

Lessons learned from zero hunger strategic reviews in Asia and the Pacific

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Introduction

1. The Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific has been at the forefront of the Integrated Road Map. Bangkok concluded its “first generation” country strategic planning processes in all WFP presence countries in the region in February 2019, which involved the successful completion of thirteen national zero hunger strategic reviews (ZHSRs).¹
2. Conducted between 2015 and 2018, these ZHSRs intended to contribute to and facilitate national efforts to adopt the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Goal 2 in particular. As country-led, multi-sectoral exercises, ZHSRs identified the actions required to accelerate progress towards zero hunger by 2030. Typically, they included a situational analysis of the country’s food security and nutrition (FSN) situation, identification of policy and programmatic gaps and responses, as well as key recommendations for how FSN can be improved.
3. Taking stock of the work undertaken to date, the Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific commissioned two independent analyses to generate lessons for future ZHSRs, as well as the “second generation” of the WFP country strategic planning approach.

Overview of the independent reviews

4. Synthesizing the various ZHSRs followed a two-step approach: i) a higher-level, analytical desk review of the ZHSR reports, carried out by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), and ii) a more in-depth and process-focused lessons-learned exercise, carried out by an external consultant through a survey and direct inter-action with a range of stakeholders involved in one or more ZHSRs.
5. *Analytical review:* IFPRI’s work focused on examining the underlying conceptual frameworks applied to each ZHSR process, in particular their utility in identifying challenges and the most relevant priority actions to improve FSN. The review also paid attention to how explicit and comprehensive the selected conceptual frameworks were applied in practice. Second, IFPRI reviewed the evidence base presented in the ZHSRs and to what extent it suffices as a sound analytical foundation for the recommendations of each report. At the same time, the research examined proposed policy changes and institutional reforms in view of their practicality. Based on emerging findings and informed by the lessons-learned exercise carried out in parallel by the external consultant, IFPRI proposed a set of *higher-level, conceptual* recommendations to inform future ZHSRs.
6. *Lessons-learned exercise:* Carried out by an external public health and nutrition consultant, the exercise focused on the partnership aspect of ZHSRs, how the process was approached and taken forward, as well as the main outcomes and follow-on actions in each country. The work drew on the perspectives of 85 individuals from diverse sectors involved in the development of one or several ZHSRs in the region. Complementing IFPRI’s work, the consultant’s findings culminated in a set of *practical* recommendations for future ZHSRs or similar exercises.

¹ ZHSR countries include Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Timor-Leste. The Royal Government of Bhutan opted for an alternative exercise while IFPRI, WFP and the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs of the People’s Republic of China conducted a review of China’s food security and nutrition transformation. The lessons-learned exercise considered both reviews although the WFP China country office is not under the Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific.

Key messages from the independent analyses

7. Based on the analytical and practical recommendations from the two exercises, a number of converging themes can be distilled. The following section outlines six key areas of action reinforced by both reviews and that will be considered for future processes.
8. **Stronger use of conceptual frameworks:** Conceptual frameworks are critical to guide the analytical work of ZHSR research teams. They help frame the most pressing FSN challenges for a country and lay out the logic for how to deal with those challenges through action-oriented recommendations. Stronger use of a comprehensive nutrition and food systems framework in the ZHSRs would allow for a more holistic understanding of FSN which considers how food supply chains, food environments and consumer behaviour inter-act and influence dietary patterns and nutritional status. Additionally, a food systems approach can offer insight into newer FSN issues related to changes in dietary patterns and emerging challenges including overweight and obesity. These issues are particularly relevant in the Asia and the Pacific region as many countries benefit from strong economic growth and rising consumption levels and simultaneously contend with increased inequality, demographic shifts and climate change. A better understanding of food systems would allow ZHSR stakeholders to review the advantages – and trade-offs – between various policy options and invest in the most suitable approaches for promoting healthy and sustainable dietary choices and eliminating malnutrition.
9. **Expansion of the multi-sector approach:** Recognizing the central role of the state in charting the path to achieving SDG 2, it is evident from the ZHSRs that progress cannot be accelerated without the full commitment of all stakeholders. It is therefore essential to bring on board all relevant actors, in particular non-governmental groups. Wherever possible, efforts should be made to expand the coalition behind the ZHSRs, particularly with groups that have been less engaged but have an important role to play in eliminating hunger, such as the private sector. This would allow for a stronger support base and broader ownership, thus mitigating the risk of losing national buy-in, which may be triggered by elections or other changes in government. At the same time, it would facilitate a broad distribution of tasks and coordinated action by a wide range of stakeholders.
10. **Enhanced accountability of stakeholders:** While the ZHSRs were broadly inclusive and reached out to all sectors of society at national and subnational levels, both the lessons-learned exercise and IFPRI's review highlighted that the value of ZHSRs will be enhanced if the process is able to instil a sense of responsibility and accountability among all individuals and institutions involved. The need for inclusivity and ensuring that the voices of all stakeholders are heard needs to be balanced with the prime responsibility and buy-in of governments in driving ZHSR recommendations forward – in line with their global commitment as signatories of the 2030 Agenda. The Lead Convener could play a key role in this regard by advocating for strong engagement of decision makers and inclusion of all relevant parties. Identifying the right champions – especially a suitable Lead Convener – and the right narrative to motivate the participation of non-traditional and non-governmental partners, in particular the private sector and sub-national actors, will be vital to maximize the utility of the ZHSRs and follow-through on recommendations after their completion. Additionally, both the IFPR review and lessons-learned exercise underscore the need for strong follow-up mechanisms to monitor and report progress, ideally based on a clear and shared agreement on an SDG 2 road map. These mechanisms are particularly important to impart greater clarity and accountability between the high-level ZHSR recommendations and required actions to be undertaken by specific stakeholders, including attribution of achieved results.
11. **Consider competing country priorities and pursue increased advocacy efforts:** ZHSRs and SDG 2 road maps should be developed with a better understanding of their relationship with other SDG commitments and national priorities. This requires stronger analysis of other ongoing or planned initiatives in-country, a better understanding of competing

