

## **Abbreviated Report of the WHO Western Pacific Region Workshop on National Plans of Action for Nutrition: Key Elements for Success, Constraints and Future Plans<sup>1</sup>**

E-SIONG TEE

*Head, Division of Human Nutrition, Institute for Medical Research, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*

A workshop on National Plans of Action for Nutrition: Constraints, Key Elements for Success, and Future Plans was convened and organized by the WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific in collaboration with the Institute for Medical Research Malaysia and co-sponsored with FAO and UNICEF from 25–29 October 1999. It was attended by representatives of 25 countries in the region and resource persons, representatives from WHO and other international agencies. The objectives of the workshop were to review the progress of countries in developing, implementing and monitoring national plans of action for nutrition (NPANs) in the Western Pacific Region and to identify constraints and key elements of success in these efforts.

Most of the countries have NPANs, either approved and implemented or awaiting official endorsement. The Plan formulation is usually multisectoral, involving several government ministries, non-governmental organizations, and international agencies. Often official adoption or endorsement of the Plan comes from the head of state and cabinet or the minister of health, one to six years from the start of its formulation. The NPAN has stimulated support for the development and implementation of nutrition projects and activities, with comparatively greater involvement of and more support from government ministries, UN agencies and non-governmental agencies compared to local communities, bilateral and private sectors and research and academic institutions.

Monitoring and evaluation are important components of NPANs. They are, however, not given high priority and often not built into the plan. The role of an intersectoral coordinating body is considered crucial to a country's nutrition program. Most countries have an intersectoral structure or coordinating body to ensure the proper implementation, monitoring and evaluation of their NPANs.

The workshop identified the constraints and key elements of success in each of the four stages of the NPAN process: development, operationalization, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation. Constraints to the NPAN process relate to the political and socioeconomic environment, resource scarcity, control and management processes, and factors related to sustainability. The group's review of NPAN identified successful NPANs as those based on recent, adequate and good quality information on the nutritional situation of the country, and on the selection of strategies, priorities and interventions that are relevant to the country and backed up by adequate resources. Continued high level political commitment, a multisectoral approach, and adequate participation of local communities are other key elements for success.

The participants agreed on future actions and support needed from various sources for the further development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of their NPANs. The recommendations for future actions were categorized into actions pertaining to countries with working NPAN, actions for countries without working NPAN and actions relevant to all countries. There was also a set of suggested actions at the regional level, such as holding of regular regional NPAN evaluation meetings, inclusion of NPAN on the agenda of regional fora by the regional organizations, and strengthening of regional nutrition networks.

---

<sup>1</sup>Extracted from WHO (2000). Report of the Workshop on National Plans of Action for Nutrition: Key Elements for Success, Constraints and Future Plans, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 25-29 October 1999. World Health Organization Regional Office for the Western Pacific, Manila.

## INTRODUCTION

A workshop on National Plans of Action for Nutrition: Constraints, Key Elements for Success, and Future Plans was convened and organized by the WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific in collaboration with the Institute for Medical Research Malaysia and co-sponsored with FAO and UNICEF from 25-29 October 1999 in Kuala Lumpur. Representatives of 25 countries in the Region participated in the workshop. They included National Food and Nutrition Committee members who have been actively involved in developing and/or implementing the NPAN and officials of countries with a draft NPAN or planning to develop one. Also in attendance were a consultant, temporary advisers, representatives from partner agencies, observers and the secretariat.

### *Workshop Objectives*

There were four objectives for the workshop:

1. To review the progress of countries in developing, implementing and monitoring national plans of action for nutrition (NPANs) in the Western Pacific Region, according to the strategies adopted at the FAO/WHO International Conference on Nutrition in 1992;
2. To identify constraints in developing, implementing and monitoring NPANs;
3. To establish key elements leading to successful planning, implementation and monitoring of NPANs; and
4. To discuss additional actions and support which may be required for the preparation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of NPANs.

The workshop was comprised of two main components—several presentations and small group discussions to address the specific objectives. The presentations comprised six background papers, case studies as introductory papers for each group work session and several update papers. In addition, the representative of each country submitted a short summary of the present status of their NPAN. There were five group work sessions to enable discussions on different stages of the NPAN development, implementation, evaluation and future plans. The deliberations of each working group were presented in plenary sessions so as to obtain feedback from all participants. The overall conclusions regarding the constraints to the NPAN process; the elements of success in developing NPAN, putting NPAN into practice, and monitoring and evaluating NPAN; and future actions and support needed were discussed, finalized and approved by the participants during the last plenary session.

