

Measuring political commitment for food and nutrition security



Implementation of a rapid assessment approach to measure political commitment and opportunities to advance food and nutrition security among the joint programmes of the Millennium Development Goals Achievement Fund

FOREWORD

In April of 2013, the Government of Spain hosted a high-level meeting in which representatives from governments, the United Nations and international experts in the fight against hunger, malnutrition and food insecurity discussed what has been done, what is being done, and what could be done in the future to eliminate two of the world's largest burdens: poverty and hunger.

Since the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were adopted, Spain has demonstrated a strong political commitment to them, placing them at the center of its development policy. In this regard, Spain signed an agreement with UNDP on behalf of other UN agencies, which created the MDG Achievement Fund (MDG-F). This commitment remains strong, and Spain is actively participating in the global debate on the post-2015 agenda, offering its extensive experience in the area of cooperation. The fight against hunger must continue to be included as a priority for development policy.

This document is the product of the joint efforts of the MDG-F and UNICEF to generate knowledge and provide evidence-based solutions for how to take a comprehensive look at the problem of malnutrition and food insecurity. The MDG-F's experience is an innovative effort of the UN system to promote integrated solutions to food insecurity and malnutrition. By bringing together the expertise of various UN agencies, the MDG-F programmes have put in place multisectoral approaches that include important issues such as nutritional education, equality and empowerment of women, agricultural production and health issues, among others.

I want to thank the authors, as well as the Secretariat of the MDG Achievement Fund and UNICEF's Nutrition Section, for their leadership on this publication and for their valuable contribution to future development agendas. The fight against poverty is one of the greatest challenges of our time, one for which we must be more united than ever. In short, we face an enormous challenge that demands the commitment and effort of all of us.

Gonzalo Robles
Secretary-General for International Development Cooperation, Spain

PREFACE

The Millennium Development Goals Achievement Fund (MDG-F) was established with an agreement between the Government of Spain and UNDP on behalf of the UN system. The aim was to accelerate progress towards achievement of the Millennium Development Goals through the United Nations system. The MDG-F has supported 130 joint programmes in 50 countries in eight thematic areas. These joint programmes purposefully bring together United Nations agencies, national government institutions, non-governmental organizations and civil society to achieve their goals equitably.

The Children, Food Security and Nutrition thematic area received the largest allocation, more than \$135 million, to support 24 joint programmes. This significant investment in child nutrition reflects the MDG-F's recognition of the critical importance of nutrition in attaining the Millennium Development Goals. All joint programmes actively worked to strengthen the supporting environment for nutrition. Working at the policy and legislation levels, joint programmes supported advocacy efforts to build national commitment for food security and nutrition using awareness-raising and communication strategies and varied capacity-development modalities. Joint programmes also provided technical input for the development of national policies and planning and supported the adoption and implementation of such policies.

In order to assist the advocacy efforts of the joint programmes, the Knowledge Management Initiative of the MDG-F commissioned research on the agenda-setting process for food security and nutrition. Through this work, a rapid assessment tool was developed, and piloted in select joint programmes, to help joint programmes measure political commitment and identify opportunities to advance food and nutrition policy initiatives. This executive summary presents the key findings of this work. The rapid assessment tool (available in English, French and Spanish) and research paper are available from the Knowledge Management Initiative by emailing nutrition@unicef.org or from www.mdgfund.org.

It is hoped that this new tool and research will contribute to enhancing the sustainability of policy initiatives and influencing future policy and planning by 1) benchmarking and monitoring the level of political commitment to food and nutrition security policies, 2) supporting the design of strategies to increase the level of political commitment to food and nutrition by national governments and the political priority afforded to these issues, 3) identifying opportunities to advance food and nutrition policy on government agendas, and 4) supporting efforts to influence national nutrition policymaking and planning—for example, by providing technical expertise, generating an evidence base to aid decision-makers and supporting advocacy efforts.

It is hoped that this innovative work will support future joint programmes and future efforts to advance food and nutrition security policies in the post-2015 era.

MDG Achievement Fund Secretariat

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Measuring Political Commitment and Opportunities to Advance Food and Nutrition Initiatives: A Rapid Assessment Approach

Low political commitment to food and nutrition security has been recognized as a key barrier to the scale-up of effective interventions to improve nutrition. Food security and nutrition are not being prioritized as highly on government agendas as other health and development issues in spite of the high burden of disease and other adverse consequences attributable to malnutrition.

