

Stronger policy coordination for better food and nutrition security outcomes

Summary

The outcomes of food and nutrition security (FNS) interventions often fall short of policy objectives due to weak or missing coordination mechanisms. Solving these policy coordination failures is not easy. If the nature, extent and causes of the coordination problems are not accurately identified, proffered solutions are unlikely to be effective and lasting. Another essential part of this diagnosis is isolating the mechanisms through which policy coordination failures impede development. The process of coordinating food and nutrition policy has within it many of the difficulties that arise in the policy cycle: multiple actors, conflictual institutions, socioeconomic change and fragmentation. Based on insights from the National Development Agency's *critical review on Food and Nutrition Security* (NDA, 2019), we explore options for improved policy coordination aimed at maximising the quality of life benefits for hungry people. To frame actions for appropriate coordination mechanisms, dimensions of FNS interventions are overlaid with policy cycle stages in the analysis. Contextual determinants that bear on well-coordinated policy activism are also incorporated.

Introduction

Ensuring adequate food and nutrition for all is a global developmental priority, as defined in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the UN. South Africa, as a member state of the UN and signatory to the SDGs, has embedded this priority in the Constitution of South Africa, 1996, and formulated interventions to operationalise it in practice. Even though the government adopted the National Policy on Food and Nutrition Security (NPFNS) in 2014 (shortly before the SDGs came into effect), it has struggled to operationalise this overarching domestic policy at scale. This is evident from the stubbornly rising trend of hunger and malnutrition statistics, especially among children in South Africa.

Finding integrated and holistic solutions to poor dietary intake and nutrition-related illnesses is the overriding preoccupation of modern food and nutrition policy. This stands in sharp contrast to the traditional focus on maximising the production of staple crops and animal-sourced foods. Modern and traditional agro-food systems pose different policy coordination problems. In the traditional model,

household farming dominates, with farmers producing mainly to feed the household. It entrusts the coordination of food policy to agricultural ministries, operating through hierarchies of national and subnational structures. While this model to coordinate food policy might have been useful in the past, it is not in alignment with farming, agro-food processing and retail networks that span nationwide or global scales and that are well beyond the reach and capacity of agricultural ministries.

Policy coordination in modern agro-food value chains is far more complicated than older and more traditional food production processes because the movement of food from farm to fork involves competing actors and diverse markets. Furthermore, this food system is not just about dietary quality for nutritional health and a better quality of life, but also about the production, distribution and consumption of nutritious food in ecologically sustainable ways. Against this backdrop, a compelling question presents itself: How can public authorities responsible for implementing the government's food and nutrition policy priorities better coordinate their interventions to yield the best outcomes for hungry people? To address this question, it is useful to start with a systematic way to think through policy coordination for a multifaceted priority, ensuring that everyone has enough nutritious food for a healthy life. The next step is to use this lens of analysis to analyse coordination at each major stage of the policy cycle.

Coordinating food and nutrition security policy

It is common to speak of policy coordination in generic terms, but no one-size-fits-all model for it exists. The rationale for coordinated policy action stems from the limits and disadvantages of ad hoc, reactive and disjointed government feeding and

nutritional assistance schemes. In the case of food and nutrition projects, for example, fragmented policy might be sensible and convenient for stand-alone actors trying to optimise private gains. However, scattering food and nutrition policies over isolated initiatives comes with substantial direct and indirect social costs, especially the negative externalities not always visible at first glance. Moreover, when the intrinsic substance of policy has multiple facets (as is the case of FNS), such a fragmented and one-sided orientation can easily become the normal mode of operation.

At the heart of policy coordination is the integrated management and administration of policy across independent state and non-state actors. While the joined and cooperative administration of policy is essential, it often restricts attention to implementation norms and procedures that are likely to neglect other elements of coordination, as is shown in Table 1. Instead of concentrating on one stage of the policy cycle, this illustration makes the case for a more pragmatic and comprehensive view of policy coordination. A more realistic approach locates policy coordination in a space or plane delineated by three axes that intersect at the same point – yielding a picture in three dimensions.

