

NATIONAL NUTRITION INFORMATION SYSTEM

TECHNICAL
NOTE

**Building
a Strong
Core Team**



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Module 2. How does a national nutrition information system support a country's nutrition programmes?

Module 3. What is needed to build a useful national nutrition information system?

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Module 5. What are the main types of data used in a national nutrition information system?

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TECHNICAL NOTE

Building a Strong Core Team

A strong core team is an essential aspect of building and operating a useful National Nutrition Information System (NNIS). Having the right team in place can positively influence critical aspects of an NNIS, including its governance, management, design, operations, scale-up and sustainability. The right team will also have a positive effect on communications, productivity, accountability, and the use of data for decision-making.

INTRODUCTION

A core team that is fit for purpose must align closely with the specific requirements to build and operate an NNIS in a given country. Consequently, the composition of the team should reflect the fact that a useful NNIS depends on the input and support of the many stakeholders in a country's nutrition programmes, including government, civil society and international partners. It is important to balance having the right mix of knowledge, skills and expertise on the team with a right-sized team that can capably and reliably move the work forward.

The champions and/or parties charged with implementing an NNIS – e.g., directors of departments of nutrition; senior staff in a Ministry of Health; experts in management information systems – should use a *facilitative approach*¹ to build the core team and the NNIS. This approach actively engages and supports team members in the development and decision-making processes. It leverages the knowledge and skills of team members to ensure the NNIS meets the country's needs for accurate information for planning and decision-making and its expectations for a manageable, affordable and sustainable nutrition information system.

KEY ACTIVITIES WHEN BUILDING A CORE TEAM

A defining characteristic of an NNIS is the involvement of multiple stakeholders. For example, government is responsible for the policies and procedures that will affect the design and operation of the information system; government is also responsible for tracking the performance of nutrition programmes and investments, including the metrics used in monitoring and evaluation. Given that many nutrition experts work through civil society organizations, it can be important for these individuals and organizations to play a role in the collection and use of data. International partners, including donors and UN organizations, play a wide range of roles in nutrition information systems, from providing funding and technical assistance to collaborating on relevant national surveys.

The involvement of multiple stakeholders in an NNIS should be reflected in the structure of the core team charged with building and operating the information system. While many different structures can be used, a decentralized organizational structure is often preferred because it enables multi-stakeholder teams to be agile and adaptable by giving them the autonomy to make operational decisions directly. When building a decentralized organizational structure, it is important to be mindful of the number and contributions of the stakeholders on the

¹ <https://www.pon.harvard.edu/daily/leadership-skills-daily/what-is-facilitative-leadership/#:~:text=Facilitative%20managers%20engage%20in%20collaborative,and%20process%20of%20group%20discussions.>

core team; for example, having too many stakeholders may limit the agility and adaptability of the team.

Combining a decentralized structure with a horizontal or flat structure reduces the hierarchy of the NNIS team, respecting the expertise of team members and reinforcing their autonomy and agility. An overarching commitment to teamwork ensures that every member is focused on the same goal: A highly functional NNIS that collects and analyzes data to enhance nutrition programming in the country and improve nutrition outcomes.

The main components of the core team are (1) an institutional home for the NNIS; (2) a governing body; (3) an operations team; and (4) the collaborating stakeholders. These components can function in various types of organizational structures, but they can be optimized using a decentralized, horizontal structure that is team focused.

INSTITUTIONAL HOME

In the context of an NNIS, the *institutional home* is the organizational unit that provides the primary structure and support that is essential to the long-term viability and sustainability of the NNIS. Essentially, the institutional home (e.g., a ministry, department or bureau) hosts the NNIS and has overarching responsibility for its day-to-day operations. It provides a stable and supportive working environment for members of the NNIS team.

The institutional home is also the hub where the stakeholders in the NNIS come together to develop, deploy and operate the system. It is responsible for establishing and maintaining productive relationships across government institutions (e.g., ministries, departments and bureaus), implementing partners and bilateral, multilateral and/or international organizations involved in nutrition programmes in the country. It must have the ability to work across relevant systems and sectors to ensure key stakeholders actively support the NNIS, including providing the data that drives the system.