### *Presentation of Background Papers*

Dr. Chizuru Nishida from Nutrition for Health and Development (NIID), WHO Headquarters presented the first of the series of six background papers. Her paper was entitled, "Global Review and Critical Analysis of National Nutrition Plans and Policies", in which she identified the priority areas and main functions of the renewed NHD. The priority areas are: malnutrition; national nutrition policies and programmes; infant and young child feeding; and nutrition from emergencies to development. The department's main functions are in the areas of country support, standard-setting and normative work, research, and global data banking. A report of the ICN follow-up activities by FAO was presented by Dr. Brian Thompson, Food and Nutrition Division of FAO. He described the role of the FAO in the development of NPAN and the range of specific actions needed to tackle nutritional problems. He also highlighted challenges that will allow the region to move ahead as follow-up to

the International Conference on Nutrition and World Food Summit.

Dr. Rudolf Knippenberg, UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office provided a report of the UNICEF nutrition strategies and ADB-UNICEF Regional Technical Assistance for Nutrition. He first spoke of the nutrition challenges and nutrition strategies in the region followed by a description of the ADB-UNICEF Regional Technical Assistance on Nutrition (RETA). A report entitled: "Healthy Islands, NCDs and NPANs: The Intersection", was presented by Dr. Gauden Galea, WHO Office in the South Pacific. He described how NPANs in the Pacific Islands countries handle the nutrition-related part of a national strategy for prevention and control of NCDs.

A report on NPAN activities in the Pacific: applications and implications was presented by Dr. Robert Hughes, Secretariat of the Pacific Community, New Caledonia. He discussed some factors that influence the progress of NPANs from a Pacific viewpoint. In the last paper in this series of background papers, Dr. Cecilia Florencio of the University of the Philippines, Philippines provided summary findings of a survey on NPAN status conducted in October 1999 by WHO, WPRO to obtain initial information on the status of NPANs in the participating countries.

#### *Presentation of Case Studies*

A total of five reports on country experiences on NPANs were reported. Dr. Safiah Mohd Yusof of the Ministry of Health Malaysia highlighted the experiences of that country in the development of an NPAN. She described the formation of a multisectoral committee to oversee the formulation of the NPAN. Working groups were formed to develop specific thrust areas in the Plan. She also identified factors that contributed to the success of the development of the NPAN.

Ms. Pamela Mathis of the CNMI Food and Nutrition Council highlighted some experiences with developing the operational plans for the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI). This was followed by a presentation on the Implementation of NPANs in the Philippines by Mrs. Alicia Ramos, National Nutrition Council, Philippines. After briefly explaining the formulation of the Plan, she described the implementation of the five impact programmes, namely Home, School and Community Food Production; Micronutrient Supplementation and Food Fortification; Nutrition Education; Credit Assistance for Livelihood; and Food Assistance.

In the case of New Zealand, Ms. Winsome Parnell of the University of Otago shared with participants the country's experience in monitoring and evaluation of NPAN. She briefly traced the development of the NPAN in 1995 and went on to explain the progress made on various recommendations or targets. She highlighted the conduct of the National Nutrition Survey and the Children's Nutrition Survey and the use of data made available to monitor particular targets of the NPAN.

In the last case study paper, Dr. Ouk Poly of the Ministry of Health, Cambodia, summarised the Cambodia National Plan of Action for Nutrition and the Nutrition Investment Plan. He outlined the development of the plan till its approval in 1997 by the Co-ministers of the Council of Ministers. Further impetus was provided by the establishment of the National Nutrition Investment Plan in 1998. The Investment Plan (1999-2008) is expected to build on the NPAN and provide operational frameworks for comprehensive nutrition strategy.

#### *Update Papers*

Four update papers were presented, covering several topics. The first two presentations

were on national nutrition surveys. Dr. Nobuo Yoshiike of the National Institute of Health and Nutrition, Japan summarised the national nutrition survey in Japan and covered aspects such as initiation, funding, planning, implementation and utilization of data. National Nutrition Surveys are required to be conducted by the Nutrition Improvement Law enacted since 1952. Ms. Winsome Parnell of the University of Otago, New Zealand described the national nutrition survey conducted on adults in the country in 1997. She covered various stages of the survey, from initiation, funding, planning to implementation. Various components of the survey were also highlighted.

