

Accounting for context

Why is this important for MSPs?

The design and functionality of the MSP are most often shaped by the socio-political, economic and institutional factors in a specific country. Therefore, MSP design must consider the external structural and institutional context of the country, and these need to be continuously factored in as the MSP evolves. It is usually difficult to change the context, at least in the short term, but if some of the issues are factored in at the planning stage, the MSP can become resilient.

MSPs must also consider the internal context of stakeholder norms and interactions. Context works at both a conscious level (structures and institutions) and subconscious level (routine ways of working and collaborating) and it is important that both these aspects are taken into consideration.

Key aspects of these contexts which an MSP will need to consider include:

External context:

- Historical context: Are there pre-existing networks and mechanisms of collaboration that already exist? Is there a possibility to re-invent these mechanisms to fulfil the aims of the MSP, even if such mechanisms are dormant or have been dissolved?
- Development priorities: Do actors believe and agree that the issue of nutrition is a priority for national economic and political development, and if so in what ways?
- Economic context: How much money does a country have to

invest in social programmes, and how much is allocated to nutrition-sensitive action in different sectors?

- Political context: How stable is the country politically, and how much recognition do politicians give to nutrition and its underlying issues? Is nutrition seen as politically urgent to address?
- Governance context: How can the MSP fit within the governance structure of the country, including how various existing departments and organisations function and their chain of authority and accountability? How does the government engage with other stakeholders such as the private sector, civil society actors?
- Policy context: What policies, governing bodies and legislation govern different aspects of nutrition, how do they interact, and how much power do they have in the country?
- Social context: How is nutrition seen socially and culturally in a country, and how does this affect what is done for nutrition? Is nutrition seen as socially urgent to address? How is the participation of marginalised and vulnerable communities in governance of issues such as nutrition seen within a country, including gender norms and codes which shape participation in the MSP?
- Support for nutrition: What is the role of development partners in the country, and which development partners choose to work on nutrition?
- Nutrition indicators: Which aspects of nutrition are most pressing in the country, and in different parts of the country, and how is this data and information used, understood and recognised?

Internal context:

- Capacity: Does the MSP, including its constituent members, have adequate technical, managerial and strategic capacities (including human resource

management, negotiation, mediation, and reaction to change), separately or in partnership with others, to carry out coordination and other activities for nutrition? Is there capacity to adapt and respond to change?

- Incentives: Are there tangible or intangible economic, financial, political, and personal motivations, within the organisations contributing to the MSP, which encourage working together for nutrition?
- Leadership: Is there a champion to take the lead in initiating or implementing an MSP, including the creation of political space? Is there high-level leadership from parliamentarians; leadership from the focal point; and leadership from other individuals or agencies in organisations participating in the MSP?
- Values: Do organizational and individual attitudes and behaviours encourage collaboration? Is there a history of working with others in other sectors and being open to new ideas? Are decision-making structures appropriate to working across sectors and stakeholders? Do organizations participating in the MSP have a common sense of purpose, a vision of the problem, solutions, and collective goals?
- Power: What are the power relations among the different stakeholders participating in the MSP? How does this affect everyday interaction and longer-term functioning?

Some factors will be more important in some contexts, and others in other contexts. Understanding these different aspects of context will help those creating or renovating an MSP to address them, and give the MSP the best chance of working well.

How does this work in practice?

Institutional context helps in building synergies: In Sri Lanka, collaboration at sub-national levels is more effective

because the nutrition steering committees are layered over existing administrative committees put in place to review the implementation of development programmes at the sub-national level. Programme and institutional convergence have helped in strengthening departmental coordination and in developing mutual trust across various stakeholders.

Political factors shaping MSP functioning: Since 1990 and up to 2017, Nepal had seen 27 governments, with no government completing a full term. Nepal is characterised by frequent changes in government. Nepal's political instability and administrative reorganisation has meant more frequent than usual staff changes. Political fluctuation at the district level has delayed the progress and monitoring of the multisectoral nutrition policy and work of the MSPs. This has also meant that donors have provided a strong steer to the nutrition interventions and framework in the country. Similarly, in Kyrgyzstan, frequent government changes have meant that new advocacy efforts have to be undertaken to ensure nutrition remains prominent on the agenda and maintain the momentum.