The best location for the institutional home will vary by country, based on credibility, capacity and expertise. Possible homes include the Prime Minister's Office, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Planning, National Statistics Bureau and specialized nutrition departments or institutes. If a single organization does not have necessary capacity or expertise to host the NNIS, the institutional home can be a partnership with different organizations playing specific roles. However,

a partnership approach will still benefit from having lead institution with clear responsibility for the day-to-day management and operation of the NNIS.

Issues of credibility, capacity and expertise are critical considerations when selecting an institutional home for the system:

- **Credibility.** The organization must have the stability, reputation, competence and accountability necessary to effectively manage and support the information system. A credible organization instills trust and confidence in users, stakeholders and partners. It is also well positioned to partner and collaborate with the various organizations involved with nutrition programmes and data.
- **Capacity.** In this context, capacity refers to having the necessary infrastructure, expertise, organizational support and resources to handle the oversight of the information system's development, implementation, operation, and maintenance. Capacity issues include management capacity, technical capacity and logistics capacity. For an NNIS, the institutional home must have its own internal capacity as well as the ability to mobilize and utilize the collective capacity of the different NNIS stakeholders.
- **Expertise.** The diversity of knowledge and skills required to build and operate an NNIS makes it extremely unlikely that an institutional home will have all the necessary expertise. As described below, additional expertise can be brought to the NNIS from other sources. However, the credibility of the institutional home will be enhanced if it has expertise in at least one of the key areas. For example, recognized and respected expertise in information systems or in the country's nutrition programmes demonstrates the commitment to the operation of the NNIS.

In addition to the overarching issues of credibility, capacity and expertise, there are also other practical and specific operational responsibilities that should be considered when selecting an institutional home for the NNIS:

- **Accountability.** Take responsibility for the overall performance, security, and functionality of the information system.
- **System administration.** Manage technology aspects of NNIS including access rights, user permissions and system configurations, maintenance and upgrades.

- **User support.** Assist users of the system; answer their questions and address their concerns in a timely manner.
- **Data management.** Oversee data governance and ensure data quality, security, sharing and compliance with relevant regulations.
- **Integration and interoperability.** Coordinate with other institutional systems, ensuring seamless integration and data exchange where needed.
- **Performance assessment.** Evaluate the system's performance; make improvements as necessary.
- **Documentation and training.** Maintain documentation for users and administrators; offer regular training to maximize the operation and use of the system.
- **Budget and resource management.** Manage the finances of the NNIS.

Questions to consider...

- **Which organizations in your country have the credibility, capacity and expertise to serve as the institutional home for the NNIS?**
- **How do the strengths and weaknesses of these organizations affect their ability to serve as the institutional home?**
- **Which key roles can the institutional home fill on the operations team for the NNIS?**

EXTENDED CORE TEAM

The challenge – and the opportunity – across the extended core team is to identify the right partners and people for the right roles within the team. Once in place, it is important to empower and support them in ways that enable them to do the quality work required to build, operate and maintain a useful NNIS.

GOVERNING BODY

Good governance is an essential component of an NNIS. While the specific structures and practices will vary by country, good governance is typically seen as participatory, accountable, transparent, responsive and inclusive.

The diverse nature of an NNIS, with multiple stakeholders from multiple sectors, places a premium on a participatory and inclusive approach to governance. An effective governing body (e.g., steering committee, advisory board) respects and values the range of stakeholders who contribute to the successful operation of the NNIS; it actively encourages input

from stakeholders; and it seeks out relevant advice and counsel from multiple sources.

A participatory and inclusive approach to governance does not mean every stakeholder group is a member of the governing body. Generally, a governing body should be large enough to include essential stakeholders but small enough to facilitate efficient decision-making and effective communication. Members would most likely come from lead government institutions and civil society partners, with the possible inclusion of bilateral and multilateral organizations and agencies. Experts in key topical areas (e.g., database technologies, nutrition data) could also be members. The optimal size of the body should be determined through careful consideration of the goals and complexities of the NNIS it governs.

