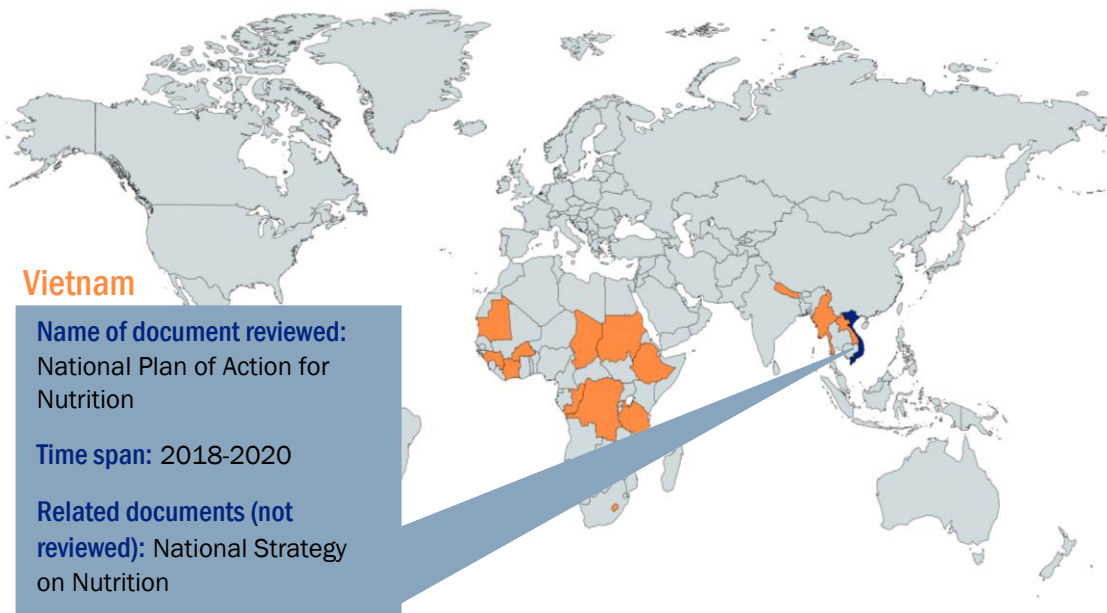


National Nutrition Plan Assessment: Vietnam

In December 2016, the United Nations Network for the SUN Movement and the SUN Movement Secretariat (SMS), with the support of an expert group, developed and launched the [Checklist on the Criteria and Characteristics of “Good” National Nutrition Plans](#) (“SUN Checklist”). In 2018, at the request of the SMS, the Maximising the Quality of Scaling Up Nutrition Plus (MQSUN+) project undertook a systematic assessment of the main planning document of 15 countries’ multisectoral national nutrition action plans, according to the criteria in the SUN Checklist. This brief summarises select strengths (✓) and suggested areas for improvement with recommendations (-) for Vietnam, organised by each of the five areas in the SUN Checklist: (1) situational analysis and policy and programming review; (2) stakeholder engagement and high-level political commitment processes; (3) costs and budgetary framework; (4) implementation and managing arrangements; and (5) monitoring, evaluation, operational research and review. A section on gender considerations is also included.



Overview

Vietnam’s *National Plan of Action for Nutrition to 2020*, based on the *National Strategy on Nutrition (2011-2020)* and endorsed in January 2018, is a short-term action plan led by the Ministry of Health. The plan proposes activities in six areas: 1) establishing policy and interdisciplinary collaboration; 2) improving children’s and mothers’ nutritional status; 3) addressing micronutrient deficiencies; 4) improving the quantity and quality of food intake; 5) controlling diet-related, non-communicable diseases; and 6) establishing supervision, monitoring and evaluation.

Key strengths

The plan evaluates the current nutrition situation in Vietnam and systematically presents and considers the progress on targets (to 2015) from the *National Strategy on Nutrition 2011-2020*. Below are a few key strengths that emerged from the review:

