

Nutrition and Politics

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POLITICS

Good nutrition can lead to an impressive range of benefits. From the perspective of human capital, these include improved health, cognitive development, and work capacity. From a development perspective, they include greater economic and agricultural productivity, better education, and improved workforce development, as well as greater resilience to shocks induced by social, economic, and natural causes. The evidence suggests that these benefits can be achieved at high levels of economic efficiency for a wide range of nutrition policy instruments. Moreover, there are compelling normative (human rights) arguments for actions to improve nutrition, backed up by a growing international consensus on the right to food. Together, these benefits support humanitarian, development, and normative arguments for addressing nutrition.

While these arguments have strong appeal for many people committed to equitable development in poor countries, fundamentally they are policy arguments, and they emanate from that portion of the development community already committed to nutrition. With the possible exception of the human rights theme, in their present form they do not constitute a set of political rationales and strategies. As such, they may not be as effective as they could be for motivating policy change. In translating sound policy arguments into effective political rationales and strategies, development practitioners must think in explicit political terms without abandoning their commitment to

the ultimate nutrition goals.

Policy Entrepreneurship

Politics refers to the social processes that determine the allocation of benefits and burdens across social groups and interests. Effective political rationales are created by analyzing how various policies may distribute, or be perceived to distribute, valued benefits and burdens across influential groups and interests. These groups and interests can exist at the national (and international) level, within organizations, and within communities. Effective political strategies are created by analyzing the current social processes and contexts that shape the formation, implementation, and evaluation of specific policies.

When the Government of Malawi established a national Food Security and Nutrition Unit in the Office of President and Cabinet in 1987, the nutrition community in that country welcomed it as a positive step toward addressing the alarmingly high rates of chronic malnutrition and child mortality. This step was actually quite surprising, given the lack of attention devoted to nutrition during the previous decades. Although establishment of this unit was preceded by many years of nutrition advocacy by national and international institutions, it was precipitated by economic decline and conditions imposed by aid donors in the 1980s. The nutrition advocacy that preceded and accompanied the creation of this unit was instrumental in adding

“nutrition” to the agenda and title of this unit, but the larger political and contextual factors created the window of opportunity for this to occur. The nutrition policy entrepreneurs active at that time recognized and seized this opportunity.

This example illustrates a common pattern within countries, organizations, and communities. Alert change agents or policy entrepreneurs are able to recognize or even catalyze the convergence of problems, policies, and politics at a particular moment and thereby increase the attention paid to nutrition or other development goals. At times this convergence can propel a rather broad and general agenda (such as “nutrition”), and at other times it can propel a highly specific issue within that agenda (such as breastfeeding promotion, micronutrient interventions, or improved targeting of supplementary feeding). The chances of success are much greater when these entrepreneurs pay close attention not only to the soundness of the nutrition arguments but also to their compatibility with the goals and interests of other actors and organizations (that is, to politics).

A “split-screen” approach is a useful metaphor to help translate sound policy arguments into effective political rationales and strategies. One screen contains the nutrition- or development-related goals, outcomes, and policy arguments, representing the worldview of one part of the development community; the other screen contains a variety of other actors, interests, and institutions, representing a more political worldview. (The term “politics” as used here refers to the relationships among a wide variety of actors and institutions, of which elected officials are but one category.) In viewing the political screen, development practitioners must temporarily suspend their own values, beliefs, and logics in order to discern a broader range of relationships, arguments, and possibilities for

promoting their agenda. A politically viable rationale and strategy for improving nutrition emerges by “togglng” back and forth between these two screens, attempting to view the issues simultaneously through two very different lenses. This concept of togglng is important because it prevents the nutrition goals from becoming lost completely in the pursuit of political feasibility.

Benefits and Burdens

Influential groups and interests typically perceive policy benefits and burdens that are quite different from those perceived and promoted by development practitioners. For instance, many groups with strong political influence become animated by the inputs associated with policy change, as opposed to the outcomes that animate development practitioners (such as improved health, cognition, and productivity). Inputs associated with nutrition policy might include:

- food aid, valued by local politicians, residents, and many others
- construction contracts (such as for water systems)
- sector loans, valued by ministry officials
- health system reforms, valued by professional health associations
- training opportunities, workshops, and per diems, valued by staff
- employment in the public sector or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), valued by job seekers
- program budgets, valued by program managers
- mass media education campaigns that implicitly promote the sponsoring organizations

The difference between the two views suggests that an effective political rationale often should be constructed by identifying the connections between policy inputs (as perceived and valued by influential groups and interests) and policy outcomes (as desired by development practitioners). These connections typically vary widely across diverse groups and interests and across diverse policy options, and the analysis needs to be conducted at that level of specificity. One danger to guard against is goal substitution, in which the political interest in maximizing access to valued inputs completely displaces concern for larger policy outcomes such as nutrition.