Steering committees are widely recognized as an effective governance structure for information systems. Establishing an NNIS steering committee can be relatively straightforward in some contexts, while in others, it might require more extensive planning, coordination and effort. A clear understanding of the project's importance, its purpose, its structure and its stakeholder are crucial factors in successfully setting up and operating a steering committee for an information system.

The role of a steering committee in the governance of an NNIS is to provide strategic direction, oversight and high-level decision-making to ensure the information system aligns with its objectives, supports its users and complies with relevant policies and regulations. When selecting members of the steering committee, it is essential to consider the knowledge, skills and experience of individual members as well as the balance of knowledge, skills and experience across the full membership. For example, the steering committee would benefit from having members with specific expertise in national and subnational nutrition priorities, nutrition programmes, information systems, information technologies and data use. Smaller subcommittees or working groups can also be formed to handle specific aspects of the information system's governance.

The steering committee must have a close relationship with the institutional home as their ability to coordinate and collaborate will have a direct effect on the viability and functionality of the information system. However, it is also essential that the steering committee maintains a level of independence to ensure it can objectively monitor the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of the NNIS.

With a new NNIS, members of the steering committee are likely to have more direct involvement with start-up issues, particularly those related to strategic planning and implementation (e.g., regulatory and policy issues, budgets, resource mobilization, partnership agreements, system structure, security, data sharing, risk management). Over time, the steering committee will evolve into its oversight and support role, but it can and should remain a source of expertise for the ongoing operation of the NNIS.

Questions to consider...

- **Who has the knowledge and skill to actively participate in the governance of the NNIS?**
- **What is the best way to balance the various stakeholders and interests in nutrition (e.g., involvement of multiple sectors) while ensuring the governance is fair and representative?**
- **How will the composition of the governing body affect decisions made about the NNIS?**

OPERATIONS TEAM

In most contexts, there are five skill areas that are fundamental to the short- and long-term effectiveness of the operations team responsible for the NNIS: (1) information technologies (IT); (2) data collection; (3) data analysis; (4) quality assurance; and (5) monitoring and evaluation. These skill areas must also be supported by a strong manager or management team.

Ideally, the identified institutional home for the NNIS will have the capacity to fill key roles on the operations team. It may be possible to attach operational responsibilities for the information system to existing staff and/or consultants and contractors already doing similar work. For example, if the institutional home has a strong IT department, it could be leveraged to build and support the NNIS.

The exact structure and composition of the operations team depends multiple factors, including the stage of NNIS development and other factors. In the start-up phase, three of the most important factors to consider are the scope, budget and timeline for the development of the NNIS. Paying close attention to these three factors when structuring the operations team will support decisions that lead to a right-sized team that is fit for purpose.

A right-sized team for an NNIS is likely to be a smaller, streamlined one that can capably and reliably move the work forward. It should have the right mix of knowledge, skills and expertise to be highly

productive; it should use resources efficiently; and it should be accountable for results.

Box A. Fundamental skill areas for building and operating an NNIS

Information technologies

- Manages the technical infrastructure of the information system.
- Develops and maintains the software, databases, and data management tools.
- Interoperability with other relevant databases.
- Ensures data security and privacy compliance.

Data collection

- Responsible for coordinating and collaborating with partners/stakeholders who collect nutrition data.
- Direct responsibility for collecting data from health facilities, communities, and surveys (in some contexts).
- Ensures the integrity of the data collection system/process.
- Must include input from nutrition experts.

Data analysis

- Responsible for data cleaning.
- Conducts quantitative and qualitative analysis and generates reports on nutrition indicators and issues.
- Collaborates with partners/stakeholders to interpret and utilize data effectively.
- Must include input from nutrition experts.

