Formulating nutrition policy questions

These guidance notes support the implementation of the nutrition policy question formulation in the NIPN operational cycle, which is the starting point for creating a data-informed policy dialogue between policy decision makers and data analysts.

It describes a process that allows NIPN country teams to narrow down broad policy demand to an answerable question. This approach is broken down in four steps that are introduced in **section 2.1**:

- **Identifying nutrition policy demand and initial questions**, in order to ensure alignment with the national decision-making priorities and calendar (**section 2.2**)
- **Formulating policy relevant questions**, to ensure the policy relevance (**section 2.3**)
- **Refining questions to be answered with available data and capacity**, to ensure technical feasibility (**section 2.4**)
- **Finalising and validating questions**, to ensure that all previous criteria are being met (**section 2.5**)

1 - Introduction to the 4-step question formulation process

1.1 - Description of the question formulation process

The process contributes to and stimulates the **broader national multisector and multistakeholder 'policy dialogue' in nutrition.** It is usually carried out in relation to a specific multisectoral nutrition policy and/or nutrition plan of action that NIPN aims to support.
It aims to formulate a nutrition policy question, that is to say a question that:

1. responds to a **relevant** policy need or decision maker's interest;
2. can be answered using **existing quantitative data and available capacity**;
3. provides **timely** output for policy use or decision making;
4. provides answers that lead to **actionable recommendations** and decisions.

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The four steps of the question formulation process

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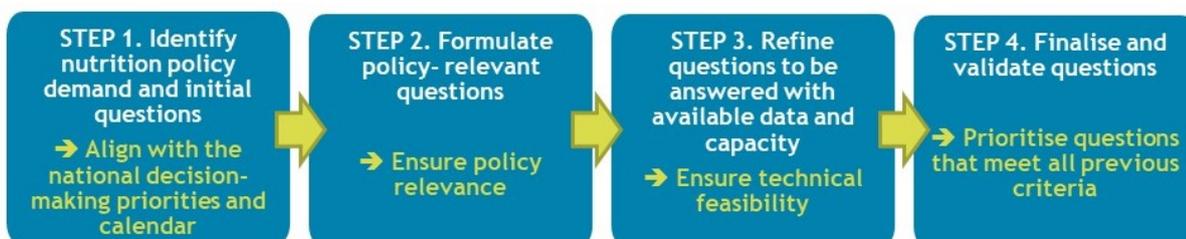
The process of question formulation is:

- led by the **policy component** of NIPN and carried out under the guidance and oversight of the multisectoral advisory committee (MAC) and facilitated by the NIPN policy expert;
- supported by the **data component** of NIPN, which helps to refine questions based on the availability of data;

- grounded in consultations between the NIPN country team, the sectoral government counterpart and non-government actors, contributing to the multisectoral policy or plan supported by NIPN.

The **NIPN approach is complex** in that it involves not only multiple stakeholders but also multiple sectors which play a role in influencing nutrition outcomes. It can therefore not be a linear process and may require going back and forth multiple times between the different steps. The NIPN approach can best be described as a dialogue between the NIPN core team, the MAC, the sectors and multiple other stakeholders (as described in the **introduction section**).

The process of formulating policy questions for nutrition builds upon the experience of the National Evaluation Platforms (NEPs), which have been successfully tested in four countries (**see below**).

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Experience of the NEP project

The National Evaluation Platform (NEP) project

The NEP is an initiative of Johns Hopkins University in four African countries (Mali, Malawi, Mozambique and Tanzania) that was supported by the Government of Canada between 2014 and 2018.

Its objective is to equip government decision makers with the tools and skills needed to critically evaluate the state of maternal, newborn, and child health and nutrition in their countries, and support sound decision making. It is built through a cycle-based approach that progressively adds new types of data, analytical tools and communications skills, and disseminates findings to policy makers concerned with maternal and child health and nutrition.
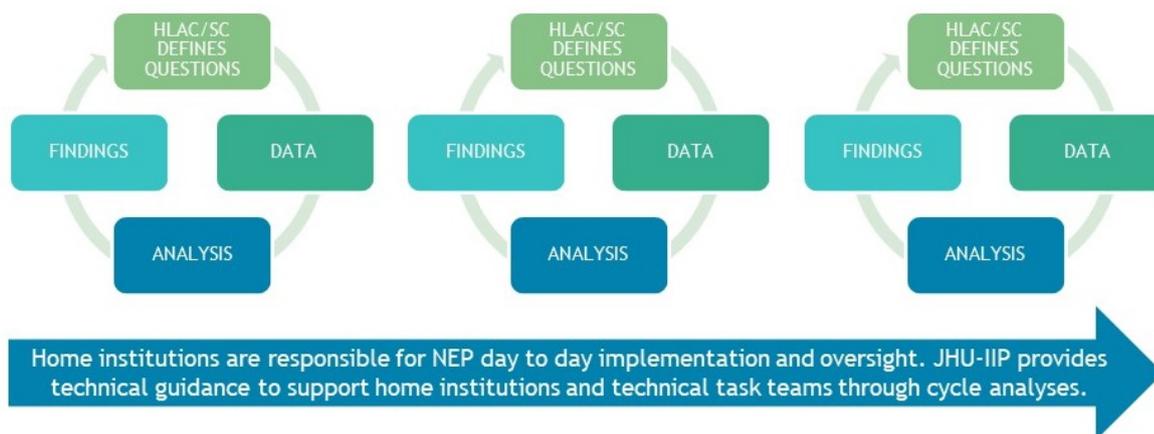
NEP has been implemented through a country-owned and government-led approach. It works with multiple national stakeholders concerned with maternal and child health, nutrition data and decision making, who all have an interest in improving health and nutrition and decreasing mortality outcomes.

To consult the NEP country experience, or to review the outputs generated and lessons learnt, you can consult the NEP website.

2 - Identifying nutrition policy demand and initial questions

2.1 - STEP 1: Identify nutrition policy demand and initial questions

Objectives:

- To **map the key opportunities** for influencing policy, programming and investment decisions by identifying policy priorities of key nutrition-related sectors and time frames for decision making.
- To **identify initial questions** of key nutrition-related sectors.

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Activities:

- **Activity A:** Mapping key opportunities for influencing policy, programming and investment.
- **Activity B:** Identifying initial questions for each priority.

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Outputs:

- **Matrix of key opportunities** for influencing policy, programming and investment decisions and priority questions.

2.2 - Scope of the question formulation process

The NIPN country team will need to make certain strategic choices at the outset of the question formulation process.

1. **The NIPN approach is usually positioned to support a specific multisectoral nutrition policy or plan of action (MPPA)**. This focus is key to ensuring that the identified questions and subsequent analyses will respond to a specific need, that the appropriate decision makers are being engaged early on in the process, and that the answers to the questions are actionable and have the potential to influence a particular decision. For countries without a multisectoral nutrition policy or plan of action, it is recommended that a strategic decision is made on which nutrition policy, strategy, plan of action or possibly programme, the question formulation process will focus.

1. Furthermore, the **NIPN country team will need to make a strategic decision** regarding whether to engage with all sectors contributing to the MPPA at the same time or whether to initially work with a subset of these, and subsequently engage the others. For countries without an MPPA, a similar choice needs to be made regarding whether to focus on all sectors that are likely to contribute to improved nutrition or only a few of them.

This decision on which and how many sectors to engage in the NIPN operational cycle depends on several factors:

- **The existing structure of multisectoral coordination** and the feasibility of engaging multiple sectors.
- **The capacity of the NIPN team** to manage collaboration and data analyses with multiple sectors at the same time.
  This decision is likely to be a trade-off between bringing everyone on board to ensure a multisectoral approach and managing expectations around what can be delivered.