Informed by Kingdon's (2003) theory of agenda setting, the tool identifies three factors or 'streams' that influence government agenda setting. Kingdon defines an agenda as a list of subjects or problems to which government officials are paying serious attention at any given time. He argues that when the three streams converge, a policy window of opportunity opens to advance an issue (such as food and nutrition) on government agendas (Box 2).

This paper presents results from the application of a rapid assessment tool designed to measure a country's political commitment to food security and nutrition and to identify opportunities and strategies to prioritize this issue on governmental agendas. The Political Commitment and Opportunity Measurement Rapid Assessment Tool (PCOMRAT) consists of a brief questionnaire designed to assess 1) political commitment and prioritization of food and nutrition policy, 2) policy windows of opportunity, and 3) the stakeholder and institutional setting (Box 1).

1) *The problem stream* is made up of issues (such as food and nutrition) that capture the attention of policymakers. This attention may be evoked by *focusing events* (crises, disasters or public spectacles that call attention to a problem); compelling and *credible indicators* (neutral, objective, scientific evidence that draws attention to the magnitude and significance of a problem); or *champions* (influential and charismatic figures who help to define problems), who can be thought of as visible participants.

2) *The policy stream* consists of prominent policy solutions. It may be facilitated by *policy communities of experts* (researchers, consultants, career bureaucrats, joint programme representatives, and others inside and outside of government who have specialized knowledge of an issue), who can be thought of as hidden participants. Policy communities should ideally be cohesive, with general agreement on the policy solutions to be advanced.

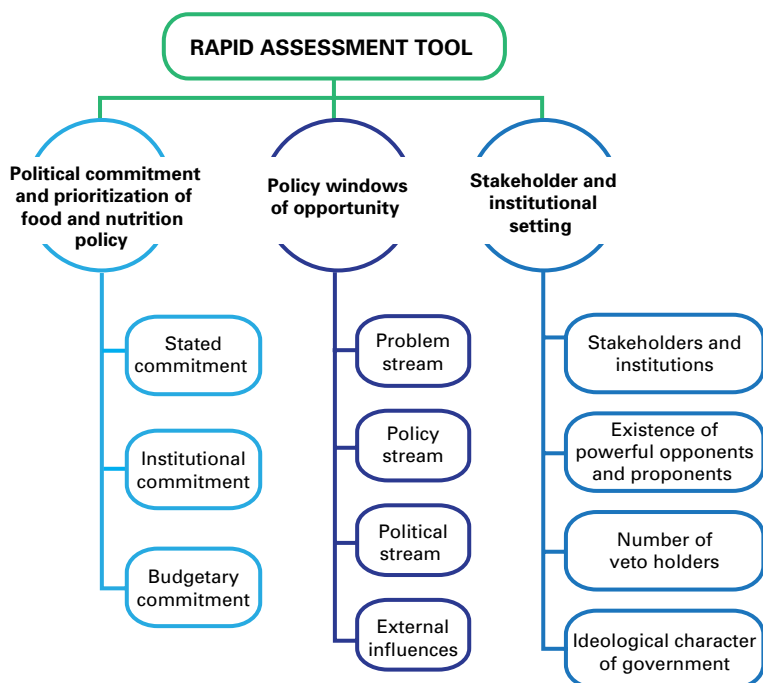
3) *The political stream* consists of events – elections, political upheavals, swings in the national mood or crises outside of government that cause a shift in the political process.

The tool was designed to help the MDG-F joint programmes strengthen their advocacy, policy development and implementation efforts with the goal of building a supportive enabling environment for efforts to improve nutrition.

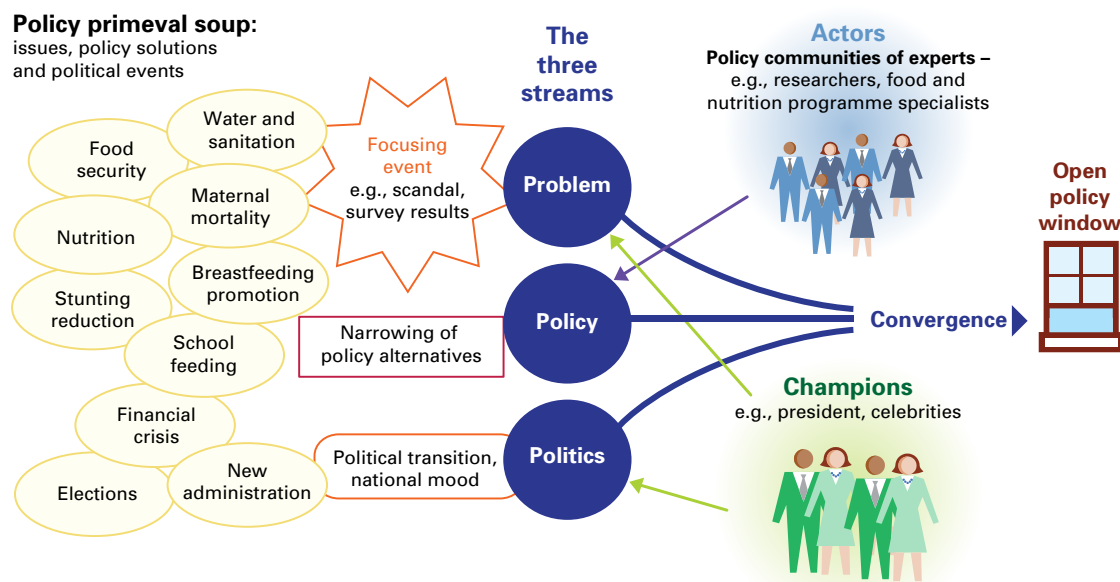
The questionnaire was completed in early 2013 by representatives, from both UN agencies and national

