

Principles for effective MSPs

How to make MSPs effective

MSPs are complex entities comprising of members who work in different roles and sectors and on complex policy challenges. Managing MSPs is quite distinct from managing service delivery through departmental bureaucracies that work in more structured environments, because the lines of accountability and control are not so clear, and participation in MSPs is often voluntary or not core to daily sectoral work.

To deal with these challenges, this toolkit has identified four key principles that need to be understood by program officers and MSP champions that will make their MSPs more effective.

1. Embrace systemic change

MSPs are devised to address policy challenges that cannot be handled by a single office or a sector working alone. Instead, **the complex nature of the problems and the dynamic nature of the policy environments requires a sufficiently adaptable mechanism** that can facilitate a system-wide response in different parts of the nutrition-food-health systems.

For this reason, those working within the MSP must be open to different ways of working that are more inclusive, participatory, and adaptive than might be usual – and the managers and systems behind those working in the MSP must also be convinced about the need for these changes.

As discussed in the toolkit page on managing change in needs over time within MSPs, by allowing participating actors to retain their autonomies and by being alert to changing external dynamics, an MSP can effect changes in the wider

nutrition systems by allowing itself to change as needed.

When monitoring itself therefore, instead of narrow, outcome-based metrics, the effectiveness of MSPs might be better assessed in the influence it has in changing the way in which different parts of nutrition systems interact with each other, and the changes in working cultures it inspires within the participating institutions themselves (see Defining success criteria).

2. Work with power

Power is the ability of an actor to influence their environment in order to accomplish their goals. Broadly speaking, sources of power can include money, knowledge or even access to others perceived as having more power.

All of us, by virtue of our education, institutional affiliation, identity, or social class, are engaged in some sort of power dynamics with our surrounding society. These **power dynamics have the potential to facilitate as well as impede collaborations** by prioritising (or marginalising) voices within MSPs. Recognising the power dynamics at play within MSPs is the necessary first step towards starting to work with them (see Power in MSPs).

Within most MSPs, it is possible to identify actors who feel less empowered on account of their disciplinary or institutional affiliation, or their position within a bureaucratic hierarchy or in society more generally (see Gender and equity in MSPs). In order to facilitate a productive interaction, **it is important to minimise the power gradient** using some of the tools discussed in the toolkit. Ownership of the MSPs among its members can also be promoted through a collaborative leadership approach and by promoting reflective learning practices, as discussed in the page on developing capacities for action.

3. Deal with conflict

Conflicts are a natural part of any policy platform, especially one, such as MSPs that involves actors with a diversity of interests, perspectives, and distinct sectoral languages. Recognising the cause of conflicts is a useful first step in identifying how to resolve them. Conflicts could result from disputes related to understanding of facts, competing interests, value differences, personal differences, or a frustration with the way the way things have been set up.

Identifying the source of conflict could allow the MSP managers to find an appropriate way to resolve the conflicts; such as developing shared understandings of facts and values, or investing in time to allow cultivation of deeper relationships. The important thing is to create an environment where MSP participants feel comfortable to talk about conflicts before they become unmanageable (see Deepening trust and understanding), and that MSP managers have the capacity to work with participants to resolve them (see Developing capacities for action).

4. Communicate effectively

Communication is important at all stages of MSP design – from communicating with potential stakeholders and champions to bring them on board; to discussing potential aims and designs of an MSP; to resolving conflicts and issues which occur over the life of an MSP. **Alongside clear communication comes a need for trust and understanding between stakeholders** (see Deepening trust and understanding). In a venue with a diversity of disciplinary and institutional cultures, such trust and relationships are often built on the back of clear and effective communication.

Effective communication entails active listening as well as speaking, taking in what others have to say even if it differs from your own views, before debating the issues. Also

importantly, it requires a non-judgmental and reasoned approach to listening that provokes reflection without being confrontational.

Note that different people prefer to communicate in different ways. For some, a clear and concise email laying out your points might be welcome, so that the receiver can reflect before replying. Others might prefer a telephone conversation one-on-one to discuss issues back and forth until they are resolved. Others still might prefer to work face-to-face or in an informal setting, or to bring everyone involved into a single conversation. It is important to think about how your colleagues in the MSP prefer to communicate, and about how you prefer to communicate, and to use a variety of methods to cover these.