How many sectors to engage? Example of Guatemala

Guatemala decided to engage with a subset of the 20+ ministries contributing to the National Food Security and Nutrition Policy (PESAN 2012-2020). A focus on the four key ministries responsible for implementing actions of the revised Strategy for Preventing Chronic Malnutrition (ENDPC 2016-2020) seemed more manageable and more likely to provide tangible opportunities to turn NIPN findings into improved actions and decisions on ENPDC implementation.

2.3 - Activity A: Mapping the key opportunities for influencing policy, programming and investment decisions (1/2)

The mapping addresses the following questions:

- What upcoming priority decisions are expected to be made in nutrition?
- To which specific policy, programme or plan will they relate?
- Who will make the decisions?
- When will the decisions be made?
- What evidence and information are likely to be needed?
- Which administrative level is the focus of the decision (e.g. central or sub-national)?

This information is gathered by the NIPN country team through a desk review of existing literature (**see additional information below**).

The information should be verified and amended through stakeholder discussions with key government sectors, donors, UN and civil society groups, facilitated by the NIPN country team. The SUN platform may offer a good opportunity for these stakeholder discussions. The discussions may be in the form of focus groups or bilateral discussions and are particularly helpful in identifying the key opportunities to influence decision making (**see next page**).

The mapping aims to achieve the following:

- Identify at which stage the MPPA is or sector-specific nutrition policy and plans are;
- Assess coherence between the MPPA and sector-specific policies and plans (**see the Mali example below**);
- Identify upcoming opportunities to influence decision making (next 12 months up to the platform's duration);
- Depending on the above, confirm which policy, plan or programme the NIPN cycle of 'questions-analysis-findings' will focus on;
- Identify what types of information or findings are likely to be considered for these upcoming decision-making opportunities, and by when;
- Ensure that the NIPN operational cycle will provide answers and recommendations in line with the decision-making calendar;
- Define the target audience for the last step of the NIPN operational cycle regarding communication and dissemination of the answers to the policy questions.

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Example: policy question formulation in Mali based on the review of sectoral plans

This example is based on the experience of the National Evaluation Platforms (NEP) project, by Johns Hopkins University.
In 2014, the Mali Government was in the process of drafting a ten-year Plan for Sanitary and Social Development (PDDSS) 2014-2023. At that time, a review by the National Evaluation Platform (NEP) team of the draft PDDSS and of the Programme of Sanitary and Social Development III (PRODESS III), the five-year PDDSS programme revealed the following:

- The target mortality rates were already achieved and the baseline information of several interventions and targets were not coherent between the PDDSS and PRODESS III.
- The target population groups of the different health and nutrition programmes of the health sector were not harmonised.
- The proposed intervention package in PDDSS did not seem to correspond with the ambition of the mortality reduction targets of the PDDSS.

Confronted with this lack of coherence between the MPPA and sector-specific policies and plans, the relevant stakeholders decided to work towards a common and harmonised mortality reduction target which could be realistically achieved within the PDDSS time frame. Policy questions were formulated by the analysis team focusing on the PDDSS targets and the proposed intervention packages, and they were validated by the government stakeholders.

To allow the use of the Lives Saved Tool, a modeling software which could provide findings in a relatively short time frame (six months), the finalisation of the PDDSS was postponed until 2015.

The analyses were carried out within the promised time frame and results were available on time to redefine the PDDSS targets and refine the intervention packages, through the mid-year review process of the PRODESS III.

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Desk review of existing litterature

Examples of documents to review

Documents that can be reviewed during the desk study include:

- Government resources such as: national policy, plans and programmes for nutrition (multisectoral and sector-specific with nutrition objectives).
- Non-governmental resources such as:
  - Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) movement UN Network online country reports and SUN country Joint Annual Assessments.
  - UN Network/REACH supported documents: policy review, stakeholder and action mapping, common narrative or situation analysis overview and nutrition barometer.
  - Specific NIPN policy review

2.4 - Activity A: Mapping the key opportunities for influencing policy, programming and investment decisions (2/2)

Window of opportunity

What are some examples of a "policy priority" that an NIPN operational cycle of 'question-analysis-findings' could inform?

- a policy or plan under development, revision or implementation
- an annual or mid-term policy review process
- a budget prioritisation exercise
- an annual planning exercise

For policies and plans, be mindful of which stage they are at: stakeholders' priorities and interests will differ depending on the stage (evaluation, formulation or implementation), influencing the type of demand and information needs they may have.

Also keep in mind that the 'window of opportunity' may be more or less strict depending on the strategic priority considered: a programme's evaluation or reformulation leaves a larger window of opportunity while a specific event, such as a conference or consultation workshop, has a fixed date, thus rendering the window of opportunity very narrow.

2.5 - Activity A: Outcome of the mapping exercise

The outcomes of the mapping exercise can be captured in a matrix summarising the key opportunities for influencing policy, programming and investment decisions (**see Matrix Part I below**).

- Each row in the matrix relates to a specific piece of information that has been collected

during the mapping.
- Each column provides information relating to the policies, plans, programming and investments for one sector.
  The matrix example includes information from a fictional country. Only two columns have been filled (for multi-sectoral nutrition and agriculture). A full matrix would include further columns for all sectors that influence nutrition.

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Matrix Part I

PART I OUTCOMES OF MAPPING BASED ON DESK REVIEW	MULTISECTORAL NUTRITION	AGRICULTURE	
Policy, plan or programmes	National Nutrition Programme II (2016-2020)	Nutrition-Sensitive Agriculture Strategic Plan (2016-2020)	
Stage in the policy cycle	Year 2 into implementation - second implementation phase	Year 2 into implementation	
Key changes/revision anticipated in the next 12 months and for the NIPN duration	Evaluation in 2019 and revision of programme (phase II) by end of 2020	USAID planning to fund dietary diversity programme in vulnerable districts (funding from 2019)	
Window of opportunity for critical decisions	January - March 2020	March - May 2019	
Key decision makers	Ministry of Health Ministry of Agriculture	Ministry of Agriculture USAID	
Key influencers	Special Advisor for NNPII (in Ministry of Health)	Food and Nutrition Advisor (in USAID)	
Key upcoming priority decision opportunities	Year 3 will have a mid-term review	Consultation workshop for USAID programme design - January 2019	

2.6 - Five recommended exercises to help make a strategic decision

The NIPN team can decide which exercises are most relevant in their respective contexts but all are helpful for framing the broad policy context overview and triggering the initial reflections and exchanges.