BOX 1

Schematic of the Political Commitment and Opportunity Measurement Rapid Assessment Tool (PCOMRAT)



This diagram summarizes Kingdon's (2003) view of the elements that converge to enable successful agenda setting.



governments, of MDG-F joint programmes focusing on children, food security and nutrition in 10 countries.¹ The questionnaire took about 45 minutes to complete. For each country, a customized report on the responses was generated, with recommendations on how to strengthen political commitment and build additional opportunities to advance food and nutrition as a priority area on government agendas.

Key findings

Analysis of the results produced the following key findings across the 10 countries:

- Most respondents reported high degrees of political commitment to food and nutrition in their countries, with high levels of both expressed commitment (ranking the issue on their agendas) and institutional commitment (providing basic policies and infrastructure to support a response to challenges).
- Most respondents reported that their countries had inadequate resources to meet food and nutrition needs, a situation that undermines the more symbolic forms of government commitment.
- There were substantial opportunities to advance food and nutrition in the problem, policy and political streams.

- While most countries were reported to have coherent community and policy solutions to food and nutrition issues, most lacked a cohesive civil society focus on these issues.
- A majority of countries were reported to have opportunities in the political stream to advance food security and nutrition policy.
- Overall, political commitment and priority-setting opportunities were found to be highest in the Philippines and Guatemala and lowest in Vietnam and Bangladesh.

The major results of the rapid assessment tool are presented below.

Political commitment to food and nutrition

Political commitment can be assessed along three dimensions (Fox et al., 2011; Shiffman, 2007):

- 1) *Expressed commitment* – verbal declarations of support for an issue by high-level political leaders
- 2) *Institutional commitment* – specific policies and organizational infrastructure created to support an issue
- 3) *Budgetary commitment* – allocation of financial resources to a specific issue relative to a particular benchmark

Respondents rated political commitment in their countries as described below.

¹ The original focal countries were Bangladesh, Bolivia, Brazil, Cambodia, China, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Philippines, Timor-Leste and Vietnam. China and Brazil provided incomplete assessments, and their responses were therefore not included in this analysis.

- **Expressed commitment.** In most countries, political leaders had expressed a high degree of political commitment to food and nutrition in the past year.
 - Respondents from all countries reported that the attention of high-level officials to food and nutrition problems had increased in the past year.
 - Respondents from 9 of 10 countries said that the head of government, first lady or other high-level official had spoken about food and nutrition problems at least twice.
 - Respondents from 9 of 10 countries said that public food and nutrition awareness campaigns had been undertaken.
 - Respondents from 9 of 10 countries gave a high overall rating for current political support by the head of government for food and nutrition programmes.
 - Colombia, Guatemala and Timor-Leste each received full scores on expressed commitment based on responses to the questionnaire.
- **Institutional commitment.** Most countries showed a high degree of institutional commitment, with basic policies and programmes in place to address food and nutrition.
 - All respondents said their countries had a multisectoral food and nutrition programme currently operational.
 - Respondents from 9 of 10 countries said their countries had a national food and nutrition policy and published national dietary guidelines.
 - Respondents from 8 of 10 countries said their countries had a mechanism to coordinate multisectoral food and nutrition programming and a national food and nutrition plan of action.
 - El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Philippines and Vietnam each achieved full scores on institutional commitment, having in place all of the policies and infrastructure to mount an effective food and nutrition programme.
- **Budgetary commitment.** In spite of the high degree of expressed and institutional commitment, a majority of respondents reported that their countries had insufficient resources; this may be related to overall low budgetary outlays in low-resource settings.
 - In only one country (Philippines) were the resources available for food and nutrition programmes reported to be adequate.
 - No respondents said that 50 per cent or more of their country's programmes had adequate resources.
- Respondents from 7 of 10 countries reported that there was a national budget line for nutrition.
- Respondents from 5 of 10 countries said that if their country had an extra \$5 million, they would put it towards food and nutrition and not other priorities.

