

UNICEF leads the evaluation of the Turkmenistan National Nutrition Programme

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PLEASE TELL US BRIEFLY THE WORK THAT UNICEF IS DOING IN TURKMENISTAN AND WHAT YOU DO SPECIFICALLY?



Siraj: In Turkmenistan, the focus of the current country program, which covers the period of 2016-2020, is young children and children with disabilities. We have four main program results that we would like to achieve during the current country program. The first has to do with support for decreasing preventable childhood mortality rates. We have unfortunately the highest childhood mortality rates in the region. This involves working very closely with the Ministry of Health (MoH) and the medical industry in strengthening the

health and nutrition system, working through the home-visiting nursing system, and prevention of development delays to prevent future childhood disability in the country.

The second component has to do with increased quality and inclusion in early learning, in particular learning in preschool age. Here, on the one hand we have been working with the Ministry of Education (MoE) in introducing play-based curriculum and increasing coverage for those children who can't attend preschool through Saturday schools. Right now, about 46 per cent of children of preschool age attend preschool and we have very big disparities between the capital, Ashkhabad, and the rest of the country. In fact, there are signals that this coverage may be further going down due to the economic situation in the country. On the other hand, under this component we have been piloting some of the ways in which to include children with developmental delays/disabilities into preschool. We have been working again with the MoE, in particular with the medico-pedagogical commissions, and with parents to try new ways of bringing these children back to prevent developmental delays and make sure that these children are slowly integrated into the mainstream preschool education.

Number three has to do with reducing social inequities and our main focus has been working with the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection as well as health and education in terms of introduction of social service and social work profession in the country. This is still work in progress. The work is incremental and only slowly moving ahead. I think we can soon reach an agreement with the MoE on the introduction of the social worker profession in Turkmenistan and then move forward in piloting social services. Right now, we have no social workers. We have only cash benefits that are distributed but nothing more.

Lastly, the program result has to do with strengthened social sector capacity to design, implement and monitor child rights-based policies. The country has just established (in 2016) an Ombudsman office, so we have started our collaboration with the Ombudsman office in terms of promotion and protection of child rights. But we also have very long-standing cooperation with the National Statistics Committee (NSO) in terms of generation and analysis of data on children. We have already partnered with the NSO in 2006 and 2015 around MICS surveys, and we are now preparing to conduct the next round of MICS in 2019.

Between last year and this year, we led the process of the development of the first SDG baseline assessment on the child-related SDG indicators in consultation with the NSO. Turkmenistan has a score of 30/100 on statistical capacity according to the World Bank -- very low in terms of generation and segregation and dissemination of data. I can say we are one of the few organizations that has moved on data generation and dissemination. For example, MICS is one of the very few data sources that have been published and the database is available in the public domain.

YOU HAVE AN INTERESTING PROGRAM IN TURKMENISTAN. PLEASE TELL US MORE ABOUT THE EVALUATION, “TURKMENISTAN’S NATIONAL NUTRITIONAL PROGRAMME”. HOW DID THAT COME ABOUT?



Aigul: The evaluation of Turkmenistan’s national programme examined both implementation of the programme and UNICEF’s role in supporting the scale-up of direct nutritional interventions and mainstreaming of the nutritional intervention into other sectors. There were four objectives: (i) To generate lessons learned evidence and to guide actions towards the development of the next generation of the nutrition program to be able to align it with SDG 2 achievement; (ii) to help define UNICEF’S role in supporting the country’s nutrition-related activities in the past and implementation of the next country programme for the next five years; (iii) to promote results-based management and evidence-based policy development and assess UNICEF’s role and contribution to programme implementation.

This was the first ever comprehensive evaluation of a government programme, which found high relevance of the program to expanding access to adequate child nutrition and quality food as well as health services. It was aligned with the global nutrition priorities. Also, the evaluation established that while the programme was consistent with the needs and interests, it was not targeted to the vulnerable and most at-risk groups of

the population because no special strategies for reaching out and targeting this group with nutritional evidence services was included in the past programme. In addition, the evaluation was also constrained by the limitation of access to and quality of data. The M&E framework of this programme, although developed with support of UNICEF, was not included in the package of the approved programme documents. Thus, it was not used to track progress. Also, we couldn't assess the budget due to the absence of information and allocation of financial resources for the implementation of the national programme, and efficient use of resources was difficult to track due to the input-based financing in use in the country. The evaluation of any state programme or plan of action is an issue in Turkmenistan due to the political sensitivity and complete lack of an M&E framework.