The two other update papers were in other areas of nutrition. Dr. E-Siong Tee of the Institute for Medical Research Malaysia and Mrs. Boon Yee Yeong of the International Life Sciences Institute described the effort of countries in Southeast Asian countries in harmonizing the development of RDAs in the region. The main discussions and agreements in the series of three workshops held for this purpose, from 1997 to 1999, were highlighted. In the last update paper, Dr. Tee shared with participants the Malaysian experience in establishing mechanisms for prioritising research in nutrition and funding for such research programmes. A dedicated funding for research in the country was made available by the government since 1988. The mechanism for establishing priorities in research areas has been improving over the years and the amount of funding made available has also increased markedly.

#### *Workshop Sessions*

For the working group discussions, participants were divided into four groups. In five separate sessions, the participants addressed in sequence: (a) developing NPANs, (b) development of operational plans, (c) implementation of NPANs, (d) monitoring and evaluation of NPANs, and (e) future plans and support required. The sessions served as opportunities for sharing of information and experience, identification of constraints and key elements leading to a successful outcome, and identification of further action and support needed by countries to proceed further in their NPANs.

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Most of the countries have NPANs, either approved and implemented or awaiting official endorsement. The plan formulation is usually multisectoral, involving several government ministries, non-governmental organizations, and international agencies. Often official adoption or endorsement of the plan comes from the head of state and cabinet or the minister of health, one to six years from the start of its formulation. The World Declaration of Nutrition (WDN) has stimulated the development of NPAN in many countries and inclusion of WDN strategies in the country plan. The NPAN has stimulated support for the development and implementation of nutrition projects and activities, with comparatively greater involvement of and more support from government ministries, UN agencies and non-governmental agencies compared to local communities, bilateral and private sectors and research and academic institutions.

The NPAN is more than a framework or a descriptive document. As a tool for action, an operational plan sets priorities; identifies projects and activities, with details of implementation such as what, how and when; designates responsibilities and accountability for the activities; identifies resource requirements and their source; and sets out the plan for monitoring and evaluation. All the countries have been implementing a range of nutrition projects and activities. At times, donor-driven activities are implemented rather than those based on

country needs, capabilities and resources thus, endangering their sustainability. Nutrition activities are implemented in a multisectoral manner; this has both positive and negative consequences. In some cases, nutrition projects compete with or duplicate other social development projects, leading to inadequate or inefficient implementation. In other cases, nutrition projects need to be a part of other social health concerns. Specific, short-term and team-based projects are favored in the Pacific.

Monitoring and evaluation are important components of NPANs. They are, however, not given high priority and often not built into the Plan. The role of an intersectoral coordinating body is considered crucial to a country's nutrition program. Most countries have an intersectoral structure or coordinating body to ensure the proper implementation, monitoring and evaluation of their NPANs. The availability of national food, nutrition, and health information that is updated periodically and routinely was important for evaluating the effectiveness of NPAN activities.

The workshop identified the constraints and key elements of success in each of the four stages of the NPAN process: development, operationalization, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation. An important constraint identified is a low level of political commitment in some countries, including frequent changes in government, or political, social, or economic instability. Scarcity of key resources, including absolute or relative staff shortages, lack of funds, and of information were important constraints. Organisational constraints identified included inadequacies in the lead agency, communication problems between and within sectors and inadequate efforts to disseminate information on programmes.

The group's review of NPAN identified successful NPANs as those based on recent, adequate and good quality information on the nutritional situation of the country, and on the selection of strategies, priorities and situations that are relevant to the country and backed up by adequate resources. Continued high level political commitment, a multisectoral approach, and adequate participation of local communities are other important key elements for success. It was recognised that a crucial resource in developing and implementing NPANs was the nutritionists themselves.

The participants agreed on future actions and support needed from various sources for the further development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of their NPANs. The recommendations for future actions were categorized into actions pertaining to countries with working NPAN, actions for countries without working NPAN and actions relevant to all countries. There was also a set of suggested actions at the regional level, in terms of holding regular regional NPAN evaluation meetings, inclusion of NPAN on the agenda of regional fora by the regional organizations, and strengthening of regional nutrition networks.

The workshop provided the participants a good opportunity to review and analyze national plans of action for nutrition, exchange information and experiences, and update their knowledge on selected aspects of the NPAN content, context and process. It also provided them with inputs and insights they could use in the finalization of the NPAN or its implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

The participants recommended that the WHO and its partner agencies convene workshops like these to facilitate sharing of information and experiences and to promote regional collaboration in nutrition.