Quality assurance

- Responsible for the accuracy and reliability of NNIS data and analysis.
- Conducts periodic audits and quality checks to maintain the overall integrity of the system.

Monitoring and evaluation

- Tracks the performance and effectiveness of the NNIS, including the contributions of stakeholders.
- Conducts regular evaluations to assess the system's use and impact to identify areas for improvement.
- Must include input from nutrition experts.

System manager

- Overall responsibility for the NNIS's operations.
- Oversees data collection, analysis and reporting processes.
- Coordinates and collaborates with partners/stakeholders to maintain the focus and value of the NNIS.
- Regularly reports to the steering committee on the status of the NNIS.

Note: Knowledge management is a cross-cutting skill area that could be jointly covered under data analysis and monitoring and evaluation. However, in certain contexts, it may be useful to have dedicated capacity for knowledge management within the operations team.

In conjunction with scope, budget and timeline, it is also important to consider the specific roles and responsibilities of staff, consultants and/or contractors in the operations team. This will likely involve developing basic job descriptions and/or scopes of work for each position to clarify and coordinate roles and responsibilities.

At a minimum, a basic job description and/or scope of work should include the following points:

- A concise overview of the essential purpose, objectives and outcomes of the role.
- A list of the specific tasks and responsibilities that the individual, consultant or contractor in the role is expected to perform.
- A list of the key collaborations and interactions with other stakeholders needed to fill the role.
- A list of the performance expectations associated with the role, including key metrics, targets and/or deliverables.
- A general timeline, including any significant milestones or interim deadlines.

In addition, there are other logistical issues that should be considered. For example, is a certain staff position full- or part-time? Should staff members be hired directly for the operations team or should they be seconded from the institutional home or other stakeholder organizations? Are certain roles and responsibilities better suited for consultants and/or contractors? What is the budget for consultants/contractors? Can they be local or international?

Finding the right balance between staff and consultants/contractors is a fundamental issue when assembling the operations team. Key points to consider:

Staff

- The day-to-day work of the operations team will likely be driven by in-house staff who have ongoing responsibility for specific aspects of the NNIS. Depending on the scope of work, in-house staff may be full- or part-time. In-house staff may be drawn or shared with the institutional home or other stakeholder organizations.
- The NNIS manager or team leader should be a staff position. In addition to coordinating within and across the operations team (i.e., staff, consultants and contractors), the manager must also coordinate with key stakeholders, including the steering

committee, the institutional home, IT/data partners and any development/funding partners.

Consultants/contractors

- External consultants and/or contractors can be useful when they have specific content or technical expertise. Consultants/contractors can also provide short-term support on targeted deliverables during different phases of NNIS development and operations; depending on the task(s), this type of support can be more cost-effective than hiring internal staff to do the work.
- Consultants/contractors can also be used to rapidly scale up the capacity of the overall team to meet critical deadlines or when additional expertise is needed.

Balance between internal and external team members

It can be practical to use a mix of staff and consultants/contractors for the initial development phase of an NNIS, gradually transitioning to a more dominant in-house team as the work evolves and the capacity of the in-house team develops. This allows for knowledge transfer and ensures that the in-house team retains control over the NNIS in the long run.

- With a more complex NNIS, there is value in using more in-house staff to ensure continuity and in-depth understanding of the system's development and content.
- For long-term and/or ongoing work, hiring consultants/contractors can be more expensive than building and using an in-house staff; consequently, budget constraints may play a role in deciding how best to balance the use of internal and external team members.
- Depending on the context, it may be more practical and efficient in some settings to have a small number of in-house staff who manage and support external team members doing the bulk of the implementation work.
- Shorter timelines may require more extensive use of consultants/contractors with the specialized skills needed to expedite the development process.
- If the data in the NNIS is sensitive or requires compliance with specific regulations, in-house staff can provide better controls and more accountable oversight.
- It is important to consider the long-term sustainability and maintenance of the NNIS. Having a strong in-house team is beneficial for ongoing support and enhancements.