The exercise reminded us once again the importance of taking into account country context, including the political system, sensitivities with data and evaluation, issues with social desirability of respondents stemming from the political system and other factors.

GIVEN THIS SENSITIVITY, HOW DID UNICEF CONVINCED THE GOVERNMENT TO CONDUCT THIS EVALUATION?

Siraj: First of all, the conduct of the evaluation was in the workplan of the government, represented by the MoHMI, and UNICEF to do an evaluation. But very quickly we understood when we started that our understanding of evaluation was very different from that of the government. The country office commissioned its last evaluation in 2013, so we already were overdue to conduct our next evaluation. UNICEF has been working for quite some time with the government in nutrition, including salt iodization, micronutrients and fortification. Moreover, the government was now very actively considering the development of the next nutrition programme for 2018-2024, as the previous one was covering the period of 2013-2017. We thought this was exactly the right time to suggest an evaluation. But then we didn't want the evaluation to be limited to UNICEF's contribution only because we said if we (UNICEF and WHO) are going to support the development of the next country programme, it is important that the current programme that was coming to an end be evaluated first.

We had several meetings with the MoH to understand their understanding of evaluation was different. They wanted something very quick and done by someone just coming and looking at the programme. We tried to explain that for us there is a big difference because evaluation stands much higher in terms of validation of results, credibility and follow up. Then the next challenge was to persuade them to do it despite the fact that they had already started preparing the next country programme. So, we had to come up with a very ambitious plan for the evaluation to be able to still persuade them to do it and make sure that the evaluation still feeds into the development of the next country programme. At some point, the MoHMI even gave up, but after several meetings the decision about the evaluation was finally made. Without any promises we explained to them that while we knew that they had done a very good job in some areas, this was an independent exercise and that there would always be areas that require improvement. So, all of us, the MOHMI and UNICEF, had to be ready for such space for improvement.

THE WORK YOU ARE DOING IS COMMENDABLE. LOOKING AT THE GOVERNMENT AND UNICEF AND THE OUTCOMES OF THIS EVALUATION, HOW HAS THIS EVALUATION BEEN USED BOTH BY UNICEF AND THE TURKMENISTAN GOVERNMENT?

Aigul: The evaluation informed and provided valuable insights into the development of the NNP for 2018-2025 as well as to the process of integration of nationalized SDG 2 and 3 targets and indicators concerning children and women. UNICEF used the main results and recommendations of this evaluation to present it to the government, to the MOH, and all the interested parties.

During the evaluation process, we identified a couple of areas of nutrition-sensitive interventions with child diet diversification which can be promoted or presented not only at country level but at the regional level as a best practice. First, it is breastfeeding promotion programme, and the second one was successful universal salt iodization. So, encouraging the government with the presentation of the good results, then focusing on the need to introduce to the next programme an M&E framework to track progress and thinking about the costing of the next programme, which was very difficult due to the input-based financing system. We assisted the government with the development of the new country programme. The Ministry of Health assured us, based on this evaluation experience, that while the new nutrition programme won't have the M&E framework in the version adopted at high political level, the MoH will itself adopt the framework as a by-law for implementation of the NNP through a ministry order. This is one of the main outputs of the evaluation process.

Looking at the political sensitivities, we worked with the government in a transparent manner and built trust of the partners and parties involved. Overall, all recommendations are presented in an attractive manner and were shared with the government and are now being followed up.

The outcomes, evidence and findings generated by the evaluation, informed effective action planning and development of the National Nutrition Programme for 2018-2025, developed by the MoHMI in partnership with UNICEF and WHO.

Siraj: The evaluation informed the next country nutrition programme, but more important was the change in the way they see evaluation. Process-wise, we wanted to build trust. We were not keeping the documents to ourselves. All the inception and draft reports were shared with them. They reviewed and provided feedback, sometimes justified or because of political sensitivity. It was a very good process in general that from the beginning we were ready to go through. Now after this exercise two things have happened. One is they understood the importance of having an M&E framework for the programme. Even if the current template used by the country for strategic planning documents does not allow to have an M&E framework when it is adopted by the high level of the government, the MoH as per their promise is going to have a separate document with an M&E framework adopted after it is endorsed by the president.

Second, the MoHMI came forward to see if we can do the evaluation of the Mother, Child and Adolescent Health Programme for 2014-2019. It was we who pushed back and what was agreed between UNICEF, UNFPA and WHO was that it will be in the form of an assessment of the programme that is coming to an end in 2019 in preparation for the next generation of a similar programme. WHO already undertook one mission

and there will be a follow up to see if there will be sufficient data to conduct this assessment and to make use of its findings.