- ✓ Includes expected results that are consistent with all relevant World Health Assembly targets, targets related to diet-related, non-communicable disease and quantity and quality of diets (with clear timelines for achieving the targets), and capacity-building indicators. Overall, the indicators are well formulated, and the planned and achieved targets are well presented and consistent.
- ✓ Discusses progress to-date on the country's Nutrition Strategy, and areas of remaining financial, advocacy and integration weaknesses. Assesses the current nutrition situation and the progress over recent years, which were used to shape the plan's actions.
- ✓ Outlines innovative approaches to pilot and test, such as developing a micronutrient prevention model in schools and community-based models for nutrition counselling and physical activity promotion.
- ✓ Incorporates several approaches to address nutrition emergencies, including developing human resource capacities for emergency response, development of guidelines, management of acute malnutrition in emergency settings and ensuring food security for disaster-prone areas.
- ✓ Contains actions to advocate for positive nutrition policies, to advocate for support from partners, and to train all levels of government to incorporate nutrition objectives in their programmes.
- ✓ Proposes capacity building for management, decentralised coordination and other thematic areas at both individual (e.g. for school teachers, social workers) and institutional (e.g. hospitals, health facilities, laboratories) levels.
- ✓ Includes a legal framework analysis, which considers innovative legislative solutions around the essential and promising issues (e.g. food fortification, control of unhealthy foods, health insurance integrating counselling and nutritional rehabilitation, child law in relation to nutrition, etc.).
- ✓ Completed a nutrition expenditure review prior to the development of the plan, which provides a solid basis for further financial projections.

Key recommendations

Area 1: Situational analysis and policy and programming review

- The plan does not discuss disparities in nutritional outcomes or causes of malnutrition, nor does it discuss the underlying and basic causes of malnutrition that are within the purview of non-health sectors.
 - **Recommendation:** Consider prioritising interventions according to where the highest burden of malnutrition is, in the event that funding falls short of the estimated cost to cover the entire country with all actions. To make the plan truly multisectoral, future iterations should provide more detail on the basic and underlying causes of malnutrition and how they relate to the actions of other ministries. A thorough review of existing policy and nutrition-relevant frameworks could also be conducted to ensure alignment of planned actions for multisectoral coordination and the leveraging of existing resources.

- The plan refers to, but does not describe, the coordination mechanisms at national and subnational level responsible for implementing the plan.
 - **Recommendation:** Develop terms of reference for each group that outline steering and executive committee composition, expectations, annual planning procedures and reporting mechanisms that demonstrate how each group will interact with each other. The groups should involve input from sectors other than health to facilitate ownership of the plan.

Area 2: Stakeholders' engagement and high-level political commitment process

- The plan does not describe which parties—including national and international non-public sector partners—were involved in the development of the plan and does not present their responsibilities to support implementation.
 - **Recommendation:** In the next iteration of the plan, briefly document the plan development consultation process, and ensure that multiple sectors as well as subnational or community stakeholders provide input, where applicable. This ensures transparency on the commitment of different sectors and stakeholders to the targets and holds them accountable for implementing actions to achieve the plan's goals.
- While the plan demonstrates endorsement and political commitment through the Ministry of Health, other sectors or a higher level political commitment is not presented. Though other non-health sector authorities are mentioned for state, provincial and district level, their commitments are not established.
 - **Recommendation:** If not already achieved, seeking a higher-level political commitment (state level) can help to ensure other sectors' contribution of resources and efforts. This may also help to advocate and empower sectors to become fully engaged.

Area 3: Costs and budgetary framework

- Though an expenditure review (2011-2015) on nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive interventions supported the cost estimates for the plan's proposed activities, it does not provide current levels of financing or an estimate of the financial gap.
 - **Recommendation:** Assess which activities in the plan need to be initiated or expanded, estimate their costs and communicate the gap when advocating for resources. In the event of a financial shortfall, issue guidance to national and subnational bodies on how to prioritise actions using available data and transparent criteria.
- The plan does not describe a mechanism for tracking financial allocations, releases or expenditures over the course of the plan.
 - **Recommendation:** Consider developing a system of financial planning for nutrition, tracking financial allocation, releases and expenditures (both public and donor sources) for all of the plan's proposed actions, based on existing tracking systems within sectors and among partners. If feasible, establish and include an indicator for government allocation and spending on nutrition—to build financial capacities for nutrition and to provide a measure for advocacy efforts.

Area 4: Implementation and management arrangements

- Though the plan presents a few intersectoral linkages, it predominantly focuses on health sector actions coordinated through a steering and coordination committee under the responsibility of the Ministry of Health.
 - **Recommendation:** To fully address the multiple dimensions of nutrition and engage key sectors (e.g. agriculture and food security, water and sanitation, education or social protection) for the required multisectoral response, it is important to establish an overarching management or coordination body that consists of representatives of all relevant sectors.
- Though it does propose close cooperation with non-health sectors, the plan does not present a strategic approach to engage other sectors to ensure their contribution to the planned actions is integrated into sectoral work plans. Further, it does not provide any operational guidance to support the alignment of planned actions in sectoral planning.
 - **Recommendation:** Provide further guidance to sectors to ensure that actions proposed in the plan are incorporated into annual sectoral and regional plans (as applicable) with clear timelines to allow multisectoral steering and coordination committees to provide input for improved coordination and effectiveness. In addition, each activity should list the lead and supporting organisations.

