Protocol for systematic review

Generating political priority for nutrition: A systematic review of the literature


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ABSTRACT

This is a protocol for a systematic review of the literature on nutrition politics and policy-making processes with the following objectives and research questions:

(1) Define and develop a conceptual understanding of political priority for nutrition.
   - What is meant by ‘political priority for nutrition’?

(2) Determine what factors and underlying mechanisms could enable and/or constrain the conversion of recent high level international political commitments into supranational, national and local level political priority for nutrition, as defined in (1).
   - What factors and underlying mechanisms enable and/or constrain political priority for nutrition at supranational, national and local levels? What does evidence of political priority for nutrition look like?

(3) Generate key recommendations for relevant stakeholders so as to inform more strategic political actions and competencies for improved nutrition.
   - What actions can relevant stakeholders take in order to generate and sustain political priority for nutrition in future?
BACKGROUND

Rationale for this review

Good nutrition fundamentally underpins the health of individuals, families, and communities and subsequently the economic and social development of nations. Conversely, malnutrition is the single greatest contributor to the global burden of disease, affecting one in three people in the world today and leaving no nation untouched [1]. Worldwide many nations face a double burden of malnutrition, with high rates of under-nutrition and overweight affecting populations concurrently [2]. Malnourished individuals are more likely to die younger and suffer disability, have impaired physical and cognitive development, reduced performance at school and work, and an increased risk of non-communicable diseases over their lifetime [3-5]. Malnutrition can incur significant health systems costs, constrain workforce productivity, and is a key mechanism promoting poverty and by which impoverishment becomes entrenched [6].

Encouragingly, world leaders have recently made a raft of high-level political commitments for improved nutrition. In 2014 the Rome Declaration and Framework for Action of the Second International Conference on Nutrition (ICN2) affirmed the following from United Nations (UN) member states;

We commit to... eradicate hunger and prevent all forms of malnutrition worldwide, particularly undernourishment, stunting, wasting, underweight and overweight in children under five years of age; and anaemia in women and children among other micronutrient deficiencies; as well as reverse the rising trends in overweight and obesity and reduce the burden of diet-related noncommunicable diseases in all age groups[7].

In 2016 the ICN2 commitments were further endorsed by the UN General Assembly, with 2016-2025 proclaimed as the Decade of Action on Nutrition. This builds upon the earlier adoption of the nutrition-relevant Sustainable Development Goals (particularly Goal 2 of ending hunger and all forms of malnutrition by 2030), the 2025 World Health Assembly (WHA) nutrition targets, and the UN High-Level Meeting on the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases. Growing attention and priority is also evident in the surge in multilateral and bilateral development assistance for nutrition over the previous decade (although this remains relatively low in terms of overall ODA spending) [6]. Global initiatives, for example Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) and Nutrition for Growth (N4G), further demonstrate commitments by national political leaders, government agencies, international organizations, civil society groups, businesses and experts [8].

The technical solutions for implementing the stated commitments exist – recent series in the Lancet and reports from international agencies demonstrate a set of cost-effective and efficacious interventions for improved nutrition across a number of issues and settings, including interventions in nutrition-sensitive sectors such as agriculture, education, finance, health systems, social protection and trade [3-6, 9]. Knowing what works is, however, not enough; addressing malnutrition in all its forms will require a sustained and concerted mobilisation of national political systems, institutions and policy processes for improved nutrition [6, 8, 10, 11]. Data from recent Global Nutrition Reports (a comprehensive source of nutrition policy relevant data) and other monitoring efforts reveal the scope of the challenge – although most countries are on track to achieve at least
one of the WHA targets, many are falling behind because of chronic under-investments in governance, policy development, financing and programming [6, 12-16]. Policy coherence – that is, achieving nutrition objectives through synergistic actions with non-nutrition sectors – also present a considerable political challenge given the potential diversity of stakeholders, interests and world-views involved [17-19].

This ‘political challenge of nutrition’ is recognized in the growing number of empirical studies describing the factors shaping political priority (or lack thereof) for nutrition across a diversity of jurisdictions, policy sectors and issues. There is therefore a strong rationale for this review: understanding the mechanisms and processes by which political priority for nutrition is generated, sustained and constrained can inform more strategic competencies and actions by nutrition actors, as well as anticipate the barriers and enablers to the conversion of the recent high-level political commitments into on-the-ground action for improved nutrition.

