

Formative Evaluation of the Philippine Plan of Action for Nutrition 2017-2022

Executive Summary

Child malnutrition is a persistent and pressing global health problem that has severe health and economic consequences at the child, household and national levels. In the Philippines, 30% of children under the age of five are stunted—a chronic form of undernutrition—with limited progress seen in recent years. Responding to these nutritional concerns, the Philippine Plan of Action for Nutrition (PPAN) 2017-2022 is the country’s results-based policy framework that aims to reduce the country’s high malnutrition rate.

The persistence and severity of child malnutrition in the Philippines requires an evaluation of strategies identified in the PPAN 2017-2022. Timely evidence on these strategies will help steer the country’s efforts to address child malnutrition in the right direction. A key first step in determining the impact of the PPAN is to conduct a formative evaluation to better understand the current delivery of nutrition programs in the Philippines and identify where efforts to determine impact should be focused. This formative evaluation seeks to describe nutrition program planning, coordination, and delivery, as guided by the PPAN 2017-2022. This also seeks to identify the challenges or constraints faced and focuses on stunting among 0-5 year-olds as a key outcome of interest.

This evaluation employed both qualitative and quantitative methods. Majority of the analyses was based on 205 semi-structured interviews with key nutrition policymakers and implementers at the central, regional, provincial, municipal/city, and barangay levels, as well as beneficiaries at the barangay level. Interviews were conducted across three regions, six provinces, six municipalities, and 18 barangays, evenly distributed across Luzon, the Visayas, and Mindanao. This study also constructed and analyzed a panel dataset of Operation Timbang Plus (OPT), the annual weighing and measuring of 0-5 year-old children, to assess the integrity of this important monitoring and evaluation system used for targeting, monitoring, and resource allocation.

Below are the main findings:

There is a widespread misconception on stunting not only among community members but also among barangay implementers, health care workers, and local chief executives (LCE). Majority of these respondents mistakenly believed that stunting is hereditary, and Filipinos are short by nature. Few respondents were able to relate stunting to nutrition and most did not consider the problem as solvable.

The relevance of the PPAN 2017-2022 is strong at higher levels of government but diminishes as it cascaded down. Regional, provincial, and largely municipal levels readily identified stunting as a nutrition concern in their localities, understood its consequences for child health and development, and aligned their nutrition action plans with the PPAN’s strategic thrusts to combat stunting. However, at the barangay level, which is the main site of nutrition program implementation, local policymakers, and implementers

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did not readily identify stunting concerns or understand it as a key preventable and reversible nutrition issue. As such, nutrition action plans demonstrated less alignment with the PPAN's strategic thrusts.

The Micronutrient Supplementation (MS) and Infant and Young Child Feeding (IYCF) Programs, key interventions featured in the PPAN to address stunting, were implemented in all sample sites but with varying degrees of fidelity to their program design. The MS Program has clear guidelines that were followed for vitamin A supplementation but less so in administering iron supplements and micronutrient powder, which were complicated by issues of supply and uptake among target beneficiaries. IYCF interventions were present in all sites and varied by the mode of delivery, but misconceptions about breastfeeding and complementary feeding persisted.

Sustainability of nutrition planning processes at higher levels appears strong. Sustained performance in nutrition planning and implementation at lower levels of government are susceptible to issues related to governance, funding, management, and human resources. Operationalization of nutrition action plans largely relies on the interests of local chief executives who often do not actively participate in nutrition planning. Where political and financial support exists, accountability mechanisms and incentives may not be strong enough to ensure good performance over time.

Operation Timbang Plus, the primary monitoring and evaluation tool used to track malnourished children at the barangay level, exhibits data quality issues. Perceptions of measurement, recording, and encoding errors were widespread and explained by a lack of training, precision of instruments, and accountability. Analysis of a three-year panel dataset indicates the OPT may also be susceptible to data manipulation where stunting rates are underreported.

The bottlenecks in implementation of PPAN identified in this study strongly suggest the need for the following action points:

- 1) Sharpen messages on stunting by following the Rule of the Three S's: simple, salient, and solvable;
- 2) Build capacity of front line workers to deliver nutrition programs;
- 3) Strengthen OPT plus data collection and reporting.