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Exercises

EXERCISE 1: Start with understanding the magnitude and the trends of the undernutrition problem and the trends in relation to national or sub-national targets

Work with the data analysts to gain a picture of the magnitude and trends of the undernutrition problem: it is recommended that DHS and any other prevalence point from validated national surveys are used.
Draw the scenarios 1) if trends continue as usual, and 2) if national targets are to be met.
This exercise is to be repeated at the sub-administrative level (region, district) at which the NIPN cycle 'questions-analysis-findings' is strategically interested in focusing on. As data allow to do so, the NIPN cycle should strengthen the decentralized decision-making level as much as possible, and thus the questions identified also respond to that level.
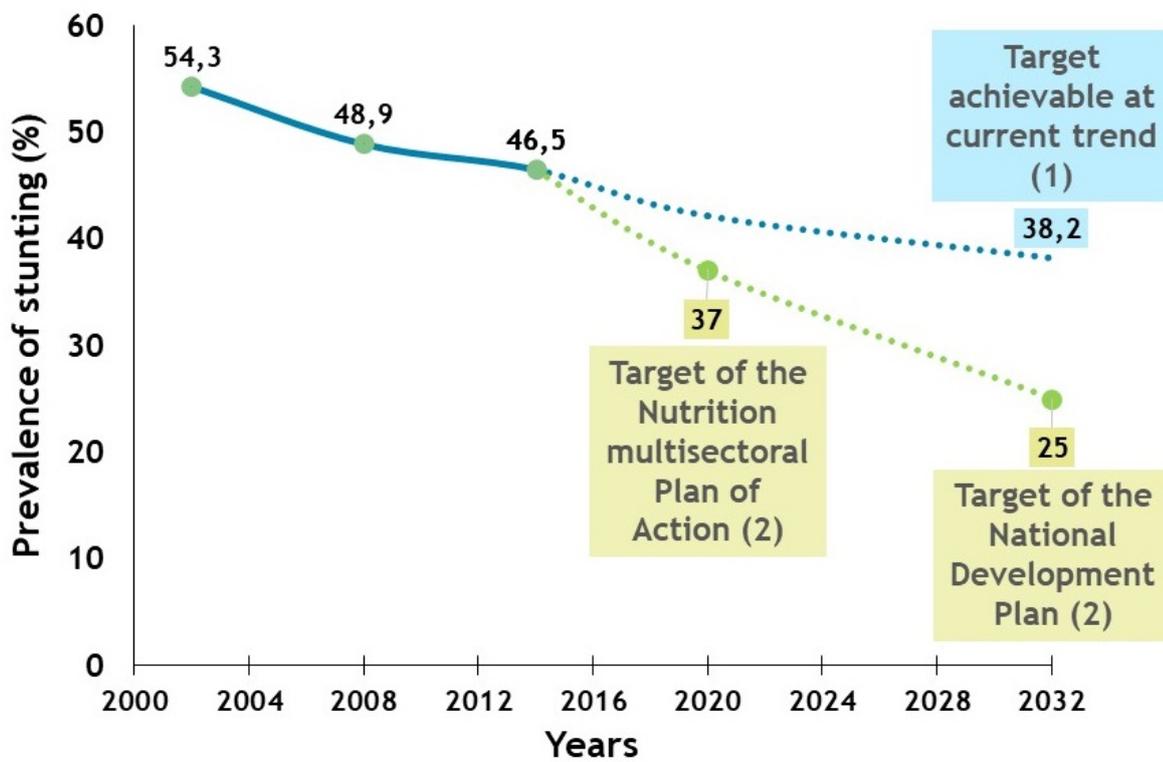
EXERCISE 2: Map out key multi-sectoral policies and plans of action in relation to the undernutrition trend

Present visually the main multi-sectoral policies and plans in relation to the undernutrition trend and consider how the trend evolved during the implementation period.
Do it for the most relevant policies, programmes and/or changes in investment in nutrition that are believed to have occurred in previous years.
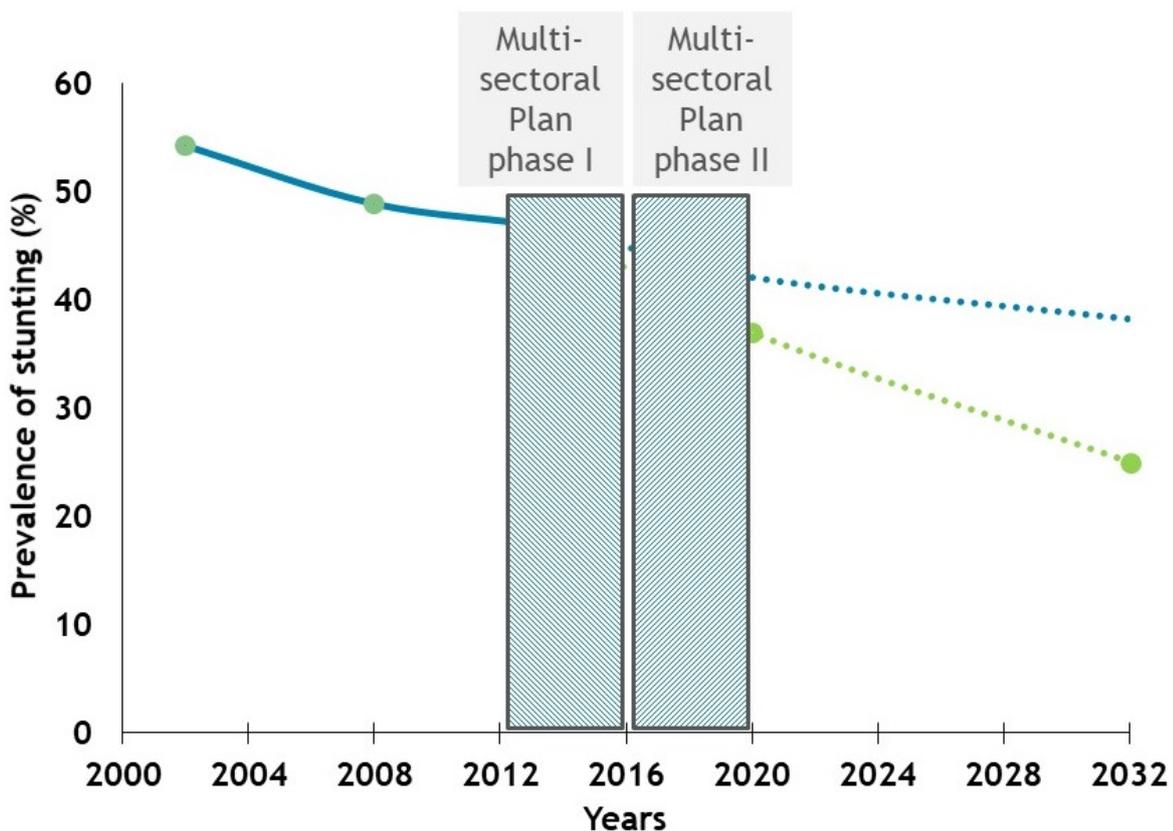
The priorities and interests of stakeholders will differ depending on the stage of the policy or plan:

- At formulation stage, the focus will be on the definition of targets, the selection of interventions, the required coverage, etc.
- During implementation, the priorities will be around progress of implementation and probability of reaching targets.
- At evaluation, the focus will be on impact: what worked, what did not.

Each stage represents a strategic opportunity to improve the next one, should the corresponding information be available to decision makers.

The assumption is that if the multi-sectoral policy, plan or programme is well designed, and the interventions are implemented 1) according to planned coverage and 2) with the desired quality, an impact should be seen on the intended outcome.