Opportunities to advance food and nutrition on government agendas

- **Opportunities to advance food and nutrition in the problem stream.** For food and nutrition to advance on a government's agenda, it must be seen as a public problem requiring the government's attention. This can occur when an event such as a natural disaster, negative publicity or an international conference draws attention to food and nutrition, or through advocacy efforts presenting credible indicators of a country's performance to policymakers in a compelling manner. Most countries were reported to have had an opportunity to advance food and nutrition as a public problem in the past 12 months, but these issues had weak coverage in the media, and advocacy groups did not emphasize them and were not cohesive.
 - *Focusing events.* Respondents from all countries except Bangladesh cited a major event that had drawn attention to food and nutrition problems and reported that policy advocates and/or high-level officials had cited indicators showing the extent of food and nutrition problems to promote attention to these issues.
 - *Media attention.* Only in Timor-Leste were credible indicators of food and nutrition status reported to have been cited in media reports, and respondents from only 4 of 10 countries said that food and nutrition had received substantial attention in the past year in the national media, indicating a low level of media attention to the topic.
 - *Advocacy and civil society.* Although respondents from all countries reported that civil society groups promoted food and nutrition issues, in only one country (Philippines) was it reported that these groups were highly cohesive. Only in Timor-Leste was it reported that the topic of food and nutrition had received attention through other forms of public discourse (such as protests and social media) in the past year. However, respondents from 7 of 10 countries were able to identify an influential champion who was currently promoting the food and nutrition issue.

- **Opportunities to advance food and nutrition in the policy stream.** In addition to food and nutrition being viewed as a public problem, identifiable policy solutions should exist. Policy communities of experts generally advance policy solutions and bring these to the government’s attention. When there is disagreement in a policy community, or when no viable solutions are provided, the issue may not be included on the government’s agenda. Although research on food and nutrition policymaking has suggested that a lack of agreement among policy experts is a central reason that food and nutrition are not prioritized on a government’s agenda (Levine & Kuczynski, 2009), most respondents to this survey reported that a coherent policy alternative had been put forward in their country and that there was an identifiable and relatively cohesive policy community of experts.
 - Respondents from 7 of 10 countries reported that a coherent proposal had been put forward.
 - Respondents from 6 of 10 countries reported that an individual within the policy community had been especially influential in promoting a particular food and nutrition policy (or set of policies) in the past year.
 - Respondents from 6 of 10 countries reported that food and nutrition policy experts agreed on a single framing issue to advance food and nutrition policy (for example, women’s empowerment, prevention of stunting, food security, or the right to food); respondents from 4 of 10 countries said that experts agreed on a common set of indicators to advance the food and nutrition cause; and respondents from 3 of 10 countries said that food and nutrition policy experts diverged in their support for multisectoral versus focused approaches.
- **Opportunities to advance food and nutrition in the political stream.** Opportunities in the political stream include political transitions such as elections and changes in party leadership that enable new issues to be emphasized. The balance of power among different

interest groups and stakeholders can also influence opportunities to advance food and nutrition in the political stream. Respondents reported positively in this regard for more than half of the countries.

- Respondents from 6 of 10 countries said that executive and/or legislative elections either had taken place within the past year or would take place within a year.
- Respondents from all countries said that, in terms of numbers and power, supporters outweighed opponents of food and nutrition policy.

Conclusions

Results from implementation of the rapid assessment tool showed that most countries participating in the exercise were well poised to address food and nutrition with high degrees of expressed and institutional commitment and had the elements in place to take advantage of windows of opportunity to advance food and nutrition policies. Key elements that countries could use to increase the emphasis on food and nutrition issues in the government’s policy agenda include the following:

- 1) Support existing food and nutrition champions, which most countries had in place.
- 2) Use focusing events as opportunities to promote food and nutrition policies.
- 3) Work with mass media and social media to highlight credible indicators and to promote greater attention to food and nutrition issues.
- 4) Build greater consensus within policy communities on food and nutrition indicators and multisectoral approaches.
- 5) Strengthen cohesion within civil society groups that focus on food and nutrition.

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