

# Champions and high-level leadership

## Why is this important for MSPs?

For MSPs to work and be sustained in the longer term, they **need to have high-level political buy-in**. Nutrition as an issue is vying with multiple other issues on the political agenda of a country, and the need for an MSP may not be immediately evident to those holding the power to make it happen. One way to get the issue noticed is through the cultivation of champions – people with a high level of legitimacy and respect who can champion the issue of MSP creation.

Nutrition champions are defined as *‘individuals who use their platforms and influence to position nutrition as a key political priority at global, regional, national and local level’*. The key role such champions play in coordinating and implementing action in nutrition has increasingly been recognised in a number of countries with MSPs. The SUN Movement, for example, supports leadership at different levels: **High Level Political and Popular Champions** – First Ladies, Prime Ministers, celebrities, athletes and religious and traditional leaders; **Working Level** – Ministers, Members of Parliaments, Heads of Organisations and Institutions, CEOs; and **Grassroots** – Health and Agriculture Extension Workers, Nutrition Field Officers, local religious and village leaders, teachers and heads of community-based organisations.

As well as highly visible champions, other high-level leaders can generate support for MSPs. Through stakeholder mapping, MSPs can identify three different types of leaders (see Stakeholder mapping): **decision makers**, such as heads of ministries, who are most traditionally nutrition champions;

**influencers**, such as donors, mid-level bureaucrats, or civil society actors, who can create networks of nutrition champions and supporters; and **clients**, who rarely have input into policy but can elevate accountability in nutrition programming, thus becoming leaders themselves.

Evidence from country case studies confirms that **MSPs cannot rely on one person to carry all leadership roles** (decision-maker, influencer, SUN focal point); rather it is necessary to engage a group, or groups, of people to champion the creation of MSPs at all levels (national *and* sub-national). Moreover, the shape and maturity of the nutrition social network may affect the type of leadership required; research shows that fragmented networks benefit from leaders who can span sectors, while more mature networks may need individuals who can generate an environment of co-creation.

## How does this work in practice?

Involvement of high-level government stakeholders has advanced the nutrition agenda in the **Kyrgyz Republic**, particularly since joining the SUN Movement. SUN MSP members have been strategic from the outset in their identification of potential nutrition champions. In order to build capacity and leadership within the government, the first SUN MSP coordinator (from UNICEF) organised the participation of the Deputy Minister of Agriculture in ICN2 in Rome, an event he himself described as a turning point in his understanding of multi-sectorality. Following this, the MSP moved from the Ministry of Health to the Ministry of Agriculture, the deputy minister was appointed as the SUN focal point and the *Food Security and Nutrition Plan* (2015-17) was adopted. Further involvement of political leadership at a high level has been achieved through the elevation of the SUN MSP coordinator role to vice prime ministerial level.

Advocacy efforts by the SUN Civil Society alliance identified a parliamentarian as a nutrition champion due to his

involvement over many years with food fortification initiatives. He formed a parliamentary network, bringing together other members of parliament, civil society organisations, media and other stakeholders to address issues of malnutrition, particularly micronutrient deficiencies, resulting in his successful nomination as a SUN Nutrition Champion in 2017. Unfortunately, the parliamentarian is no longer in office which is a serious setback for the SUN MSP since he had proved to be an energetic and effective leader of the platform.

The Kyrgyz experience with fostering leadership highlights the potential gains and pitfalls of working with nutrition champions. The unstable nature of the Kyrgyz coalition government and frequent turnover of key members makes nutrition advocacy and relationship-building within the state sector a particular challenge: the resignation of the Vice Prime Minister (SUN MSP coordinator) meant that MSP stakeholders have had to 'talk in' nutrition once again with a new minister. Although context-specific, the loss of the parliamentarian as a nutrition champion does illustrate the problems inherent in over-reliance on one person, rather than creating a range of different types of leaders (decision makers, influencers and clients) at different levels (high level, working level and grassroots).