Visualising the implementation period of the policy, plan or programme in relation to the undernutrition trend will provide an initial idea of the probability of these assumptions being correct.
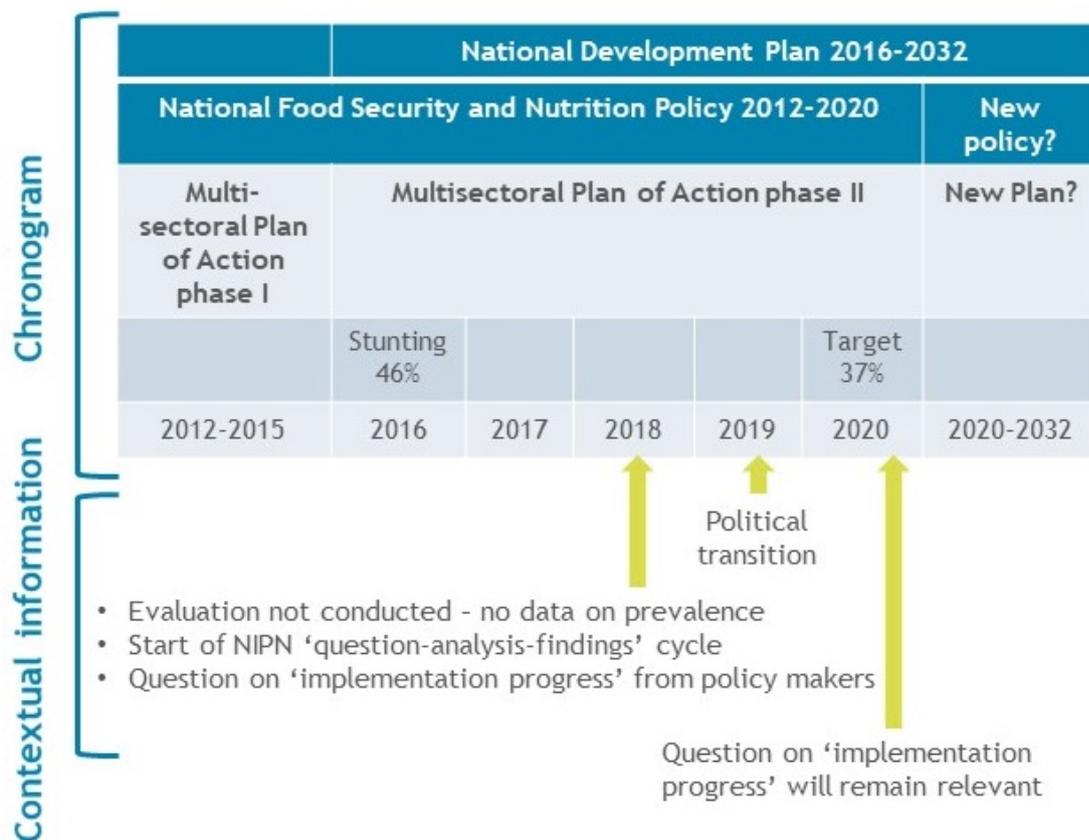
EXERCISE 3: Create a timeline of the multisectoral policies and plans

- Display the implementation periods of the multi-sectoral policies, plans and programmes on one timeline.
- Add complementary information on the context of implementation, as shown in the fictional country example below.

This chronogram can help to confirm the priorities of policy makers for the next 12-24 months and will help to identify possible windows of opportunity for influencing planning, formulation or evaluation cycles.

The fictional example below shows that policy makers in this country need information in 2018 on the progress of implementation of the Multi-sectoral Plan of Action, phase II, and the probability that the plan will achieve its targets by 2020. The absence of a mid-term evaluation makes this information need, which can be filled by NIPN, more acute.

With an upcoming political transition in 2019, the new policy makers will also need information regarding 'implementation progress' to inform the formulation of new policy by 2020.

The table shown in the chronogram:

	National Development Plan 2016-2032					
	National Food Security and Nutrition Policy 2012-2020					New policy?
	Multi-sectoral Plan of Action phase I	Multisectoral Plan of Action phase II				New Plan?
		Stunting 46%				Target 37%	
	2012-2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2020-2032

Political transition

- Evaluation not conducted – no data on prevalence
- Start of NIPN 'question-analysis-findings' cycle
- Question on 'implementation progress' from policy makers

Question on 'implementation progress' will remain relevant

NOTE: The relationship between multi-sectoral and sectoral policies or plans can be presented visually in a similar way, to identify whether the latter could offer an entry point to strategically supporting multi-sectoral efforts.

EXERCISE 4: Identify which policies, programmes or investment decisions are more likely to be influenced and decide which administrative level to influence

Ultimately, the review process will give the NIPN team an initial idea of the decision makers' priorities and the corresponding time frame on which the 'questions-analysis-findings' cycle should focus.

The initial selection of the priorities will be based on the information pulled together in the policy review, using the previous tips, and on the feedback from stakeholders.

At the same time, the team will need to decide at which administrative level the NIPN cycle intends to strengthen the decision-making process. This decision will depend on how decentralized nutrition interventions are, the interests of policy makers and the availability of data at sub-national level. The demand for information is likely to be higher at sub-national level, where capacity to use collected data is often sub-optimal and a feedback loop is often lacking. The sub-national dashboard can support analysis at the decentralized level as long as the process is initiated by decision makers' interests and question formulation.

EXERCISE 5: Identify and know the key 'decision makers' at the various administrative levels

At this stage, the team should have good knowledge of the various decision makers along the implementation chain. Decision makers are not necessarily limited to policy makers: programme planners and implementation officers are other actors along the implementation chain who are also making decisions to improve nutrition actions at their level.

Categorizing the decisions makers, according to the administrative level at which they intervene and according to the type of decisions they can make, will help to assess the diversity of the NIPN stakeholders' needs.

It will also define the target audiences and consequently help to fine-tune the policy relevance of the questions and align the 'storyline' of the findings with each target audience of decision makers.

2.7 - Activity B: Identify initial questions

After having completed the policy review, the next activity will be to:

- Engage with the sectoral government counterpart and request them to formulate one to two priority policy questions which they consider highly relevant to their sector
- Capture these inputs in Part II of the matrix on key opportunities for influencing policy, programming and investment decisions (**see example below**)

The matrix exercise allows questions to be collected based on stakeholders' priorities and sense of importance. At this stage, there is no need to apply other criteria; this will be done in the next steps.

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Matrix Part II

PART I OUTCOMES OF MAPPING BASED ON DESK REVIEW	MULTISECTORAL NUTRITION	AGRICULTURE	
Policy, plan or programmes	National Nutrition Programme II (2016-2020)	Nutrition-Sensitive Agriculture Strategic Plan (2016-2020)	
Stage in the policy cycle	Year 2 into implementation - second implementation phase	Year 2 into implementation	
Key changes/revision anticipated in the next 12 months and for the NIPN duration	Evaluation in 2019 and revision of programme (phase II) by end of 2020	USAID planning to fund dietary diversity programme in vulnerable districts (funding from 2019)	
Window of opportunity for critical decisions	January - March 2020	March - May 2019	
Key decision makers	Ministry of Health Ministry of Agriculture	Ministry of Agriculture USAID	
Key influencers	Special Advisor for NNPII (in Ministry of Health)	Food and Nutrition Advisor (in USAID)	
Key upcoming priority decision opportunities	Year 3 will have a mid-term review	Consultation workshop for USAID programme design - January 2019	
PART II: DRAFT POLICY QUESTIONS	MULTISECTORAL NUTRITION	AGRICULTURE	
Example question 1	Is the plan having an impact on stunting?	How much impact have the nutrition-sensitive agricultural interventions had on stunting reduction?	
Example question 2	Will the plan meet its targets by 2020? At national and regional level? If not, which interventions need to be prioritised to accelerate progress?	Which interventions should be prioritised to achieve the maximum impact on nutrition outcomes under the Nutrition-Sensitive Agriculture Strategic Plan?	
...	...	...	