**What is meant by malnutrition?**

This review focuses on ‘malnutrition in all its forms’ for several reasons. First, because many nations now face the challenge of addressing multiple forms of malnutrition concurrently – different forms of malnutrition can affect populations simultaneously (e.g. undernutrition and overweight / obesity), across the life-course (e.g. undernutrition in early-life can predispose to overweight in adulthood), and consistent with a theory of ‘nutrition transition’ over the course of a country’s economic and social development [20, 21]. Second, recent studies suggest that enabling political environments for addressing the various forms of malnutrition are shaped by similar sets of factors [6, 8, 22]. Addressing all forms of malnutrition is also consistent with the ICN2 commitments, SDGs goals and WHA targets, and informing the implementation of these commitments is a primary objective of this review [7].

We adopt a definition of malnutrition as ‘an abnormal physiological condition caused by inadequate, unbalanced or excessive consumption of macronutrients and/or micronutrients’ [23]. This encompasses the multiple forms and physiological manifestations of malnutrition including undernutrition, wasting, stunting, micronutrient malnutrition, overnutrition, overweight and obesity. Several forms of malnutrition are linked with non-communicable diseases in later life including type-2 diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, cancer, osteoporosis and dental caries [24]. Malnutrition is often associated with food insecurity caused by inadequate food availability, economic and physical accessibility, utilization, and sustainability of supply. Nutrition security recognises that good nutrition requires not only access to a nutritious diet, but also to healthy environments, health care services, education and care. For definitions of these terms we refer to a recent glossary [23].

A number of frameworks are available for understanding the multi-level determinants and causal pathways shaping nutrition status, and for conceptualising where political priority can be targeted in terms of policy and programmatic interventions. With regards to food and nutrition security the most commonly used is the UNICEF nutrition framework [25, 26], recently adapted for *Lancet* series on child and maternal nutrition [27, 28]. Similar causal frameworks have been developed for overweight/obesity [29, 30]. Others conceptualise the pathways by which food systems – from agricultural production, through to processing, storage, transport, retailing, and consumption – influence population nutrition status [31-36]. Informed by these frameworks, a set of evidence-
based, cost-effective and efficacious interventions have been developed for enhancing nutrition across a number of issues and settings [3-6, 9]. These include nutrition-specific interventions, for example micronutrient fortification of staple foods and community breastfeeding programmes, as well as more distal nutrition-sensitive interventions in a raft of sectors including social protection, education, finance, and throughout the food system.

**What is meant by political priority?**

This review is focused on what the nutrition frameworks described earlier conceptualise as the ‘basic causes’ and ‘systemic drivers’, what we refer to more specifically as the ‘political determinants’ or ‘political economy’ of nutrition. Drawing on a framework commonly used to understand political priority for global and national health initiatives, our starting definition of political priority is ‘the extent to which political leaders respond to malnutrition by mobilising official institutions and wider political systems into providing resources [including technical, human and financial resources], and enacting interventions commensurate with the severity of the issue’ [37].

This definition acknowledges that political priority is more than simply generating attention to an issue or getting it onto the ‘governing agenda’. It also encompasses broader systems of governance, institutional capacities, policy-making processes, policy design decisions, financing, implementation and monitoring systems that support and sustain nutrition actions. This multidimensional conceptualisation is also consistent with the ICN2 and UN Decade of Action on Nutrition outcomes, which commit governments, albeit on a voluntarily basis, to: enhance political priority and governance, develop policy and legislative frameworks, establish and develop institutions capable of coordinating and sustaining actions, mobilise human and financial resources, and develop accountability mechanisms for nutrition [38].

As identified in recent reviews a diversity of theoretical frameworks can be used to conceptualise the sets of factors that could hypothetically enable or constrain political priority for nutrition [8, 39-43]. Several of the most commonly applied frameworks (in nutrition but also in health policy more broadly) have informed the development of this protocol and selection of the search terms. These include those on issue salience, agenda-setting processes, and political commitment for example Kingdon’s Multiple Streams framework [44], Shiffman and Smith’s framework on political priority for global health initiatives [37], and Heaver’s work on conceptualizing political commitment for nutrition [45]. Others have adapted frameworks for assessing policy-making processes for nutrition throughout the policy-cycle from agenda-setting through to policy-development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation [46, 47]. Also informative are tools for assessing and monitoring political commitment including the Hunger and Commitment and Nutrition Index (Hanci) [48], and the Rapid Assessment Tool for Measuring Political Commitment for Food and Nutrition Security (Pcom-Rat) [49]. Others consider ways in which nutrition governance can be assessed including the ‘enabling environments for nutrition’ framework developed by Gillespie and colleagues [8].

