

Collaborative dynamics in multisectoral nutrition governance of Uganda's second nutrition action plan: a qualitative case study

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ABSTRACT

Background Malnutrition has various causal pathways that necessitate participatory design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of interventions, culminating in the current multisectoral collaborations for nutrition. In addition to the growing interest and investment in multisectoral collaboration, there is demand for knowledge on the processes of delivering collaborative nutrition plans and endeavours. These processes remain less studied and undocumented.

Objective The study examined dynamics during national level implementation of Uganda's second Nutrition Action Plan (UNAP II), inspired by the reduction in stunting in Uganda alongside multisectoral nutrition governance under the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement.

Methods 20 key informant interviews and 28 documents provided information for this case study. The interviews were conducted among representatives of key ministries, departments and agencies implementing UNAP II and representatives of the SUN Networks. The Integrative Framework for Collaborative Governance structured a primarily deductive thematic analysis of principled engagement, shared motivation and capacity for joint action. NVivo 12 was used to manage coding and analysis.

Results Multisectoral coordination meetings supported accountability and joint planning. A recurrent cross-cutting pattern was mandate competition, described by participants as mandates being 'hijacked' when resources were attached to particular activities. Accounts linked these disputes to political pressure and role encroachment resulting in exclusion of some actors regarded as controversial. Trust, transparency and commitment varied across sectors and were closely tied to financial resources and individual actors. Capacity for joint action was constrained by weak knowledge management as well as limited financial, technical and human resources, much of which relied on donors. Formal allocation of roles did not by itself prevent mandate disputes or power imbalances.

Conclusion Improving UNAP implementation requires stronger procedures for coordination, resolving disputes, knowledge management, continuity beyond individual focal persons and deliberate trust-building across participating organisations.

WHAT IS ALREADY KNOWN ON THIS TOPIC

⇒ Malnutrition in all its forms has multifaceted causal pathways that require coordinated action. This has led to multisectoral governance approaches in which government sectors and non-state actors jointly define problems and design, implement, monitor and evaluate interventions.

WHAT THIS STUDY ADDS

⇒ This study shows that beyond formal role allocation, collaborative dynamics during Uganda's second Nutrition Action Plan implementation are shaped by resource-linked mandate competition as well as political pressure with implications on engagement, trust, legitimacy and capacity for joint action.

HOW THIS STUDY MIGHT AFFECT RESEARCH, PRACTICE OR POLICY

⇒ For policy and practice, multisectoral nutrition plans should couple role definitions with strengthened coordination, transparent reporting and procedures for resolving mandate disputes. Stronger monitoring and knowledge management, as well as continuity arrangements for focal persons should also be considered.

INTRODUCTION

Malnutrition in all its forms is still a problem of public health importance despite interventions to curb it. Globally, 23.2% of children under 5 years were too short for their age (stunted), while 6.6% were too thin for their height (wasted) in 2024.¹ Moreover, undernutrition is responsible for 45% of all deaths among children less than 5 years globally.² On the other hand, 15.8% of adults were obese and 30.7% of women of reproductive age were anaemic in 2025.¹

In Uganda, latest national data shows that 24.4% of children less than 5 years were stunted, 3% were wasted and 10% were underweight in 2022.³ Moreover, a recent study in Eastern Uganda showed that malnutrition