3 - Formulating relevant policy questions

3.1 - STEP 2: Formulate policy-relevant questions

Objectives:

- To **engage relevant sectors** to formulate policy questions
- To forge a common understanding of what questions can be answered within the platform's scope
- To **develop the capacity** of sectoral government counterparts on question formulation in line with the contribution and role of sectors in the MPPA (impact pathways)
- To **achieve a consensus** on a set of policy-relevant questions

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Activities:

- **Activity A**: Organising and facilitating a consultative workshop

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Outputs:

- Document with **prioritised list** of policy-relevant questions

3.2 - Activity A: Preparation of a consultative workshop

The key activity in Step 2 is to convene a consultative workshop with sectoral government counterparts and non-government stakeholders with the following objectives:

- To **formulate and prioritise** a set of policy questions, based on questions identified in Step 1.
- To **develop the capacity of sectoral government counterparts** and non-government stakeholders in policy question formulation (especially important during the first cycle of question formulation).
- To **enhance dialogue and build common expectations** amongst key nutrition stakeholders.

There are a number of important points to take into account in the agenda setting and invitation to participants in this workshop:

- Who will facilitate and who will participate in the workshop?
- Setting the agenda of the workshop including:
  - 1. Relevant **framing** of the workshop
  - 2. Creating a **common understanding**
  - 3. Which **questions and data analyses** best lend themselves to the NIPN approach?

- 4. Adopting an **impact pathway approach** to formulate relevant questions
- 5. **Illustration** of the use of the impact pathway to support the formulation of question
- 6. Characteristics of **well-formulated** policy questions
- 7. Preparing relevant and concrete **country examples**

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3.3 - Activity A: Workshop inputs, outputs, facilitation and participation

Workshop inputs

The **matrix on key opportunities for influencing policy**, programming and investment decisions (output of Step 1, **section 2.2**) will be used as a main input for the workshop. Also the NIPN sub-national nutrition dashboard (**section 3.2**) could serve as an entry point for discussion and further policy-relevant question formulation.

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Workshop outputs

A **priority list of well-formulated policy-relevant questions**.
Based on the needs, priorities and time frame of decision makers identified in Step 1, it is important, once having formulated the questions, to agree on the final set of questions. The NIPN team will then finalise these questions, looking at the technical feasibility of answering them (Step 3, **section 2.4**).

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Facilitation and participation

It is strongly recommended that one person is identified to take on the role of facilitator in the workshop preparation and during the workshop. This could typically be the senior policy advisor within the NIPN core team.
Prior to undertaking the consultative workshop, the NIPN country team should have decided whether to engage with a subset of priority sectors or whether to invite all of the nutrition-relevant sectors to this workshop and involve them in the full NIPN operational cycle (**section 2.2: Step 1 – Scope of the question formulation process**).
For each sector, several key people might be invited to this workshop who collectively bring relevant expertise to the table regarding:

- The policies and plans of the sector (for example, FIRST policy officer in Ministry of Agriculture).
- Routine M&E data availability and accessibility as well as surveys data.
- Nutrition: typically nutrition focal point, if existent.

Non-government partners, notably UN agencies, REACH, and members of the SUN networks (UN, civil society, donors) could also be invited as important resources to support preparation of and participation in the workshop.

3.4 - Activity A: Setting the agenda of the workshop (1/6)

1. Relevant framing in country context

The overall objective is to strengthen or develop the data-informed nutrition policy dialogue, and this workshop is a first step to engaging stakeholders in this process.

The workshop and the NIPN approach need to be framed to be coherent with the broader multisectoral nutrition policies and plans at country level.

It is important to highlight that NIPN does not replace existing Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) systems that track the progress of MPPA, but that its added value is to analyse the data of such M&E systems to answer specific policy questions.

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2. Create a common understanding

Before engaging in the process of question formulation, it is crucial that all key actors share a common understanding of what NIPN's purpose and approach is. Even when several advocacy or awareness-raising activities have taken place prior to the workshop, it is important to start the workshop with a generic presentation of NIPN (**section 1.1, advocacy and awareness raising**) to create a common understanding amongst all participants.

The scope of NIPN and its added value can be mentioned briefly in this presentation in order to manage participants' expectations with regard to the type of answerable questions, but this should be a specific and separate session on the agenda of the consultative workshop. This session can be facilitated with support from the **Technical Note on Data Analysis**.

3.5 - Activity A: Setting the agenda of the workshop (2/6)

3. Which questions and data analyses lend themselves best to the NIPN approach?

The NIPN data expert(s) will facilitate a session to explain what type of data analysis is particularly suited to providing solid answers to policy questions which can be translated into actionable recommendations. The choice of data analysis is based on data availability, and the quality and capacity of the team. The details of this information is explained in the guidance note on data analysis (**section 3.4**), as well as in the **Technical Note on data Analysis**.

It is important to illustrate the theoretical explanations with concrete examples: the guidance note on data analysis (**section 3.4**) provides a number of examples (summarised in the **table below**). It is recommended that the initial questions formulated by NIPN stakeholders are also used (see output of Step 1, **section 2.2**). The NIPN data team will need to review the list of initial questions prior to the workshop, in order to decide which data analysis method is best suited to providing an actionable answer.

In many cases, the initial question can be reformulated into answerable (sub-)questions. At all

stages during question formulation, it is important to manage stakeholders' expectations and be transparent about the questions which are prioritised and why, and what the next step will be. Questions and data analyses which are less suited to providing actionable recommendations, and are therefore less of a priority, could become part of a 'Question Bank'.

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Suitability of questions for NIPN approach

Questions which are answerable by suitable data analysis methods	Partially answerable questions (after reformulation)	Questions which are not suitable for analysis in the NIPN approach
Are nutrition interventions reaching the target population?	What are the causes of high levels of stunting in the semi-arid regions of the country?	What is the impact of nutrition-sensitive interventions on stunting?
What factors can explain the lower coverage of nutrition-specific interventions in some districts compared to others?	Which nutrition-specific interventions should be prioritised to maximise impact on stunting?	Is it more cost-effective to invest in food fortification or supplementation?
What are the causes of stunting in my country and where should we focus our intervention efforts?	Have investments in WASH contributed to stunting and mortality reduction?	How can indicators for nutrition sensitive interventions at sub-national level be defined and tracked?
Where should interventions to prevent obesity and overweight be focused?	-	-

3.6 - Activity A: Setting the agenda of the workshop (3/6)

4. Adopt an 'impact pathway' approach to help formulate policy questions

Using an impact pathway approach can be helpful for unpacking broad policy questions, which are often related to impact, into sub-questions which are more likely to be answerable with existing data.

For instance, it is difficult to answer the following question: "*Did the investments in nutrition-specific interventions in the Multi-sectoral Nutrition Policy and Plan of Action, phase II (MPPA-II), reduce stunting significantly over the same period*?"

The question asks whether the inputs at the start of the pathway resulted in impact at the end of the pathway. Yet, there are so many different factors along the pathway which could have intervened that it is impossible to answer this question without a controlled research set-up which measures all these (confounding) factors. It is, however, possible to break down this broad question into a set of smaller questions pertaining to each step of the impact pathway.

The impact pathway model is a logical way to organise the various elements (inputs - activities - outputs - outcomes - impact).

As shown in the animation below, the logic can be tested by moving from one element to the next. The relationship between two elements is based on underlying assumptions. For instance,

at implementation stage the overall assumption is that if the multi-sectoral plan is well designed, and the interventions are implemented according to the planned coverage and with the desired quality, this would lead to measurable impact on the intended outcome (e.g. stunting).

It is important to test the relationship between elements as well as the assumptions themselves. Following the impact pathway, policy-relevant questions and sub-questions can therefore be formulated with respect to each individual element, the relationship between elements, or the underlying assumptions.

