

USING SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE IN THE DESIGN OF NUTRITION POLICIES IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA: WIDELY ACKNOWLEDGED, POORLY DOCUMENTED

INSIGHTS FROM A REVIEW OF NUTRITION-RELATED POLICIES IN SIX SUB-SAHARAN AFRICAN COUNTRIES

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It is now widely acknowledged that the policymaking process should be informed by a variety of sources of evidence, among which scientific knowledge, but also information on the environment and context in which decision-making occurs, as well as the lived experiences of the targeted communities or groups.

In particular, the effective use of scientific evidence is believed to strengthen the potential contribution of policies and programmes towards nutrition outcomes through:

- maximising the efficiency of resource allocation
- improving the implementation of policies and programmes through adaptive management

Nevertheless, how to make such evidence available and usable by decision-makers is an issue that still faces many challenges¹.

In order to better assess how far nutrition-related policies explicitly rely on scientific evidence in sub-Saharan African countries, the Nutrition Research Facility undertook a review of policy documents in six countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi and Uganda².

These countries were chosen because nutrition is a priority in their cooperation programme with the European Union, they were involved in initiatives to strengthen evidence-informed decision-making and their policy documents were referenced in the WHO-GINA database³, which was used as the source of documentation.

A total of 31 national strategies, policies and action plans from various sectors and having explicit nutrition objectives were selected for assessment (published between 2011 and 2019).

The analysis considered three aspects: (1) any textual reference to research, scientific or academic evidence; (2) any reference to the consultation of experts, researchers or scientists during the policy formulation process; and (3) any citation of scientific or grey literature in the document.



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What lessons can be drawn from this analysis?

1. Most of the reviewed documents explicitly refer to the use of evidence as a need, though evidence of its effective use is rather limited in many instances. Some policies refer to previous reports or reviews they build upon, such as the 2010/11-2014/15 Uganda Health Sector Strategic & Investment Plan. Above all, most documents stress the need to further develop and use evidence in future nutrition programming. For instance, the 2016-2020 Burkina Faso Integrated Strategic Plan for Preventing Non-Communicable Diseases considers the low use of research findings as a weakness and calls for a better consideration of scientific evidence.

2. The way existing evidence is retrieved and used in the policy development process is rarely described. Only five documents (out of 31 reviewed) explicitly referred to the consultation of an expert committee. For instance, the 2011-2016 Uganda Nutrition Action Plan referred to a Multi-sectoral Technical Committee, which included nutrition experts from academia. Furthermore, sources of information are not always cited; and when they are, the way this information has been retrieved, appraised and selected is not detailed.

3. Citations of information sources (ranging from 0 to 64, average: 14) is more frequent in policy documents related to the health and nutrition sector than to the agriculture and food security sector. Data are mainly used to inform the “context” section and describe the extent of the problem. They often come from national statistics or international agencies. More rarely are scientific publications cited (on average 1 source out of 9) or sources of data about the efficiency and/or effectiveness of interventions.

4. Some good practices emerge from the analysis, for instance when increasing the use of scientific evidence becomes part of the policy itself. As an example, the 2018-2022 Malawi National Multi-sectoral Nutrition Plan promotes evaluation and learning, documentation of implementation successes, best practices and application of lessons learnt in programming; while some countries like Ethiopia have set-up dedicated multi-stakeholder platforms that comprise academia (the National Nutrition Coordination Body and Technical Committee).

This rapid assessment of a sample of national policy documents leads to the following recommendations:

1. The policy development process should be well documented, since the types of actors involved and forms of consultation provide valuable information to improve the transparency of policymaking and aid further evaluation and updating of policies.

2. National governments and international partners should promote research in priority areas related to evidence-gaps in the nutrition field to ensure high-quality evidence is available to inform and influence policies and programmes.

3. Evidence should be used, as far as possible, to feed the public policy debates and to support the choices made in policy orientations and interventions, in addition to documenting the nutrition problem that the policy aims to tackle.

4. The sources of all data and studies referred to in the policy documents should be accurately cited to improve their quality and reliability and to facilitate the monitoring, evaluation and updating of policies.

A limitation of this review is that it did not allow to fully capture the extent to which evidence has been called upon, nor the role that academic institutions may have played. A more in-depth qualitative appraisal of the policymaking process in one or two case study countries, where a culture of science-policy dialogue is emerging, would be an interesting development.



1 Nutrition Research Facility. May 2022. Evidence-informed decision-making for better nutrition policies and programmes: halfway through the gate. Available at: https://www.nutrition-research-facility.eu/IMG/pdf/evidence-informed_decision_making_in_nutrition.pdf

2 Nutrition Research Facility. July 2021. Deliverable 1.4 - Review and analysis of a sample of national policies regarding nutrition. Available at: https://www.nutrition-research-facility.eu/IMG/pdf/pr2_annex_9_d1.4_final_approved.pdf

3 World Health Organisation. Global database on the Implementation of Nutrition Action (GINA). Available at: <https://extranet.who.int/nutrition/gina/fr/map>