As the NNIS evolves through real-world use, there may be opportunities to adapt the structure and membership of the operations team, so it has the capacity to continue to improve the performance of the information system. Over the long-term, the ability to be flexible and adaptable with the composition of the operations team is essential to the sustained success of the NNIS.

Questions to consider...

- **What is the right mix of staff, consultants and contractors? In terms of knowledge and skills? In terms of cost? In terms of quality? In terms of timeliness?**
- **What is the right-sized team to build and operate the NNIS efficiently and cost-effectively? What are the key factors influencing the size of the team?**
- **How can the operations team be supported to ensure they have productive relationships with other key stakeholders in the NNIS, including the governing body, data partners and the user population?**

COLLABORATING STAKEHOLDERS

The viability of an NNIS depends on establishing and maintaining collaborative relationships across the stakeholders in the information system. The diverse nature of nutrition means that stakeholders will come from many different sectors and perspectives, including health, agriculture, education, social protection and gender. And stakeholders will include different types of organizations (e.g., government ministries and departments, implementing partners, academic institutions, donor agencies and multilateral organizations). The challenge is to ensure the various stakeholders are aligned and working together to ensure the success of the NNIS.

When building relationships, it is important to clearly define the objectives of the partnership and establish clear roles and responsibilities for each stakeholder, including the institutional home, the governing body and the operations team. Each stakeholder should understand their contribution to the nutrition information system and how they fit into the overall strategy. It is equally important for each of the stakeholders to understand the roles and responsibilities of the other stakeholders.

The roles and responsibilities of individual stakeholders will vary based on the country context, but they will generally align with the fundamental skill areas associated with building and operating

an NNIS (Box A). For example, there are likely to be stakeholders with expertise in information technologies (e.g., operators of the national health management information system); there will be stakeholders who collect and supply data to the NNIS (e.g., implementing partners, multilateral organizations); and there will be stakeholders with expertise in data analysis (e.g., bureau of statistics, academic institutions). Some stakeholders may have very specific interests; for example, a donor organization concerned with resource mobilization, budgeting and burn rate related to the NNIS.

Box B. A note about monitoring and evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation are a fundamental skill area for building and operating an NNIS. In addition to assessing the performance of the information system itself, it is equally important for stakeholders to participate in regular reviews on the effectiveness of their collaborative relationships. The success of an NNIS depends on this collaboration and a robust and participatory approach to reviewing it is an effective way to keep it on track.

An essential best practice for collaborating with stakeholders is to establish an open and transparent line of communication across the group (*see Facilitative Approach*). This line of communication should be used to regularly share updates about the NNIS, both positive and negative. Open and transparent communication about relevant issues will support an environment where stakeholders can productively discuss issues and propose actions.

Open and transparent communication is also an effective way to build trust and respect among the stakeholders in the NNIS. When stakeholders trust each other and respect each other's perspectives, it can be easier to find solutions that work for everyone. This will help ensure the collaboration is effective and beneficial for individual stakeholders and the NNIS overall.

Box C. A note about data sharing

Data for the NNIS typically comes from multiple stakeholders in the country's nutrition programmes. It is essential to have data sharing agreements in place with this extended team of stakeholders to ensure the integrity and protect the confidentiality of the data. These agreements should be part of the set of IT and data protocols that specify how data is collected, stored, secured and used.

Different stakeholders may have different objectives and approaches related to their involvement with an NNIS, so it is vital to have a level of flexibility and

adaptability to deal with any variations. Flexibility and adaptability are also a valuable asset that can enable an NNIS to adjust to changing circumstances, objectives and expectations.

Questions to consider...

- **Which organizations and/or individuals are indispensable to building and operating an NNIS? Why are they indispensable?**
- **What can/should an NNIS core team learn from other examples in the country of a diverse group of stakeholders (e.g., government, civil society, international organizations) having a productive collaborative relationship?**
- **What initiatives should be in place to sustain open and transparent communication across the collaborating stakeholders?**

FACILITATIVE APPROACH

The number and diversity of stakeholders involved in an NNIS is an opportunity to use a *facilitative approach* to build and sustain a strong core team. A facilitative approach builds on the implicit acknowledgement that the value of an NNIS depends on the input and support from its collaborating stakeholders. This approach also works well with a decentralized, horizontal organizational structure for the team.