Impact pathway models or a theory of change already adopted by the country to monitor the MPPA may be a good basis for triggering the discussion and preparing the workshop exercise. These models will be particularly useful for identifying the intervention logics of the MPPA and the existence (or gaps) in indicators. However, the actual categorization chosen for the question formulation purpose and for the MPPA's purpose may be slightly different.

In the absence of impact pathway models or a theory of change adopted to monitor the MPPA, impact pathways models of the REACH Compendium of Actions can serve as a good basis from which to start the exercise.

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The impact pathway can guide the formulation of policy-relevant, answerable questions

Watch the video.

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3.7 - Activity A: Setting the agenda of the workshop (4/6)

5. Illustration of the use of the impact pathway to support the formulation of question
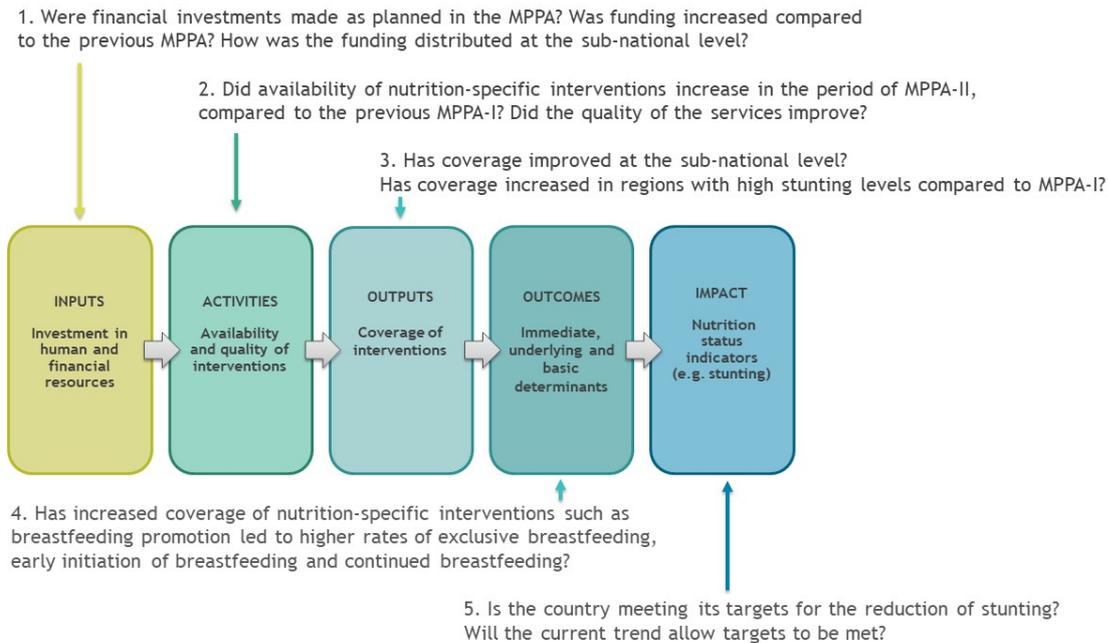
Tips

- Unpack what is happening at the level of inputs and activities, filling in each level of the impact pathway based on the information from the MPPA.
- Consider all the evidence available to inform on the degree of implementation of the MPPA.
- Consider whether changes took place during the MPPA implementation period or in comparison with the period before, in terms of availability and quality of implementation, or intervention reach (all population) and coverage (target population) (step 1, **section 2.2**).
- Consider differences in interventions coverage and nutrition indicators of population groups (e.g. by income quintile, or rural/urban) and geographies.
  Refer to the examples 1 to 3 below.

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Examples

EXAMPLE 1: Type of questions which can be articulated at each level of of the impact pathway

1. Were financial investments made as planned in the MPPA? Was funding increased compared to the previous MPPA? How was the funding distributed at the sub-national level?

2. Did availability of nutrition-specific interventions increase in the period of MPPA-II, compared to the previous MPPA-I? Did the quality of the services improve?

3. Has coverage improved at the sub-national level? Has coverage increased in regions with high stunting levels compared to MPPA-I?

INPUTS	ACTIVITIES	OUTPUTS	OUTCOMES	IMPACT
Investment in human and financial resources	Availability and quality of interventions	Coverage of interventions	Immediate, underlying and basic determinants	Nutrition status indicators (e.g. stunting)

4. Has increased coverage of nutrition-specific interventions such as breastfeeding promotion led to higher rates of exclusive breastfeeding, early initiation of breastfeeding and continued breastfeeding?

5. Is the country meeting its targets for the reduction of stunting? Will the current trend allow targets to be met?

EXAMPLE 2: Identify the different elements of a specific policy question against the impact pathway and break them down into sub-questions

Have investments (input) in WASH interventions (activity) led to better access to WASH facilities (output), resulted in a reduction in % of children suffering from diarrhoea (outcome) and reduced child undernutrition (impact)?

1. Break the question down into more specific questions to better understand the intermediate steps of the impact pathway.
For example:

- Have investments in WASH interventions changed over the past 5 years?
- How are investments in WASH interventions distributed at sub-national level?
- Has coverage in WASH interventions changed over the past 5 years?
- Are WASH interventions reaching the target populations?
- Have WASH interventions led to improved access to latrines/access to safe drinking water?

2. Unpack the question to identify the indicators, the relationship between the indicators and any assumptions, in order to generate more specific questions that can be answered by the data available.
For example:

- Indicators can be investments or programme coverage.
- A relationship is: "WASH investment leads to increased WASH programme coverage."
- An assumption is: "WASH investments translate directly into increased programme coverage."

3. Zoom in on a specific question and unpack it further.
For example:

- The latest assumption can in turn become a question to be unpacked into further questions: "WASH investments translate directly into increased programme coverage."
- Have investments in WASH translated into equal budget expenditures at regional/department level for WASH interventions?
- In which WASH interventions have investments been made at regional level? What was the distribution of budgets across regions?
- Has staff been hired, trained and supervised in each region equally? Were supplies and equipment equally available in each region to achieve planned coverage?
- etc.

EXAMPLE 3: Formulating questions related to a social protection pathway for impact on nutrition

