

ISSUES IN THE DESIGN & DELIVERY OF INTERVENTIONS TO IMPROVE RURAL DIETS IN LOW- AND LOWER-MIDDLE-INCOME COUNTRIES

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All photographs included in this document have been taken with consent for use in publications.

SUMMARY

The Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) and Wellspring Development designed and hosted a series of in-person and online consultations with partners of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs to examine challenges in improving the quality of diets of population groups living in rural areas of Low and Lower-Middle Income countries. These groups still largely consume nutrient-inadequate, even unhealthy, diets and face heavy burdens of malnutrition. This fifth paper, out of six, looks specifically at the challenges in managing complex programme comprising multiple components, as well as the roles played by external actors in programme success and how best to manage this. The aim of the discussions was to elaborate on the definitions of coordination and orchestration, gather examples where these have been done successfully and to understand the challenges involved in doing these well during programme management.

The bulk of the discussion reflected in this paper is from an online meeting held on 21st November 2024, with the participation of the Netherlands Food Partnership, One Acre Fund, and the Wageningen Centre for Development Innovation.

KEY MESSAGES

- The complexity of programmes that impact on rural diets requires the engagement of multiple partners, both inside and outside of the direct control of the programme.
- Internal coordination of programme partners and external orchestration of wider stakeholder groups are essential for success, but require institutional focus, resources and skillsets that are frequently underestimated.
- Effective orchestration in particular needs a good understanding of the operational environment, with sufficient time and resources allocated to finding and listening to the voices of all stakeholders to balance top-down engagement with government.

BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVE

The challenge of improving the diets of rural populations in Low- and Lower-Middle-Income Countries

Despite decades of rapid urbanisation, it is still the case that 42% of the world's population—3.4 billion people—live in rural areas (1). In lower-middle-income countries, this proportion is somewhat higher (56%), and in low-income countries, nearly two-thirds of the total population live in rural areas. There are 2.4 billion people living in rural areas in these two groups of countries.

Healthy diets are the foundation of all nutrition outcomes—from undernutrition and micronutrient deficiencies to obesity. Many rural households struggle to access a nutritious diet, even though they live close to the land. Globally, and in almost all regions, rural households are more likely than urban households to report severe or moderate food insecurity (2). In Sub-Saharan Africa, the average prevalence of severe/moderate food insecurity is 60% in rural areas (2) and the cost of a healthy diet is no cheaper (or barely cheaper) in rural compared to urban areas (3). Throughout Sub-Saharan Africa, the value of food consumed from own production never exceeds 50% for rural households (4). As a result, African rural households are vulnerable to high food prices, perhaps counter to common perceptions. And in the 85 countries around the world for which the Global Diet Quality Project has collected data on dietary patterns (5), the average percentage of rural dwellers consuming all five major food groups on a given day is just 30%. Indicators of malnutrition in children are consistently worse in rural than in urban areas (6).

Over the last few decades, there has been a renewed focus on the critical role of agriculture and rural development in supporting adequate nutrition by way of promoting healthier diets. In the wake of the food price crisis in the early 2000's (7), 'community development' and 'integrated rural development' agendas both mobilised significant funding over many years. 'Food and nutrition security' has been an important theme and 'nutrition-sensitive agriculture' (8) has become a recognised priority for development. At the same time, many governments have developed national multi-sectoral nutrition plans, policies, and strategies that include or prioritise rural populations, and numerous international development partners have supported project and programme implementation in these areas.

Today we have a better understanding of what works for improving rural diets (9). However, while these approaches have achieved notable nutrition outcomes, evidence of large-scale, sustainable improvements in rural diets remains limited. Looking ahead, large-scale development projects may benefit from placing greater emphasis on dietary outcomes, rather than focusing solely on downstream health metrics for specific target populations.

