knowledge, and in access to healthcare systems and diversified food. Communities also described agents from different ministries (health and

agriculture) engaging the population through women, youth, and civil society organizations.

- Stakeholders said that nutrition has increased its standing as a national priority, particularly in the last decade. However, maintaining this status will be a challenge in the future, as climate, migration, and security issues pose new challenges to Burkina Faso. Furthermore, as the government restructures its national coordination bodies between food security and nutrition, power games are being played by various sectors and actors to maximize their influence.
- Smoother vertical coordination of action in nutrition requires greater inclusion of communes and provinces in planning activities, better interlevel communication, a fair distribution of funding, expertise, and human resources, and large improvements in accountability mechanisms. Also, data gaps remain in the existence, processing and/or use of data to inform local action, to improve programs, to link malnutrition and mortality, and to weigh other sectors' contribution to nutrition and understand nutrition's contribution to other sectors.
- Systemic poverty and inequity hinder communities' ability to cover basic needs and stymie nutrition efforts. More attention to advancing literacy, financing education, creating access to credit, and providing social services in an inclusive way would build communities' capacity to overcome poverty.
- Increased availability and over-consumption of non-nutritious (high-fat, high-sugar, high-salt) foods is an emerging challenge acknowledged in the community.
- Moving into the future, Burkina Faso should concentrate on maintaining momentum in nutrition at the national level and in relevant ministries, allow for better integration of nutrition into sectoral policies, operationalize nutrition-sensitive policies into effective programs at scale, empower decentralized authorities to act in nutrition, build the capacity of communities to produce and purchase more nutritious diets, increase nutrition awareness of communities to raise grassroots demand for nutrition, and work to alleviate the dangers caused by climate change and security threats.

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