*Based on the **SUN Movement Secretariat** (SMS), 2015. The contribution of agriculture and social protection to improving nutrition; Scaling Up Nutrition in Practice. Geneva.*
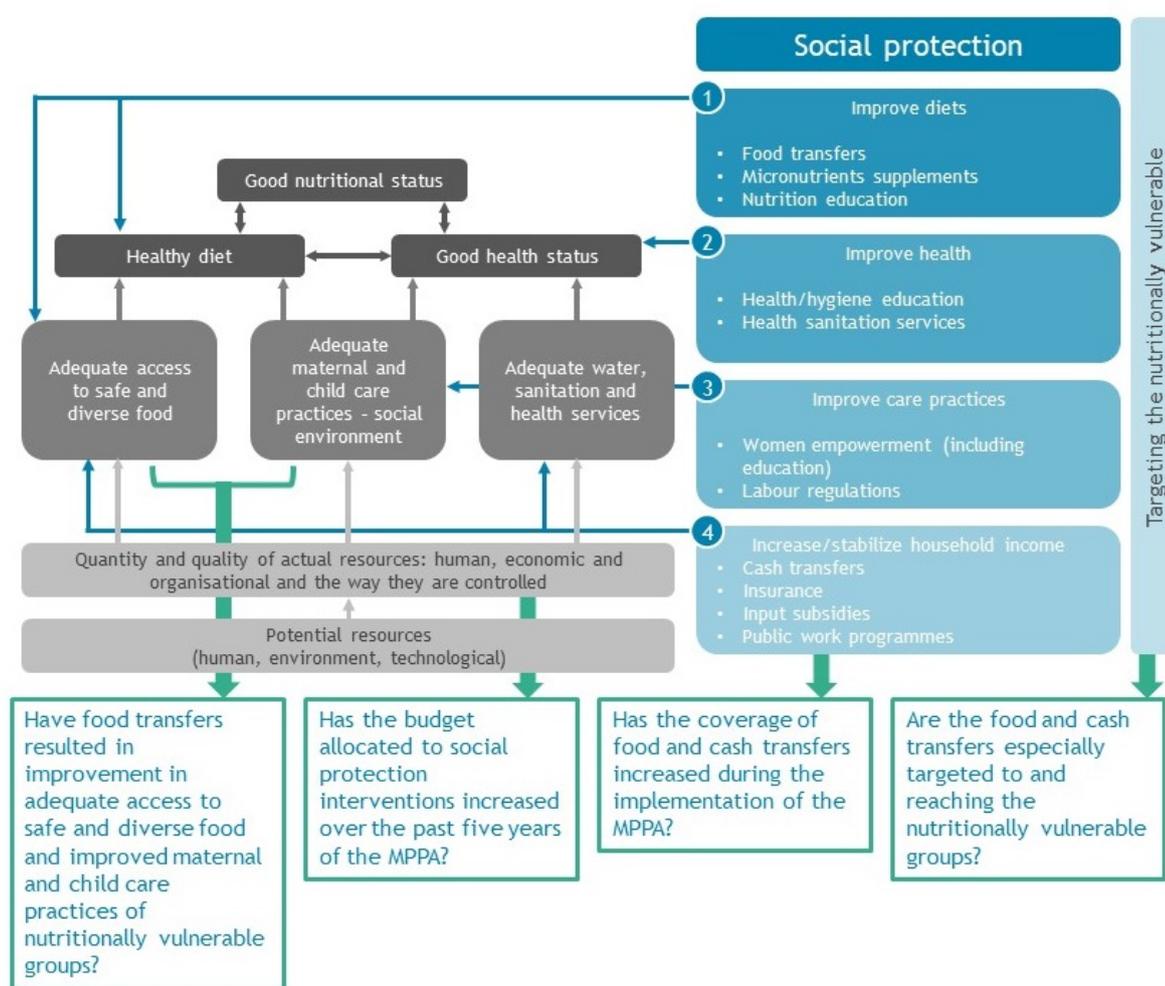
Developing more detailed impact pathways than the ones shown in this example, which highlight specific assumptions and specific relationships between activities, outputs and inputs, will allow the formulation of more specific and detailed questions to help identify bottlenecks, such as:

- "Has the budget allocated to the implementation of social protection interventions also been used to strengthen the human resource capacity, and has this in its turn led to a higher quality of services and better targeting?"

- "What are the reasons for a lack of increase in coverage of social protection interventions? - Insufficient number of staff, low level of training, low quality of service delivery, insufficient number of distribution points, inadequate targeting, incomplete monitoring?"

3.8 - Activity A: Setting the agenda of the workshop (5/6)

6. Characteristics of a well-formulated policy question

Remind workshop participants that a well-formulated question has the following characteristics:

- It responds to a relevant policy need or demand from decision makers.
- It can be answered by analysing existing quantitative data with available capacity.
- It provides a timely answer for policy use or decision making.
- It leads to an actionable recommendation and decision.
- In addition, it should be specific in its formulation and specific with regard to the subject of investigation (**see the visual below**).
- A sixth characteristic is discussed in more detail in the guidance note on data analysis (**section 3.4**). In fact, each question needs to be formulated in such a way that an appropriate data analysis method can be used. The NIPN platform focuses on data analysis using existing data, mainly from population-based surveys and routine monitoring data, which are less suitable for studying causal relationships or cost-effectiveness of interventions. Questions about causal relationships may require robust study design to collect data, as well as more elaborate data analysis methodologies, which will not lead to clear-cut answers and actionable recommendations for NIPN.

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Elements that need to be specified in the question

Population	• Specify the population group
Intervention	• Specify the type of intervention
Objective	• Specify the objective (e.g. comparison, description, explanation, etc.)
Time frame	• Specify the time period
Result	• Specify the expected outcomes

3.9 - Activity A: Setting the agenda of the workshop (6/6)

7. Prepare relevant and concrete country examples to trigger question formulation

Examples are key for helping the participants in the workshop: they need to go through the question formulation process and practise by themselves how impact pathways models can help. Thus, it is important that these have been prepared and tested by the person facilitating the process before the workshop itself.

Especially in the first NIPN cycle of 'question-analysis-dissemination', it has proven difficult for participants to grasp what are possible policy-relevant questions and how to formulate a good question. To initiate the process, it is recommended that workshop participants are provided with examples which are as concrete as possible.

Questions which have been proposed as priority questions in Step 1 may provide a good starting point for developing the examples for the workshop. In all cases, it is important to:

- Ensure that examples are available and prepared ahead for participants to practise with.
- Present and explain at least one unique example to all participants, independent of whether it relates to their own sector or not.
- Include sector-specific questions identified as relating to a nutrition-relevant issue in the MPPA, to help sector experts understand the importance of formulating policy-relevant questions.

The four steps described in this guidance note for formulating policy-relevant questions can be applied at any administrative level. In cases where the NIPN operational cycle is implemented at decentralized/sub-national level, it is important that all the steps described in this guideline are implemented at that level as well.

Thus, Steps 1 and 2 are crucial for engaging with stakeholders identified at decentralized level to create a policy and programme dialogue around their needs and to assess what their strategic priorities are for the question formulation.

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Examples of strategic priority needs and policy-relevant questions at national and sub-national level

	Strategic priority needs of stakeholders	Examples of questions
National level	• Revision of the MPPA • Decision over inter-sectoral budget allocation	• Can the MPPA targets for reducing chronic malnutrition be reached? • Should a pilot programme on community management of SAM be scaled up to all districts?
Sub-national level	• Planning of interventions; choice of interventions coverage by sector • Budgeting exercise within each sector • Human resources allocation and trainings	• How does the district perform on stunting reduction? • Should investments in community management of SAM be increased in this district?

4 - Refining questions to be answered with available data

4.1 - STEP 3: Refine questions to be answered with available data

Objectives:

- To finalise a **set of questions based on available data** and capacity

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Activities:

- **Activity A**: Map out the data and capacities required
- **Activity B**: Produce an analysis plan

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Outputs:

- Document with **final list of priority policy questions** that can be answered with available data and capacity, agreed internally by the NIPN country team.
- **Questions analysis framework** setting out availability, accessibility, quality of data and capacities required to address the policy questions.

4.2 - Activity A: Map out the data and capacities required

At this stage, it is important to assess the gap **between what is needed for robust data analysis to answer the policy-relevant question versus what is available**, as well as the challenges presented by the data.

The NIPN **policy experts** review the final list of priority questions for NIPN which comes out of the workshop in Step 2, to ensure these are fully aligned with the policy makers' priorities and the political calendar ('window of opportunity'). They also recommend the optimal order for answering questions by data analysis, to obtain initial results which could influence the direction of the analysis.

The NIPN **data experts** review the list of questions to establish whether they can be answered based on the technical feasibility criteria. To do so they will:

- Map out the **data required to respond to the questions against the data availability and accessibility**, while also taking into account data quality. The **data landscape** will be a helpful document for this exercise (**section 3.1**).
- Review the **capacity required** to access and analyse the necessary data using robust methods, within the necessary time frame. This capacity may already exist within the NIPN country team. If this is not the case, the capacity needs to be strengthened or acquired within the time frame in which results have to be produced. Ensure that these capacity development needs are adequately reflected in the **NIPN capacity development plan** (**section 1.3**).