GIVEN YOUR EXPERIENCE, WHEN YOU LOOK INTERNALLY WITHIN UNICEF, WHAT TWO THINGS NEED TO BE DONE TO PROMOTE USE OF EVALUATION EVIDENCE AS WE IMPROVE OUR PROGRAMMES OR SET UP NEW PROGRAMMES?

Siraj: When we started, we knew that anything, any state programme here, will have an issue in terms of evaluability and that's a question we were asking ourselves, is that when we know that evaluability is an issue do we still not do an evaluation at all or do we start somewhere and see it as part of an incremental process of introducing an evaluation culture in the country. I think there should be a balance, especially when we talk about country-led evaluations and evaluation of a country programme vis-a-vis the contribution, we must be probably be a bit more flexible in terms of the standards and acceptability of an evaluation. Otherwise it's not going to start anywhere.

I think UNICEF and the UN evaluation rules are more targeting internal objects of evaluation and internal processes. When it starts going beyond and interacting with the government and involves evaluating a government programme and national plan of action it becomes a very different issue. For example, when it comes to evaluation and dissemination and use of evaluation one of the lessons learned in our evaluation had to do with M&E frameworks for national programmes. When the evaluation report was reviewed by the regional M&E facility one comment was that this is not a lesson learnt, this is something that everybody knows already but then we are saying yes, the international community knows about it. However, if in the future this evaluation is to be used and shared in the country hopefully with other ministries they should at least understand the importance of M&E frameworks because right now they may not realize that having an M&E framework for a state programme or national plan of action is so important. So, balancing internal and external use is one of the lessons learned.

ANY FINAL WORDS TO UNICEF COLLEAGUES WHO MIGHT BE IN A SIMILAR POSITION? WHAT ADVICE CAN YOU GIVE?

Siraj: First of all, when we started, we knew that we are dealing with very ambitious timelines. Ideally, the planning for this evaluation should have started in 2016 and continued with better design with maybe additional attempts by the government to organize additional focus group discussions and maybe even data collection. Given the time constraints and reluctance of the government to prolong the timelines and the very short window of opportunity that we didn't want to miss, we still wanted to go ahead despite the expected difficulties. We advise offices to start well in advance and know exactly what they are going to evaluate and ideally do the evaluability assessment. For example, we have started thinking about the 2020 evaluation already now, and even now we will have ambitious timelines. In our case, we know that the availability of data and accessing new data are going to be problematic. These things need to be planned well in advance.

Secondly, our main target is to instill the evaluation culture in our countries and to work with the government to gain their trust, particularly in sensitive political contexts such as ours. The product and process may not be ideal but at the same time it is very important that the government is part of it and we accompany and work with them through the process so that we can improve incrementally and do something even better in the future.

Last but not least, the evaluation must be an office-wide exercise. For example, this evaluation was one of the core results in the 2017 annual management plan of the office, requiring engagement of the whole H&N section, including a very able programme associate who supported the whole process, a CRM specialist, the representative, and myself.

Aigul: One of the recommendations to our colleagues is to involve all relevant government or non-government partners in the evaluation planning process and to involve them at each step and share information and all draft reports with the government partners, have transparency and build trust.

Also, to work directly with all involved parties to bring their attention and support. Finally, to have the ownership from the government. Because now we are supporting government to evaluate the current situation, to develop the next country programme cycle and to provide some technical assistance, but bearing in mind that the upper middle-income countries need to have capacity and ownership to handle all the results of the evaluation and recommendations of the evaluation. Also, to be ready to present results and recommendations of the evaluation in an attractive manner. It is an inspiration to government partners and opens a window to evaluation in challenging contexts such as in Turkmenistan.

Indirect outcomes of the trustful evaluation process can inspire government partners to continue with such practices and results in opening windows in challenging contexts.

Siraj: We also linked advocacy for introducing an M&E framework to the SDG adaptation and integration process. Within this process, there was a rapid assessment of all the state programmes and plans of action, which established that while there is very good coverage of SDG targets in the current state programmes, there's only one or two programmes that have got M&E frameworks. So, we used it also as an advocacy with the government to persuade them that the new generation of any plan, any state programme, should be results-based, should have an M&E framework, and ideally should be costed, although we know that in our context the whole costing debate is a different and difficult exercise.