MSP Examples and options

Why is this important to MSPs?

MSPs are not a new idea: Multi-sectoral planning units were set up and supported by development donors in 26 countries in the 1970s, with a focus on planning the policies of multiple sectors to respond to nutrition. **MSPs are common in many other sectors both inside and outside of the development industry**, wherever complex issues require the coming together of different groups in order to solve multisectoral problems.

MSPs are not always the right solution, and those looking to coordinate work on nutrition should think hard about whether the time and opportunity is right for starting or renovating an MSP for nutrition. But **the multi-sectoral nature of nutrition means that very often, an MSP will facilitate coordination** of the multiple stakeholders that need to be involved in addressing the issue.

The original 1970s nutrition MSPs were largely seen to fail because they assumed that all stakeholders were equally worried about nutrition, and they generally failed to acknowledge that different sectors had different priorities both inside and outside of nutrition. Much learning has been done since the 1970s however, and today's MSPs would be wise to note what has been learned. Broadly, this falls under **four broad topics that those designing an MSP need to address**:

1.   Understanding context

Much of what determines whether an MSP will be successful in coming together, keeping the momentum, and realising actions related to its goals is how the MSP addresses the context within which it exists. This context includes the broad external context (including a country's politics and

governance, and who is involved in the issue of nutrition) and the narrower internal context (made up of the different contexts within the organisations participating in the MSP, as well as the interactions between these stakeholders within the MSP). MSPs cannot change many of these contextual factors, particularly in the short term. MSPs therefore have to design their structures and processes to take account of these contextual factors. 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 (see Understanding Context).

2. Identifying and engaging stakeholders

The people and organisations making up the MSP are what will make the MSP succeed. It is therefore important that those catalysing the design or renovation of an MSP give clear and systematic thought to identifying and engaging the right stakeholders at different stages. Champions and high-level leaders are particularly important early in the MSP design and creation process, to draw in key stakeholders and resources and set up relevant structures and systems. As more stakeholders join the MSP, there will be a broader diversity of interests within the MSP, and systems will have to be able to deal with any conflicts that arise. It therefore becomes important to understand the different ways in which stakeholders hold power over MSP processes, and to ensure that meaningful participation is valued from all stakeholders, including non-traditional groups and those often marginalised from governance processes. A slow but effective way to make stakeholder participation fair and meaningful is to build mutual understanding and trust among stakeholders over the long term, through transparency and accountability for actions within the MSP (see Identifying and engaging stakeholders).

3.   Establishing structure and process

An MSP is both a structure and a process. An MSP is a structure in that it is a committee or group with certain leadership and members, with a certain positioning within a bureaucratic hierarchy, with a certain set of resources. An MSP is a process in that it has certain ways of doing things, such as meeting schedules, ways of involving different stakeholder groups, and systems for adapting to changing context. Both structure and process are vital to MSP functioning; one will not work without attention to the other. For instance, deciding to place the MSP under a Ministry of Health or a Planning Ministry might be an initial structural decision, but without a process of internal monitoring and learning it will be difficult to know whether this placement is working or needs to be changed (see Establishing structure and process).

4.   Reviewing and improving

Monitoring progress and learning from experience can be built in even from the earliest days of the MSP. Creating a culture of learning, where successes are celebrated and replicated, and failures are shared and learned from, encourages reflection on the MSP and allows for real-time course corrections to keep it moving forward. Defining success criteria for the MSP in terms of its successful creation, sustainability, and achieving actions related to its goal means that meaningful monitoring can keep the MSP on track. In particular, making sure that a range of technical, managerial and strategic capacities are built and available among MSP members can contribute to a successful MSP (see Reviewing and improving).

Examples

Many MSPs learn best through hearing about the experiences of other MSPs. There are many examples throughout this toolkit of how MSPs have addressed specific issues when designing their own MSPs. Below are links to five in-depth MSP case-studies from different global regions, which give a flavour of how different countries have designed an MSP for their context.