Area 5: Monitoring, evaluation (M&E), operational research and review

- While the plan includes indicators on nutritional status with specified targets, the 2-3 year timeframe for implementation may pose challenges to bring the expected measurable outcomes. In addition, the plan does not include indicators of progress for each proposed activity in the main planning document.
 - **Recommendation:** Based on performance of the current plan, consider revising the indicator targets to align with suggested global standards and the country context. Also develop a detailed M&E framework that includes output or process indicators for each of the key activities proposed, with data sources and targets (both annual and end-of-plan). Where data gaps exist, the M&E framework should summarise ways to address them and to strengthen data quality overall. In addition, the next iteration of the main planning document should contain these basic elements (even if a more detailed M&E document is developed afterwards) so that the appropriate human and financial resources can be dedicated to M&E as soon as the plan is approved.
- Although the plan includes research as a strategic area, it does not describe how research priorities will be identified, pursued or coordinated or how research findings will be disseminated.
 - **Recommendation:** Identify a research body that will work with the entities in charge of monitoring and evaluation of the plan to prioritise research topics, incorporate lessons learned into annual planning and disseminate findings.

Gender considerations

Beyond the SUN Checklist, all country plans were assessed with a gender lens for their consideration and inclusion of gender dimensions of nutrition. See supplemental [gender brief](#) for the specific factors that were considered.

Vietnam's plan does not appear to explicitly consider gender dimensions of nutrition and sex-related differences in nutritional status. This could be addressed through the following recommendations. It is acknowledged that some of this may have already been completed or documented in supplemental planning documents.

- **Situational analysis:** A gender assessment could be conducted as part of an updated analysis to fully assess gender-related dimensions of nutrition in the Vietnam context (e.g. exploring traditional gender roles and norms and how these may influence nutrition), if not already done. As well, data in the situational analysis should be sex- and age-disaggregated for nutrition-specific indicators and relevant nutrition-sensitive indicators to inform targeted and appropriate interventions.
- **Planned actions:** Ensure that relevant planned actions consider the unique circumstances of different populations based on the situational/gender assessment, including actions that address underlying inequities and broader harmful gender norms, where possible. As well, include gender equality as a crosscutting strategic principle or goal, and establish mechanisms to assess and address the specific needs of men, women, boys and girls to mainstream gender across planned actions.
- **Capacity building:** Capacity-building actions should include measures to encourage active participation of both men and women (and address any unique needs or potential barriers to participation). Capacity-building efforts should also broadly integrate gender discussions, where relevant, to address gaps in knowledge and action around gender-related needs and differences.
- **M&E:** Selection of appropriate gender-related indicators should be based on Vietnam's individual situational/gender analysis. Relevant data should also be disaggregated by sex and age, and there should be a documented plan for how sex-disaggregated data will be used to inform decision making. For nutrition-specific indicators, it is recommended that all should be sex-disaggregated, and disaggregation of nutrition-sensitive indicators should be determined based on the country context.

For future nutrition planning at both national and subnational level, the involvement of gender-experienced stakeholders (e.g. Ministry of Women's Affairs, gender representative CSOs, relevant UN agencies/international NGOs) and the discussion of gender norms and differences can strengthen the consideration of gender across nutrition actions.

Moving forward

These recommendations can be applied to either the ongoing implementation process for Vietnam's national nutrition plan or to the next iteration of the plan once the time frame of the current plan comes to a close in 2020. Country stakeholders should refer back the [SUN Checklist](#) to consider other areas of improvement. For additional information on how closely this plan aligns with the SUN Checklist, please contact SMS or MQSUN+@path.org to request a full copy of the plan assessment.

MQSUN+ belongs to the Technical Assistance for Nutrition (TAN) programme with partners Nutrition International and the Emergency Nutrition Network to strengthen the capacity of the 60 countries within the SUN Movement to deliver policies and programmes which reduce malnutrition.

For more information about MQSUN+

Website:

mqsunplus.path.org

Email:

mqsun+@path.org

Social media:



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