CONVENING SERIES WITH PARTNERS OF THE DUTCH MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS

The Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN), supported by Wellspring Consulting, designed and hosted a series of in-person and virtual meetings with a range of partners of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, including: Bopinc, CARE Netherlands, East-West Seeds, the Netherlands Food Partnership, One Acre Fund, and Wageningen University & Research. The aim of these meetings was to share experiences and insights on the most

pressing issues that complicate the design and implementation of initiatives to improve rural diets and thereby to guide more impactful and sustainable project design and implementation in the future. The in-person meeting was held in May 2024 in Utrecht. The list of topics to be explored was developed by GAIN and Wellspring based on a preliminary non-systematic literature review and the initial in-person meeting; topics for which the evidence is weak or non-existent were prioritised for exploration. The selected topics, all of them referring to rural populations in low- and lower-middle-income countries, were:

1. **Dietary quality.** What does improving quality of diets mean in practice; specifically, what constitutes a meaningful increment in dietary quality in this context?
2. **Segmentation.** How can we define and understand the needs of different segments / groups of rural populations?
3. **Markets.** What are the different types of markets and their role in improving incomes, supply of nutritious foods, and quality of diets?
4. **Scale.** What does large-scale mean, and what is the role of financial viability / sustainability in such large-scale efforts?
5. **Orchestration.** Why is coordination (or orchestration) of different programme components and multiple partners so critical? How can it be done better?
6. **Trade-offs.** What are the synergies and trade-offs involved in combining different programme components? How can these be managed?

At least one detailed case study was presented in each meeting, and participants were invited to share other case studies and references. There was no attempt to force consensus around pre-determined or emerging conclusions. To produce the resulting convening papers, the transcripts of the discussions were synthesised and analysed using Artificial Intelligence (Claude 3.5), with output subsequently checked and editorialised by the paper's authors, who take responsibility for the final content.

TOPIC V: COORDINATION & ORCHESTRATION

The sheer number of rural people requiring improved diets means programmes to address the challenge need to work at large scale, as discussed in the paper on scale. Such programmes often have several components that address multiple issues to realise impact. Few organisations have the capabilities required to implement every single component involved in such large and complex programmes with the required quality and effectiveness. Therefore, collaboration with a range of partners / actors is essential. Large scale programmes also need to be mindful of other actors and projects operating in the same geography because of possible effects on one another, both positive and negative. This includes local and national governments.

For the purposes of this discussion, we have considered this in two parts – internal collaboration amongst individuals and organisations directly implementing the programme that we refer to as **coordination**; and external collaboration with third parties who have influence on the success of the programme, which we have referred to as **orchestration**.

INSIGHTS FROM THE MEETING

Characteristics of Coordination

Based on the discussion, the main characteristics of coordination were:

- It has an **internal focus within the programme** and covers working with defined partner organisations under clear management control, budgets and operational plans.
- There is **organisational alignment**, where partners share similar objectives and joint visions, may have history of prior collaboration and are often peer organisations.
- Programme leadership has **control mechanisms** through authority over budgets and approvals, and clear reporting structures.
- **Practical implementation** is guided by regular internal communication, standard operating procedures, and unified monitoring and evaluation that supports collective decision-making processes.

Coordination requires both technical expertise and interpersonal skills, particularly in the initial phases of the programme or when making significant course-correction. Dedicated resources and management capacity are required to ensure that components are working in harmony. Gillespie and colleagues (10) outline 'vertical coherence' to be a critical element of programme success, requiring appropriate governance structures and partner roles being defined from the outset.

Characteristics of orchestration

Based on the discussion, the main characteristics of orchestration were:

- Has an **external focus**, engaging with third parties outside direct programme control. These third parties include government ministries and officials, local institutions, industry and businesses, and other civil society organisations operating in the same geography.
- Relies on influence, relationship building, and trust rather than control or authority. There are **complex motivations** for external parties to engage with the programme, with different organisational priorities leading to competing agendas and interests, personal and institutional politics and informal and unwritten objectives that need to be recognised, understood and integrated into programme management.
- **Relationship management** is at the core of orchestration, leveraging existing partner connections and building on long-term collaborations. This requires cultural understanding and a focus on finding common interests.
- **Flexibility** is key in programme design to enable it to adapt to institutional constraints, manage frequent personnel changes (in other actors) and changes in priorities from different stakeholders

The discussion emphasised that orchestration requires different skills than coordination and often faces greater complexity due to working with autonomous external actors. Within the literature it has also been conceptualised as 'self-organisation', where relationships with actors that are working towards complementary goals are strengthened

to facilitate change on a large scale (11). Orchestration, then, often requires senior leaders to lead to ensure credibility with external actors.