Facilitative approach:

A leadership or management style focuses on guiding and enabling individuals and/or groups to collaborate effectively and achieve their objectives through open communication and active participation.

The goal of a facilitative approach is to enable a group of individuals and organizations to work together efficiently and collaboratively on the information system. The focus is on creating an inclusive environment where team members of the core team can freely express their ideas, share their perspectives and engage in constructive discussion. It leverages the collective intelligence and skills of team members, leading to better problem-solving, higher levels of motivation, and ultimately, improved performance and outcomes.

The facilitator acts as a neutral guide rather than a directive manager. In the context of an NNIS, one of the challenges of using the facilitative approach is identifying one or more people who can act as an impartial facilitator while still having sufficient knowledge and experience to help shape and support the process. However, the benefits of this type of inclusive approach are significant, given the range of

stakeholders in an NNIS. It is important to note that a facilitator can be either an internal or external person; the key is their ability to be impartial.

One of the primary roles of a facilitator is to promote open and transparent communication within the extended core team. Actively participating in the discussion – and freely sharing their perspectives – helps build a sense of ownership and accountability within the team. The ongoing discussions are also an opportunity to pursue creative thinking and innovative problem-solving that will enhance the value of the NNIS. In addition, the discussions are a forum to resolve disagreements and build consensus around critical issues related to the information system.

By embracing the principles of facilitation and demonstrating a commitment to a collaborative and inclusive culture, the governing body and the management team can institutionalize the facilitative approach in the operations of the NNIS. By institutionalizing the facilitative approach in its operations, the extended core team can sustainably function in the collaborative, adaptable and innovative ways that lead to a more robust NNIS (e.g., improved technologies; better data and analysis) and more successful outcomes (e.g., improved decision-making; more effective nutrition programmes).

Questions to consider...

- **What factors should be considered when identifying a facilitator or facilitators to work with the NNIS core team? Are there good candidates – internal or external – to fill the role?**
- **What are the strengths and weakness of the facilitative approach in the local context?**
- **Overall, how will the facilitative approach affect the operation of the NNIS core team?**

KEY TERMINOLOGY

Data	Facts and/or figures; pieces of quantitative or qualitative information
Database	An organized collection of data stored electronically for rapid search and retrieval
Data provider	An organization that produces data; may be referred to as a data generator; see also data source
Data source	Type of data and/or modality of data collection (e.g., routine data, survey data); can also be synonymous with data provider
Data value chain	A framework used to guide the transformation of raw data into a valuable resource to better understand situations and improve decision-making
Disaggregated data	Data that have been broken down into detailed subcategories (e.g., by age, gender)
Indicator	Indicators make collected data understandable and useful for monitoring performance, assessing achievement and determining accountability. They can be used to determine a proportion (e.g., prevalence) and are often designed to track inputs, outputs, outcomes and impact.
National data	Data that are common to or characteristic of a whole nation; see also subnational data
Qualitative data	Data collected using qualitative methods, such as interviews, focus groups, observation and key informant interviews; generally expressed in narrative form, pictures or objects (i.e., not numerically)
Quantitative data	Data that are measured on a numerical scale, can be analysed using statistical methods and can be displayed using tables, charts, histograms and graphs
Routine data	Data continuously collected as part of a regular activity/procedure
Sentinel site	A dedicated location (e.g., facility, community) where surveillance data are collected
Subnational data	Data disaggregated by administrative units below the national level (e.g., provinces, districts, counties); may also include other breakdowns below the national level (e.g., urban, peri-urban, rural)
Surveillance data	Data collected on a recurring basis from designated locations (see sentinel sites) to provide insights on trends into a broader area and/or larger population

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