The three axes are: (i) a policy's intrinsic substance, (ii) the policy cycle stage and (iii) actors. For ease of presentation, this picture is a once-off snapshot which does not detail feedback loops between the axes and among elements that make up each axis. A brief explanation of what each axis captures should be in order at this point. First, concepts listed on the left illustrate the *intrinsic substance*. The concepts flow from the standard definition, its self-explanatory facets widely referenced in scientific and policy documents and which need no repetition here. Second, every policy moves along a path of *major stages or nodes*, starting with its conception which usually combines a mix of sociopolitical interests, civil society formations and academics. In fact, *conceptualisation and design* are just central elements of policy development, a terrain where political contestation coupled with ideological and scientific disagreements heavily influence the contents and scope of the resulting policies. Similarly, *policy implementation* spans actions such as the delivery of food and nutrition assistance and how regulatory authorities oversee the functionality of the agro-food system. Reliable evidence is now firmly anchored in policy processes. This includes the construction of indicators to track what is happening along agro-food value chains and assessing what, if any, improvement a food and nutrition assistance initiative

Table 1 Schematic linkages of FNS dimensions with policy cycle nodes

		Policy Cycle Stage		
		Conceptualise and Design	Implement, Deliver and Provide	Measure, Monitor and Evaluate
Food and Nutrition Security Dimension*	Availability			
	Access			
	Consumption			
	Food Preparation			
	Nutritional Health			

Note: *Stability is an essential part of FNS, but it is debatable whether it stands alone from or cuts across all other dimensions. It basically has to do with temporal vulnerability, hence its crosscutting character.

Source: The authors

has made to the wellbeing of recipients of state assistance. In practice, how authorities *measure, monitor* and *evaluate* policies is tightly intertwined with the other stages of policy cycles.

A third axis – *actors* – is implicit in this schematic illustration. Explicitly showing this third axis might better reflect what happens in reality, but also makes it increasingly cumbersome and less reader friendly. Having integrated the roles of actors in the foregoing overview, a brief characterisation of actor profiles should suffice. In addition to separating state actors from non-state actors, this axis includes how formal or informal the structures and interactions are, coupled with the extent of local decentralisation of policy actions.

Research insights

In the overview in the previous section, we concentrated on potential or real difficulties in coordinating food and nutrition policy and shed light on (i) gaps in coordination mechanisms at each stage of the policy cycle and (ii) the nature and extent of policy coordination breakdowns. A brief synthesis of insights assembled in the *critical review* is not only instructive to identify the *when, how* and *why* of policy coordination problems (as explained below), but is also a crucial step towards fit-for-purpose solutions.

Coordinated policy development

The *critical review* explores what forces have been shaping South Africa's food and nutrition policy landscape since 1994 and how this happened, revealing that its coordination has been inseparable from political contestation. The conception and design of food and nutrition policy, especially at the national level, took the lead from macro-development imperatives and strategic political decisions. The Reconstruction and Development Programme, grounded in the idea of satisfying everyone's basic needs, was a

leading impetus behind the first wave of post-1994 food and nutrition policies. It inspired, for example, the right to food clause in the Constitution and the adoption of the 2002 Integrated Food Security Strategy (IFSS, the first overarching and consolidated framework for food policy).

Even though the IFSS marked a significant achievement, it reinforced a food availability and rural bias in policy and was weak or silent on how to counter the growing malnutrition or 'hidden hunger' crisis. Another shortcoming was its almost complete isolation from piecemeal measures such as zero VAT on staples in the food baskets of poor consumers. Interventions like regular food price monitoring, nutritional healthcare assistance and nutritious meals for school children were never integrated into the strategy. The IFSS did not actually facilitate the development of an integrated and holistic policy reference point. As the *critical review* found, studies questioning the lack of a participatory nature of conceptualising and designing the IFSS have critiqued its top-down development, bypassing many civil society organisations.