Social Processes and Context

As already noted, benefits and burdens may be not only material or economic in character, but also personal, professional, organizational, psychological, and political. The most relevant benefits and burdens in a given case depend on the context and therefore must be analyzed in that context.

The relevant features of social process and context are highly variable from one case to another, but for analytical purposes it is possible to discern three broad categories.

One category relates to the decisionmaking processes involved in policy formation, including agenda-setting and problem definition, promotion of favored solutions, implementation, and evaluation. As all development practitioners have learned from experience, these decision processes do not follow a linear, technically rational path. Instead, they are heavily influenced, if not driven by, the social processes that surround these activities. For instance, the priority given to general malnutrition versus micronutrients within an international agency or national government relates to each of the above decision activities and is influenced by well-known social processes in those institutional contexts.

The social processes that surround decisionmaking represent the second category to be analyzed. These processes are made up of varied and shifting interactions among participants, each with particular perspectives, interests, values (goals), and resources. These participants can be government or international agencies, sections or individuals within agencies, private sector interests, professional organizations, academics, the media, and a variety of civil society groups. The most relevant groups vary widely in relation to distinct nutrition policy instruments and actions (for example, supplementary feeding versus vitamin A fortification), although overlapping membership is not uncommon. Some of these groups may already be active in some stage of the policy cycle, but many others remain potential participants whose identity might be revealed through the split-screen analysis of benefits and burdens described. Animating and involving these participants is a fundamental part of political strategy.

The third important category, the social context, refers to the historical and recent trends, incidents, and conditions that have influenced the specific policy problems and potential solutions. Analysis of the social context often

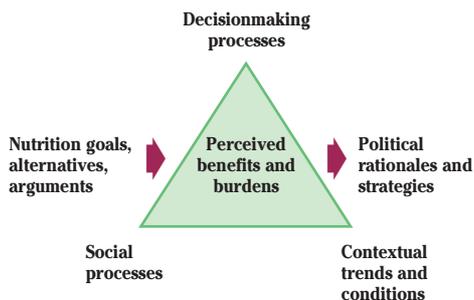
should not be conducted at the broader level of abstraction (“nutrition” in its entirety, for instance) but rather in relation to (1) more specific actions or inputs (such as recent trends and conditions in the health sector or in administrative decentralization) and (2) some of the key participants associated with specific trends and conditions. Thus, this analysis helps identify political opportunities as well as constraints for specific nutrition-relevant actions.

Analyzing the social context for the entire nutrition domain may be useful at certain junctures but not for the purpose of developing a comprehensive nutrition policy in the usual sense. Rather, from a political perspective the main utility of such an exercise is (1) to develop an inventory of political opportunities for further analysis and strategy development and (2) to enlarge the “negotiation space” by expanding the range of political benefits and burdens potentially available.

Translating Nutrition

Translating nutrition goals and arguments into a set of viable political rationales and strategies requires integrating the components of the previous sections, as depicted in Figure 1. The fundamental dynamic depicted here is that various participants in a policy process will act upon the benefits and burdens (or opportunities and threats) they perceive in a situation, as shaped by the social processes and contextual factors that surround that situation. Implicit in this depiction is that (1) many participants are not motivated by nutrition goals and arguments as such, and many may be threatened by such goals, and (2) the pattern of benefits and burdens, or opportunities and threats, for various participants can be highly individualized and is a function of their particular values, beliefs, and interests as they perceive them.

FIGURE 1: FORMATION OF POLITICAL RATIONALES AND STRATEGIES



It follows that effective advocacy involves not only enhancing the knowledge of nutrition goals and arguments as perceived by the nutrition community (though that may work in some instances) but, more important, enhancing the ability of other participants to perceive a convergence between the nutrition agenda and their own values, beliefs, and interests. In a similar fashion, the nutrition community may achieve more success and greater economy of effort not only by advocating for its own agenda, but also by identifying opportunities for attaching specific nutrition-related elements to the agendas of others in the political and development communities. Opportunities exist for pursuing both approaches within a wide variety of settings (government and international agencies, with the private sector and with communities and NGOs) and at various phases in the policy and program cycle (agenda setting, implementation, and evaluation). In those cases when the

nutrition community does not possess the authority or resources to act on its own or compel others to act in the interests of nutrition (which describes most cases), success will depend upon the ability of the nutrition community to reframe and recognize what is of value to others while pursuing that which is of value for nutrition.

Suggested Reading

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