**What is meant by ‘factors’ and ‘mechanisms’?**

In this review we adopt the terms ‘factors’ for conceptualising what enables and constrains political priority for nutrition and ‘mechanisms’ for conceptualising how such factors operate in a mechanistic yet context-dependent way. Mechanisms are defined as processes through which agents with causal
capacities operate to transmit a causal force between a given factor (i.e. the causal or independent variable) and an outcome (i.e. the dependent variable) [50].

A mechanistic account of political priority acknowledges that political phenomena have various spatial, temporal and complexity characteristics. In the spatial dimension, for example, mechanisms underpinning political change can operate across a nested hierarchy of layers, levels or orders of abstraction including the micro (e.g. psychological mechanisms that shape individual behaviours), meso (e.g. the actions of policy communities or networks of actors) and macro (e.g. social institutions and economic systems that structure political interaction) levels. All three levels can be important in determining a political or policy outcome in a given context [50].

Causal mechanisms will differ in terms of their rate of change (tempo), for how long they endure (duration), whether they are accelerating or decelerating (acceleration), and when they are important (timing) [51, 52]. Understanding change in terms of only one or two causal factors will, in many cases, likely underestimate causal complexity. There may not be just a few but many causal factors, and the relationships between them may be independent-dependent but also potentially interdependent as well as temporally dynamic [53]. These considerations will be taken into account when synthesising the findings of this review.

**OBJECTIVES**

For this systematic review of the literature on nutrition politics and policy-making processes we adopt the following objectives:

1. Define and develop a conceptual understanding of political priority for nutrition.
   - What is meant by ‘political priority for nutrition’?
2. Determine what factors and underlying mechanisms could enable and/or constrain the conversion of recent high level international political commitments into supranational, national and local level political priority for nutrition, as defined in (1).
   - What factors and underlying mechanisms enable and/or constrain political priority for nutrition at supranational, national and local levels? What does evidence of political priority for nutrition look like?
3. Generate key recommendations for relevant stakeholders so as to inform more strategic political actions and competencies for improved nutrition.
   - What actions can relevant stakeholders take in order to generate and sustain political priority for nutrition in future?

**METHOD**

We adopt a realist systematic review method as established by the Realist and Meta-narrative Evidence Syntheses: Evolving Standards (RAMSES) project [54, 55]. This method is particularly well suited to understanding how complex social interventions operate through causal mechanisms to generate outcomes in contingent and context dependent ways. In this view interventions aimed at generating or impeding political priority will yield different outcomes in different jurisdictions because of variations in the economic, social, environmental and political context in which the underlying mechanisms of causality are embedded. This method is therefore consistent with our mechanistic conceptualisation of causality described earlier. Furthermore, the realist review method...
is particularly well suited to our objective of informing more strategic actions and competencies among nutrition advocates and policy-makers. Rather than seeking to generate simplistic answers or generic prescriptions for action we seek to provide a detailed and highly practical understanding of the complexities of nutrition politics and policy-making processes.

Search strategy

We will search a number of scholarly and web-based databases from 1990 onwards for relevant studies. Although there are relevant publications that predate the review period, the year 1990 was selected as the starting point as just prior to the first International Conference on Nutrition (ICN) in 1992, and to capture a number of seminal publications published at that time. These databases were selected after consultation with two librarians with expertise in systematic review. Nearing completion of the review, a further search will be conducted to ensure we have captured eligible studies published within six months of the review publication date.

Electronic search

The following electronic databases will be searched;

- PubMed
- Scopus
- ProQuest
- ISI Web of Science
- Google Scholar

Initial search terms were identified from the relevant nutrition and political science frameworks referenced earlier and from a scoping review of the literature. Terms were further refined through preliminary searches of databases using various combinations of terms and search queries. Subsequently, the electronic databases will be searched in June and July 2016 using combinations of the terms given in table 1. Because it is not possible to develop extensive search strings for Google Scholar, we will free search this database using various combinations of terms, and use the ‘related articles’ feature of this database to identify additional studies.