In 2012, the government unveiled its new macro-development agenda – the National Development Plan (NDP) – which confirmed FNS as a policy priority (NPC 2012). Moreover, this prioritisation boosted prospects for overcoming the shortcomings of the IFSS. Large sections of the NDP chapter with proposals to restructure and grow the agricultural sector also put forth implications of this restructuring for food policy reforms. Together with discussions on dietary quality and nutritional health elsewhere in the NDP, it shifted the conception of food and nutrition policy towards a multifaceted perspective. In terms of process, the NDP assembled the latest insights from diverse fields of science to back its developmental vision and

advocacy for urgent action. However, this process stopped at a discredited model of consulting civil society voices instead of intensive and structured participation of communities in policy development.

Among the policy revisions that the NDP stimulated, two stand out. First, it promoted tighter cooperation across government departments around the strategic priorities of the state. Towards this end, it aided the construction of a framework (known as signed outcome delivery agreements) through which the president holds a minister accountable for executing a strategic priority in the government's programme of action. Outcome 7 deals with agriculture and rural development; it also concentrates on food security, outlining indicators for most dimensions in the illustration above and responsibilities per department. Second, the NDP bolstered the rationale and urgency for the NPFNS, eventually replacing the defunct IFSS. Thinking embedded in the NDP (particularly the multifaceted nature of FNS) also manifested in the NPFNS, with diverse state and non-state actors helping to refine the new policy. It has been translated into five-yearly action plans that provide for national and subnational coordination structures – an issue further examined in the next section.

Coordinated policy implementation

There are currently no functional overarching FNS institutional arrangements in South Africa, especially at the national level, that are responsible for coordinating the implementation of FNS policy and activities. This absence of proper functioning arrangements to coordinate policy implementation has exacerbated the confusing mandates among different FNS stakeholders while duplications and overlaps in different aspects of FNS initiatives proliferate. While on paper the government has, over the years, sought to approach FNS

in a coordinated, interdepartmental way, structures responsible for coordinating the implementation of FNS policy and activities remain largely dysfunctional. The 2017 NFNSP, for example, recommended the establishment of (i) the intersectoral National Food and Nutrition Security Council chaired by the deputy president, (ii) Provincial Food and Nutrition Security Councils chaired by premiers, (iii) district subcouncils on FNS chaired by mayors, and (iv) consultative forums at all levels that are supposed to meet at regular intervals. There has, however, been very little movement towards setting up these structures. Only the National Food and Nutrition Security Coordinating Committee chaired by the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation has been established, mainly to steer the implementation of the six strategic objectives of the National Food and Nutrition Security Policy. Setting up functional national and subnational vulnerability assessment committees (VACs) with international donor support struggled to gain traction with a limited number of directorates in the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (DAFF) occasionally attending irregular gatherings of the South Africa Vulnerability Assessment Committee (SAVAC). In provinces with acute hunger, ad hoc and uncoordinated responses dominate, with SAVAC unable to mobilise resources across all the departments for integrated and proactive assistance to vulnerable people.

Coordinating the implementation of food security efforts has been and continues to be the mandate of the DAFF, yet the department lacks both the convening powers and the resources required to ensure interdepartmental accountability. Consequently, most FNS-related institutions continue to work in silos. The underperformance of a crucial flagship intervention, the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP), is

also primarily a case of weak or absent coordination in implementation. The direct physiological and psychosocial benefits of ensuring that every child eats a healthy meal at school are widely documented, in addition to it encouraging school attendance. However, as the *critical review* found, meals provided under the NSNP have not always been nutritious and healthy enough for growing children. Moreover, while the Department of Health (DoH) advises schools and the Department of Basic Education (DBE) on the types of meals to be provided to children, the DBE is not obliged to take up the DoH's advice as the meal types are also largely dependent on the budget available to the DBE.

