

Practical pathways to integrate nutrition and water, sanitation and hygiene

Investing in the nutrition of children is crucial if countries are to nurture the human capital necessary for social and economic development. Improvements in water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services are critical for the success of such investments. Our research in Cambodia, Ethiopia and Madagascar¹ reveals opportunities and pathways for combining WASH and nutrition efforts to better tackle undernutrition. This brief draws on these three country examples to inspire other governments and development partners to take practical steps to establish an integrated, multisectoral approach across policies, programmes and financing.

Raoy and her daughter Natasha at the new waterpoint in their village in Belavabary commune, Madagascar.



Practical actions to integrate nutrition and WASH

There is no silver bullet for creating a multisectoral approach, and approaches must be context-specific. Our interviews in Cambodia, Ethiopia and Madagascar – alongside research and experience by the World Bank, USAID, Action Against Hunger and others^{2,3,4} – highlight common entry points for governments and development partners to take integrated WASH–nutrition action:

- Target WASH interventions to undernutrition hotspots (also known as convergence or co-location), on the basis of systematic collection of localised data.
- Promote key hygiene behaviours integrated in nutrition interventions. Key behaviours include: handwashing at key moments; safe treatment and storage of food and water; hygienic food preparation and cooking; creation of safe play spaces that separate animals and their faeces from children; and safe disposal of child faeces.
- Prioritise mothers, newborns and young children as targets for WASH interventions, recognising that high community coverage, especially for sanitation, is critical to reduce contamination of the whole environment.
- Deliver an integrated minimum package of health, nutrition and WASH services and messaging and strengthen the capacity and resourcing of service delivery platforms and frontline workers, such as health extension workers.
- Ensure regular vertical and horizontal coordination meetings between WASH and nutrition stakeholders (policy makers, donors, NGOs) from local to national levels.



Pathways to success

1 Leadership

Secure the highest level leadership – from the prime minister or president – to drive cross-ministerial coordination and hold line ministries to account for integration of WASH and nutrition.

The multicausal nature of undernutrition requires strong cross-ministerial coordination and accountability. In Cambodia and Madagascar, the positioning of nutrition as a priority issue led by a senior government official has helped to accelerate progress.

In Cambodia, WASH–nutrition integration is led by a high-level cross-Government working group, chaired by the Director of the Deputy Prime Minister’s Cabinet, with the Deputy Prime Minister himself a vocal champion of the need for multisectoral action. The Government of Ethiopia has decided to establish a similar high-level, supra-ministerial body – the National Nutrition Coordination Body. It coordinates 13 ministries to improve collaboration on and accountability for nutrition.

2 Policies

First, ensure national and regional development plans take a multisectoral approach to integrating nutrition and WASH interventions, aiming to improve child nutrition. Second, ensure specific policies for nutrition and WASH are coordinated and cross-refer to one another.

National nutrition policies must outline clear nutrition-sensitive priorities including WASH interventions, with identified lead ministries, sufficient budget, and targets and indicators. National WASH plans must shift from a sole focus on access numbers towards recognising and monitoring the impact of WASH on reducing undernutrition, and should contribute to the targets and indicators of the nutrition plan.

In Madagascar, WASH has been incorporated as a strategic axis within the National Nutrition Plan, with well-defined and comprehensive interventions, and complemented by an operational plan and a monitoring and evaluation plan. In Ethiopia, the second phase of the One WASH National Programme (OWNP) provides an opportunity to include indicators on health or nutrition rather than only WASH service coverage, with increased Ministry of Health involvement.

3 Financing and strong government systems

Fully finance national WASH and nutrition plans, with clearly defined financing strategies across ministries that support better coordination.

Increased domestic and international funding is needed to support government systems and ensure WASH interventions can be aligned with nutrition objectives.

In Cambodia, 2018’s National Conference on WASH and Nutrition, convened by the Deputy Prime Minister, called for a strategic action plan to drive progress on WASH–nutrition. Crucially, the Ministry of Economy and Finance was asked to help develop the strategic action plan, and to agree with line ministries budget for service delivery, prioritising hotspot locations. Investment by donor agencies in Cambodia aligned with Government plans has supported pilots of multisectoral approaches and evidence generation. Donor support will remain crucial to enable the Government to complete nationwide mapping of undernutrition hotspots and to scale up interventions. In Ethiopia, Government-led frontline programmes, such as health extension workers and agriculture extension workers, provide important community-level platforms for joint WASH and nutrition messaging. However, without financing to increase capacity, these frontline staff are severely overburdened and under-resourced, with high turnover.

