

Evaluation Brief



Joint Evaluation of Renewed Efforts against Child Hunger and Undernutrition (REACH) 2011-2015

Context

REACH is a joint United Nations (UN) Strategic Initiative, established in 2008 as a partnership between WFP, FAO, WHO and Unicef. Its original intent was to help countries accelerate progress towards Millennium Development Goal (MDG 1/Target 3 to halve the proportion of underweight children under five globally by 2015). Its initial primarily public health-oriented approach evolved over time towards the multi-sectoral approach articulated in the 2008 Lancet Series on Maternal and Child Undernutrition that presented evidence of the irreversible and profound effect of undernutrition on overall child development and linked achievement of the MDGs to efforts to address nutrition.

REACH operates in the context of other global nutrition initiatives including the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) movement launched in 2010. It aims to reduce maternal and child undernutrition in participating countries by improving national nutrition governance and management. Its design was based on two core assumptions: i) through better coordination and less duplication, nutrition actions will be more efficiently and effectively delivered; and ii) a multi-sectoral approach to nutrition will improve nutritional status of women and children.

Objectives and Scope of the Evaluation

The evaluation was requested by the global REACH Steering Committee. Following an evaluation of the Scaling Up Nutrition and the 2nd International Conference on Nutrition in late 2014, the evaluation aimed to inform REACH's future operational and strategic decision-making within the wider dynamic evolution in the global nutrition movement. The evaluation of REACH covered the 2011-2015 period and assessed the relevance, efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability of REACH activities and results in Bangladesh, Ghana, Mali, Mozambique, Nepal, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda and the REACH secretariat. The evaluation was intended to address aspects that cannot be understood through routine monitoring in particular the extent to which REACH's outcomes have been achieved, factors affecting REACH outcome achievement, and a comparison of experiences and implementation approaches across different REACH countries.

Key Findings

Relevance and Appropriateness of REACH's Design – (Evaluation Question 1)

REACH's theory of change. REACH's overall design rested on major assumptions and envisaged that improvements in national nutrition governance and political commitment would lead to enhanced nutrition outcomes for women and children under 5 through multi-sectoral and inter-agency approaches, improved awareness, commitment and consensus on policy and programming, capacity and accountability. The evaluation assessed whether the extra effort and complexity of coordinated multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder approaches is warranted by the results.

Overall, these assumptions were found to challenge the validity of REACH's theory of change (TOC). The evaluation found relatively strong evidence that multi-sector and multi-stakeholder approaches have resulted in increased awareness of nutrition issues and improved priority setting in the countries assessed, and that REACH contributed to this. However, it found only limited evidence for i) stakeholders' commitment to scale up support for nutrition and/or joint action as being a direct result of this increased awareness of and consensus on nutrition problems indeed, incentives for such coordination were found to be still weak ; or ii) that REACH could effectively influence national and international stakeholders to place nutrition at the top of their agendas, implying that the REACH model/formula does not guarantee a catalytic impact in such a complex arena.

Alignment with the international nutrition agenda and priorities of participating countries. REACH's focus on country-specific and country-led responses, multi-sector action and the need to scale up funding fitted well with the priorities of the international nutrition agenda.

Coherence with the mandates and capacities of the four UN agencies. REACH's objectives were in line with the nutrition priorities of the four UN participating agencies. REACH did not always make sufficient use of existing tools and guidance or effectively leverage agencies' nutrition capacity to improve coordination and scale up national nutrition responses.

Coherence and complementarity between REACH and other nutrition initiatives. In a crowded nutrition environment, the establishment of REACH as another initiative was contested and continues to be questioned by some global stakeholders. There is little

understanding of REACH beyond the people directly involved.

Contribution to equity, including gender equality. REACH was designed to align with and contribute to equity, including gender equality. Country Implementation Plans were uneven in clarifying the extent to which these issues would be addressed through improved planning, advocacy and monitoring.

Country-Level Performance (Evaluation Question 2)

Effectiveness

Outcome 1 – Increased awareness of the problem and potential solutions. REACH effectively contributed to increased awareness of nutrition problems and potential solutions, and helped to build national commitment. However, stakeholder and activity mapping – the most prominent activity – was considered over complex and difficult to update.

Outcome 2 – Strengthening national nutrition policies and programmes. REACH contributed to advancing national or sub-national plans by drafting or contributing to processes that ensured their approval. However, plans remained unimplemented, because funding was lacking linked to commitments from government and partners.

Outcome 3 – Increased capacity at all levels. The complexities of capacity development processes meant that there were limits to what REACH could achieve in three years. Despite this, REACH contributed to significant enhancements in institutional capacity.

Outcome 4 – Increasing effectiveness and accountability. Work was done to develop multi-sector monitoring systems and partial nationally-led systems are now in place in some countries covered. REACH's achievements in dismantling barriers among UN agencies were also limited. Good technical relationships were built, but there was little joint programming other than that occurring through One UN.

Equity and gender

REACH's tools and analytical work highlighted equity and gender issues. However, REACH was not strongly associated as having specifically advocated for equity and gender, or with having progressed on the agenda in this area.

Efficiency

Results were achieved with lower budgets than planned, allowing timelines to be extended appropriately beyond the overly ambitious ones factored into REACH's original design. There was some loss in programming efficiency because of delays in placement of REACH facilitators.

Sustainability (Evaluation Question 3)

Overall, the results and achievements of REACH are unlikely to be sustainable unless additional investments and efforts are made.

Factors affecting Performance and Results (Evaluation Question 4)

REACH provided a unique facilitating and catalytic function at country level as a result of its neutrality, flexibility, quality of technical tools, links with national planning and priorities, and – in the opinion of many national stakeholders – its strong and competent staff. It did not excel in forming diverse and strategic partnerships at global level, and it continues to lack support from UN agencies and partners.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Overall Assessment

REACH made most progress towards its outcomes 1 and 2, and less or no progress on outcomes 3 and 4. This was partly related to the initiative's limited timeframes versus the sequential nature of the intended outcomes. Progress was significantly influenced by the performance of the secretariat in Rome. While the process of the initiative's launch was slow, disjointed and confused in some respects, the secretariat has gradually standardized the programmes of work across REACH countries.

Recommendations

In the event, various far-reaching decisions were made in advance of the evaluation's recommendations, which assumed a continued need for REACH and with implications for its future role, functioning, structure and scope: i) REACH to become the secretariat of the UN Network for SUN; and ii) funding of REACH in additional countries. The evaluation recommendations were formulated with these prior decisions in mind:

- 1) Maintain REACH's focus as a neutral facilitator of nutrition governance at country level;
- 2) Expand timeframes for engagement;
- 3) Encourage the UN Network for SUN to align its focus with REACH's core function;
- 4) Strengthen incentive structures within the UN to contribute to the initiative;
- 5) Redesign REACH's theory of change;
- 6) Commission a study of the architecture for technical assistance in scaling up nutrition
- 7) Develop funding options and sources for REACH's second phase; and
- 8) Continue use of Country Implementation Planning guidance for in-country implementation and strengthen engagement with gender and equity issues.



Reference: Full and summary reports of the evaluation and the Management Response are available at www.wfp.org/evaluation. For more information please contact the Office of Evaluation WFP.evaluation@WFP.org