BOX 1. SUCHANA PROGRAMME CASE STUDY

Dr. Shahed Rahman shared experiences from the Suchana programme in Bangladesh, which reached 235,000 households across two districts. The programme involved multiple international organizations including Save the Children, Helen Keller International, World Fish, and International Development enterprise (iDE) along with three national NGOs and International Centre for Diarrheal Disease and Research (icddr,b) as a research agency.

Key insights on coordination:

- Leadership consistency and shared vision were crucial for success
- Different expectations between international and national NGOs had to be managed
- Standardized monitoring systems helped for real-time programme monitoring which aligned partners
- Building trust among consortium partners was required in the initial two years of the programme
- Adaptive management was essential to handle challenges like COVID-19 and flooding

Regarding orchestration with external stakeholders:

- The programme worked with seven government sectors and required careful relationship management
- Success depended on leveraging existing relationships between consortium partners and government ministries
- Local presence and understanding were critical for community engagement
- The programme had to balance multiple competing interests and agendas
- Government capacity limitations required creative solutions and support

Challenges and solutions:

- Frequent transfer of government officials at sub-national level complicated relationships
- The programme helped to build the capacity of local government institutions
- Platforms created for coordination and regular communication between different government departments
- Developed community-based solutions like women vaccinators to address service gaps
- Balanced donor expectations with ground realities

Discussions on coordination and orchestration

The discussion focused on several key themes:

Bottom-up vs Top-down Approaches - Participants raised the risk of orchestration mechanisms being mainly top-down in nature and discussed the importance of including community voice when developing approaches to manage a broader stakeholder group in programme implementation.

Research and Evidence – The Suchana example highlighted the importance of using research and evidence to:

- Understand community perspectives and needs through ethnographic research
- Influence policy decisions by using data from real time monitoring of programme activities
- Ensure credibility by using independent research for evaluations and to feed programme knowledge into broader research agendas

Suchana was able to inform policy changes in agriculture and fisheries, supported advocacy for child benefit programmes and demonstrated the effectiveness of community-based approaches by leveraging the evidence they generated.

Diverse stakeholder expectations – Suchana experienced tensions between sometimes conflicting nutrition goals and environmental objectives; challenges of balancing donor requirements with local realities; resource allocation between different programme components and competition between ministerial priorities.

Resource Requirements - Necessary investment in coordination roles is critical and yet there is a challenge of convincing donors to fund coordination positions since these get seen as overhead. As a result, often the Programme Lead is expected to take this responsibility without the requisite capacity (time) and sometimes also the skills. Coordination and orchestration require emotional resilience to deal with the ongoing negotiations amongst between partners with varying agendas. One approach could be to have a dedicated coordination role in the lead organisation for the programme.

Programme Complexity – There was acknowledgment that not all programmes are as complex as Suchana. However, there is value in preparing for adaptive management from the onset and ensuring context-specific approaches.

The discussion concluded with agreement on need for better documentation of coordination and orchestration successes to build the case for resource allocation.

LEARNINGS FOR DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS

Coordination: Required resources and capacity should be allocated during programme design based on the number of components and complexity involved. Building in flexibility to adapt and change – promoting continuous learning rather than 'implementation by blueprint' - to ensure synergy and coherence across components is also critical (12).

Orchestration: Important to ensure continuity of senior leadership to ensure relationships are built and maintained. These leaders need emotional resilience to cope with changing external environment while providing cover and guidance to the programme team. Early stakeholder engagement is necessary as trust building takes significant time and requires clear communication channels – both formal and informal.

Orchestration: Successful programme implementation needs to balance top-down and bottom-up approaches that engages communities meaningfully. Booth and Unsworth (13) provide a set of case studies demonstrating this, including the Odisha rural livelihoods programme which prioritised local ownership at all levels to reduce poverty in Western Odisha (India). In orchestration, there are going to be competing expectations and these need to be identified and addressed proactively.

Both coordination and orchestration need dedicated resources with an emphasis on local expertise so that relationships can be retained, to ensure that investment in capacity and relationship building has the chance to pay off.

These lessons emphasise that effective coordination and orchestration are fundamental to programme success but require dedicated resources and skilled leadership.

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ABOUT GAIN

The Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) is a Swiss-based foundation launched at the UN in 2002 to tackle the human suffering caused by malnutrition. Working with governments, businesses and civil society, we aim to transform food systems so that they deliver more nutritious food for all people, especially the most vulnerable.

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