4 Data

Governments and donors must prioritise investments in data systems to enable effective targeting and prioritisation and reliable monitoring.

This should focus on generating up-to-date, localised data on undernutrition hotspots, drawing on existing surveys where possible. In addition, sharing data regularly across relevant ministries responsible for nutrition and WASH will enable better targeting of interventions to these hotspots.

In Cambodia and Ethiopia, our research identified insufficient data collection and sharing between local and national levels and between line ministries as a significant impediment to monitoring. Without localised, reliable and up-to-date data on stunting and wasting, it is not possible to properly monitor the progress of national multisectoral nutrition plans.

5 Sub-national coordination

Replicate strong national coordination mechanisms at sub-national level, ensuring 360 degree accountability.

National governments and donors should invest in building the capacity of and creating the incentives for sub-national authorities to jointly plan, deliver and monitor integrated WASH–nutrition approaches.

In Madagascar, 22 regional nutrition offices are in place to monitor implementation of the National Nutrition Plan. These could be strengthened to facilitate joint planning and implementation of WASH and nutrition interventions. In Cambodia, the Government’s Council for Agriculture and Rural Development has called for provincial and district governors to play stronger convening roles among nutrition and WASH actors. The outcome document from the Government-led national conference on WASH and nutrition in December 2018 calls for provincial departments and district offices of relevant line ministries, such as the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Rural Development, to strengthen coordination with each other and with their respective national ministries.

6 Knowledge sharing

Local authorities, CSOs, NGOs and donors should prioritise documenting and sharing knowledge and experience from integrated WASH–nutrition projects, to support governments to adopt and scale up models that work.

Knowledge needs to be shared at local, sub-national, national and international levels. This could include sharing lessons from WASH–nutrition projects within regular national and sub-national nutrition coordination meetings, and in joint sector reviews. Internationally, lessons could be shared as part of the ongoing collaboration between the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement and Sanitation and Water for All (SWA) Partnership.

In Ethiopia, the WASH sub-group of the SUN Civil Society Alliance is a useful forum for sharing integration experiences and discussing barriers to progress. In Madagascar, the National Nutrition Office and NGOs have sought to document and share lessons from models such as the ‘nutrition village’ in Masindray, which integrates WASH, nutrition, health, education and livelihoods into one programme coordinating different stakeholders.

7 Accountability

Ensure transparency and accountability – it is key to driving multisectoral approaches.

Roles and responsibilities across sectors and stakeholders working on WASH and nutrition should be clearly defined, and common measurements of success established. New multisectoral approaches should be communicated openly and clearly to citizens, to demonstrate the intended long-term benefits. Civil society and NGOs must be able to contribute to the cross-governmental approach at all stages – from inception of the multisectoral plan, to monitoring budget allocations, to evaluation of its progress.

In Madagascar, active civil society platforms, such as the SUN civil society alliance, are coordinating with the WASH sector platform to promote multisectoral approaches, and to hold the Government to account on progress against the National Nutrition Plan and the broader obligations to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.

Children enjoying their porridge at Ntondoko Early Childhood Development Centre, Zomba, Malawi



WaterAid/Dennis Lupenga

Poor sanitation is the second leading risk factor for stunting worldwide⁵

This brief is the result of collaboration between Action Against Hunger and WaterAid, in support of the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement and Sanitation and Water for All (SWA) Partnership on WASH and nutrition. It is published alongside three country case studies based on interviews with stakeholders in Cambodia, Ethiopia and Madagascar, intended to document successes, challenges, opportunities and recommendations for greater coordination between WASH and nutrition.

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WaterAid is an international not-for-profit, determined to make clean water, decent toilets and good hygiene normal for everyone, everywhere within a generation.

Action Against Hunger is a global humanitarian organisation that takes decisive action against the causes and effects of hunger.

References

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