Coordinated metrics, monitoring and evaluation

South Africa does not have an official measure of food and nutrition security, or a coherent FNS information system, either at national or subnational levels. While the national FNS Policy Implementation Plan includes a list of possible FNS indicators, these have not been officially adopted as the standard FSN indicators across various government departments and agencies as well as civil society actors. Insights from the *critical review* pinpoint how the lack of cooperation and convergence among different state and non-state actors vis-à-vis FNS information collection, analysis, management and dissemination disable action across the policy cycle. This has resulted, for example, in the lack of standardisation of FNS information being collected in different areas, resulting in most cases in a large number of poorly targeted and poorly streamlined indicators as well as different frequencies in the collection and dissemination of similar types of FNS information.

The Food Price Monitor, a flagship initiative led by the National Agricultural Marketing Council, was originally

conceived as an early warning tool to trigger targeted and well-coordinated interventions against the negative effects of food price inflation on hampering access to nutritious food and worsening malnutrition. How this resource intensive information tool on food pricing, which is heavily reliant on data inputs from Statistics South Africa and handpicked academics, is utilised across the food and nutrition policy cycle is unclear. Food price monitoring has been restricted to a mechanical data collection and reporting routine that caters for narrow agricultural interests rather than proactive action against worsening malnutrition crises driven by food price inflation.

A systematic programme to monitor and evaluate food and nutrition support programmes is non-existent. This gap is particularly evident in the social grant system, as most cash transfers have not been spent on nutritious food since the onus of deciding what to spend the money on lies with the individual. A vital food utilisation and food quality initiative targeting children from poor families (the NSNP) is being implemented without a reliable monitoring and evaluation system. Despite the sizeable scale and cost of the NSNP, its objectives and priority outcomes have been vague, further complicating how to monitor and evaluate it. It is unclear what the NSNP is trying to achieve beyond simply delivering meals to school children, what difference the programme is making in children's nutrition and scholastic performance, and what planning and organising are needed to make it work better.

Recommendations: Urgent actions for stronger policy coordination

Realising the socioeconomic and political imperatives of adequate nutrition for all demands the seamless and dynamic integration of policy actions across all aspects of policy

processes. Towards this end, we propose the following urgent actions:

1. Translate the constitutional commitment to food rights into an overarching food and nutrition security law based on the latest advances in social and natural sciences, beginning with an immediate update of the National Policy on Food and Nutrition Security to clearly reflect relevant SDGs (particularly SDG 1, 2, 3, 6 and 12).
2. Promote nutritional knowledge and healthy food preparation and dietary decisions, with enforceable rules around the marketing and advertisement of food, food labelling and physical activity in a bid specifically to reduce the prevalence of obesity (especially among children).
3. Actualise longstanding proposals for setting up multilevel and multisectoral FNS structures responsible for implementing the coordination of FNS policy and initiatives, drawing on the relative successes of efforts such as Operation Sukuma Sakhe in KwaZulu-Natal province.¹
4. Directly involve non-state actors in coordination across all stages of policy cycles based on the principles and best-practice evidence of transformative participation.
5. Establish national and subnational forums that unite diverse but complementary expertise in metrics, monitoring and evaluation to optimise benefits for people

afflicted by inadequate food access, poor dietary intake and malnutrition crises.

6. Invest in data collection tools, particularly a dedicated longitudinal national survey on FNS that are representative at district level for better targeted interventions and allow for compatibility with relevant national household surveys with supplementary data.

References

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1. Operation Sukuma Sakhe is a programme spearheaded by the provincial government to tackle problems such as poverty, unemployment, HIV/AIDS, and crime and substance abuse through the creation of opportunities for sustainable livelihoods, skills development and employment, as well as cooperative governance for better, coordinated and more fast-tracked service delivery.