Table 1. Search terms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Search terms</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nutrition</td>
<td><em>nutrition</em>, diet*, food*, hunger, micronutrient deficiency*, nutrition security, obesity, overweight, stunting, underweight, wasting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy and politics</td>
<td>accountabilit*, advoca*, agenda*, capacit*, collective action, commit*, coordination, enabling environment*, govern*, leaders*, politic*, policy, policies, priorit*, <em>sector</em>, scaling-up, stewardship, strateg*</td>
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* Truncated so as to capture all variations of the word (e.g. *nutrition* captures ‘mal’-, ‘over’- and ‘under’- nutrition as well as nutrition ‘-al’)

Manual search
A grey literature search will be conducted with the aim of obtaining relevant documents and other articles that were not available in the primary literature through a manual search of websites of institutions identified as comprising the ‘global nutrition governance’ system. The following institutional websites will be searched in September 2016, using the search functions available on the respective sites:

- Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
- Committee on World Food Security
- DFID
- ELDIS
- Food & Agricultural Organizations of the United Nations
- Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition
- Institute for Development Studies (IDS Research Community)
- International Food Policy Research Institute
- International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)
- International Network for Food and Obesity / non-communicable Diseases Research, Monitoring and Action Support
- Mainstreaming Nutrition Initiative
- Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
- Oxfam International
- Save the Children
- Scaling-up Nutrition (SUN)
- United Nations Children’s Fund
- United Nations Standing Committee on Nutrition
- USAID
- World Bank
- World Cancer Research Fund International
- World Food Programme
- World Health Organization

A further web-based search using Google will be conducted. Grey literature will also be found through snowballing from reference lists (i.e. by scanning reference lists of the studies found for additional studies) and recommendations by key experts in the field.

Two reviewers (PB + KW) will undertake the search. A detailed search diary will be kept to record progress and any modifications to the search strategy, for example using ‘AND NOT’ operators to exclude certain irrelevant but numerically common study types. References for all studies will be entered into an EndNote library with duplicates removed, and further filed against the inclusion/exclusion criteria.

Selection of studies

Given the diversity of theoretical and methodological approaches used, systematic reviews in the political and social sciences present considerable challenges with regards to assessing research
quality. Studies tend to adopt qualitative study designs that rely on thematic rather than numerical analysis and presentation. However guidelines on assessing the quality of qualitative research for systematic and realist review have been developed and, together with the study aims, were used to guide the development of inclusion and exclusion criteria [54, 56].

Studies will be included if;

- Published after 1990 in English-language.
- Published in a peer-reviewed journal or by an official organization or non-government organization with a mandate to address the issue.
- Authors identify and describe factor(s) shaping political priority for nutrition and/or nutrition policy-making processes at supra-national, national or sub-national levels.
- Authors undertake an empirical analysis with clearly described aims, explicit underlying assumptions or theoretical orientation, an appropriate and robust methodology (including rigorous sampling, data collection and analysis), clear statements of findings and justifiable conclusions.

Studies will be excluded if;

- Published prior to 1990 or not in English-language.
- Non-empirical (e.g. editorials, commentaries, theoretical frameworks, calls to action, statements by professional bodies).
- The primary focus is on specific institutional (e.g. school, prisons and workplaces) or clinical policy-settings (i.e. not at jurisdictional level).

All authors will discuss and refine the inclusion/exclusion criteria during the research process. Two of the authors (PB + KW) will independently review search results with disagreements settled by discussion. All authors will review the final list of included articles. If there is a scarcity of empirical studies on political priority for nutrition we will adapt our selection criteria so as to include those studies with aims tangential to the review objectives but which included relevant findings.

**Data extraction and analysis**

Political science studies typically use qualitative case study research designs comprising a single or small number of cases. Best practice political science methodology suggests that the findings of such ‘small-N’ studies are difficult to compare unless they have adopted the same theoretical orientation and methodology [57]. We will not therefore enumerate the various factors identified as shaping political priority for nutrition across the various studies, but determine whether they were present/absent and describe how they functioned mechanistically in a given context or across a variety of contexts. The following data will be extracted from included studies and tabulated using a standardised template;

- Study characteristics: authors, aims and objectives, issues, theories used, study design, method, and data sources.
- Context: geographical scope (supranational, national, state, local), jurisdictions included, income-level (e.g. low, lower-middle, upper-middle, high-income countries).
• Causal factors and mechanisms: Factors identified as generating or impeding political priority and a description of how they operate mechanistically.
• Outcomes: political or policy outcome, study conclusions and key lessons.

To visualise data concisely, identified factors will be further synthesised into a data matrix sortable by study characteristics (e.g. by nutrition sub-issue and/or country context) allowing for more streamlined data interpretation. To categorise and summarise the key factors shaping political priority the list of tabulated mechanisms will be condensed into a smaller sub-set of thematic areas through structured deliberation among the authors. This approach is consistent with a constant comparative analysis approach used to interrogate qualitative data and categorise emergent and related concepts. The extracted data will be reviewed by qualitative synthesis and organized around the sub-set of themes.

References