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Framework for mapping data and indicators
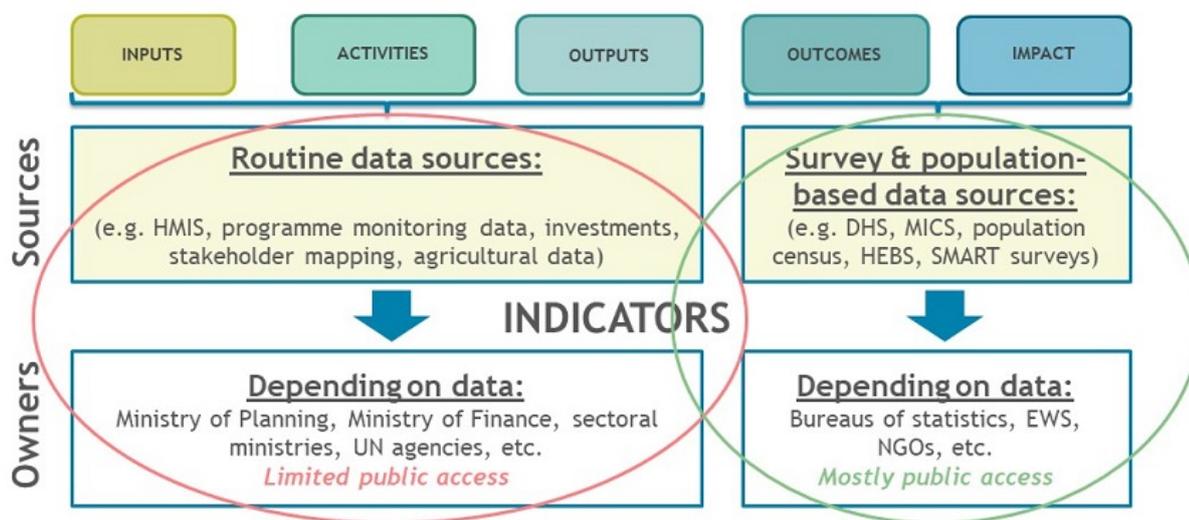
4.3 - Activity B: Produce a question analysis framework

Based on your review, produce a question analysis framework which sets out for each question:

- The available and accessible data, its source and quality, noting data gaps.
- The methods to be used for analysis and the time required.
- The tools and software required.
- The human skills required.

Refer to the examples of data mapping/questions analysis frameworks below.

Based on this high-level assessment of the technical feasibility, the NIPN policy experts and NIPN data experts will decide together on the final ranking of the full set of policy questions on which the NIPN team will work at the top. The question analysis framework makes it possible to document and keep track of the questions that can and will be answered completely or partially by NIPN, or others, and which questions have lower priority and for which the time and human resources' investment is not feasible.

Prior to beginning data analysis, the NIPN data experts will need to work out a much more detailed data analysis plan to guide the work of the NIPN data experts. This is further described in the guidance note on **data analysis (section 3.4)**.

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Example of question analysis framework in Mali (from the NEP)

Priority question n°1: "*What are the reasons for the Mopti region presenting lower level indicators in relation to mother and child health and nutrition than the other regions according to the EDHS-V (2015-2016)*"

Sub-questions	Data sources	Methods	Tools	Skills & capacity needs
Which MCHN indicators of the DHS-V are lower in Mopti than in other regions?	• DHS-V	• Calculate each indicator level with confidence interval in each region • Difference testing between Mopti and other regions	• STATA • Protocol for survey data • Protocol for data comparison	• Calculation of confidence intervals with STATA • Comparison between regions with STATA
How do the MCHN indicators of the DHS-V in the health districts of Mopti compare to the health districts of other regions?	• Database DHS-V paired with GPS data	• Data disaggregation by region and district • Estimate level of coverage indicator with confidence interval for each district (homogeneisation) • Comparison of indicators level between Mopti and other districts	• STATA • Disaggregation protocol for DHS data • Data homogeneisation protocol • Protocol for data comparison	• Use of the various protocols (disaggregation, homogeneisation, comparison)
For those MCHN indicators, what are the trends for the regions and health districts of Mali according to the various surveys (2001 to 2013)				

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Example of data mapping in a fictional country

Map the data available along the impact pathway and in time

5 - Finalising and validating questions

5.1 - STEP 4: Prioritise and validate questions

Objectives:

• To **finalise the priority ranking** of policy-relevant questions, with appropriate

justification and explanation regarding the priority questions that will be addressed by NIPN.

- To **obtain validation** of this final priority ranking by the MAC, who will ensure transparent communication of these decisions to the broader set of stakeholders.

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Activities:

- **Activity A**: Validation of the final priority list of questions by the MAC.

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Outputs:

- Document with **final list of priority policy questions** and justification.

5.2 - Activity A: Validation of the final priority list of questions by the MAC

In each of the three previous steps to formulate policy questions, criteria were applied to define the priority ranking of the questions. This final fourth step is important for **formalising the decision on the priority ranking of questions** and notably those questions which will be addressed/answered by NIPN analysis.

Furthermore, **transparent communication** about this decision to the NIPN stakeholders that have been directly involved in the various steps is crucial. These stakeholders are, for the most part, the ultimate audience to whom the findings of the analyses will be communicated for further action.

At the same time, a number of the relevant and important questions which have been formulated will not be eligible for analysis by NIPN. These should be part of a **'Question Bank'** to be constituted (see **text box below**). The MAC may request other nutrition actors to take on the task of answering some of these questions, though it must be expected that certain questions will not be answered. For instance, the MAC may ask one of the members of the SUN CSO network to carry out a literature study to collate global evidence on a specific topic (e.g. the effectiveness of MNP distribution) or it may request a research institute to study the impact of specific nutrition-sensitive agriculture interventions on the dietary diversity of women.

It is recommended that each step and decision is documented in a transparent manner, which will also help to manage the various stakeholders' expectations:

- **Prepare the final list of policy questions** which have been formulated over the three steps of the exercise, in order of priority ranking, with the questions for analysis by NIPN at the top, followed by the questions which can be answered by other actors, etc. Provide the data analysis framework for the priority questions that NIPN will answer.
- **Request that the MAC validates this list of questions** in an official meeting, with a formal sign-off. This validation is also important for obtaining approval for sharing data from data owners.
- **The MAC will communicate their decision formally** to all NIPN stakeholders, including a tentative timeline for the analysis of the priority questions.

Maintain a "bank of questions" over time

It is recommended that a 'Question Bank' is maintained over time - this is a list of all questions which have been formulated by stakeholders, ranked according to the prioritisation criteria. In this way, the NIPN team keeps track of all questions, their feasibility and how they have been managed or analysed.

The ranking of the questions constitutes the basis for dialogue with the NIPN stakeholders, in particular through the MAC. Questions will be ranked according to their priority: meaning that the priority questions which can be answered by NIPN come first, followed by the important questions which cannot be answered by NIPN but which could be passed on to other actors to be answered (e.g. by doing a literature review or collecting new data), and finally the questions which are considered to be of a lower priority, and will not be the focus of NIPN or another actor's analysis.

Transparent ranking of the questions in a 'Question Bank' will help to manage the expectations of a diverse set of stakeholders and contributes to a common understanding of what NIPN can and will do.