priorities for country stakeholders, and a stronger empirical argument at times as to why resources should go towards enhancing nutrition and food security and the direct relevance to other domestic development priorities. ZHSRs were successful in engaging the highest levels of SDG 2 authorities in-country but would benefit from mechanisms that continue to raise the most pressing FSN needs beyond the launch of the report. To ensure that the momentum generated by the process is not lost in a very crowded space of competing analyses and assessments, the development of advocacy strategies should be an integral part of the process. A successful ZHSR, in particular a clear road map with agreed actions and responsible parties, would go a long way in serving as a powerful advocacy tool for various purposes and audiences.

12. **Deeper analysis of challenges for policy changes and related costs:** ZHSRs have the potential to improve efforts in analysing the challenges of policy change, including a better understanding of policy reform processes, implementation and institutional structures as well as their implications on progress towards eliminating hunger and malnutrition. It is evident that this requires specific expertise, which would need to be added to the research team. Overall, a deep-dive into how policy processes operate and how priorities are set, implemented and resourced, as well as what is required to maximize their impact, has been found to be an area that should be further explored and adapted to suit each individual country context.
13. **Elaborate links to other SDGs:** The ZHSRs provided an adequate overview of gaps and recommendations to address SDG 2 in a country. Yet, the articulation of interdependencies between SDG 2 and other SDGs remains limited. One possible solution is to broaden the scope of ZHSRs and add non-SDG 2 experts to the research team, if required by the country context. The process could also be expanded to other SDGs – SDG 1 (no poverty) and SDG 3 (ensure healthy lives) were mentioned by interviewees – while retaining SDG 2 as the main focus. To that end, better integration with other nation-wide exercises such as voluntary national reviews or the new United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF, formerly known as UNDAF) would be pertinent. The focus of ZHSRs on SDG 2, however, should not be forgotten when considering its scope and contribution towards a well-informed national assessment for achieving all seventeen Goals.

Way forward

14. As clearly outlined by the two independent analyses, it is paramount to more closely align ZHSRs with other similar initiatives and streamline processes to the extent possible. ZHSRs are intended to inform both national and United Nations planning exercises and have the potential to guide not only WFP country strategic plans but also the work of other United Nations agencies in the FSN arena. This is particularly important for future engagements under United Nations reform.
15. The Regional Bureau's effort comes at a critical and opportune time as the United Nations system moves towards the next generation of its country-level development framework. The new UNSDCF is expected to become the central governing and management document for all United Nations development activities, based on a broad and inclusive Common Country Analysis (CCA). This presents the opportunity to elevate the ZHSR approach and reposition it as one of the key analytical inputs for the CCA and main reference point for SDG 2 related prioritization exercises during the UNSDCF process. While the ZHSR would not be started afresh and rather updated to reflect latest FSN data and analysis as well as capture progress on the SDG 2 road map, this also means that the ZHSR needs to be closely aligned with the UNSDCF, both in terms of timing and conceptual complementarity. Appropriate sequencing of the ZHSRs as an integral part of the UNSDCF must be a main feature of the second generation.
16. As the increased authority of the UNSDCF over agencies' country strategic planning has implications on the current WFP approach, the Programme will leverage the lessons-learned presented in this document during the development of the second generation of ZHSRs. This will provide the opportunity to expand the support base among the broader United Nations system

and align future ZHSRs – or updates of existing SDG 2 road maps – more closely with other efforts and processes. Recent evaluation and audit findings urge WFP to support future ZHSRs jointly with the Rome-based agencies.² To ensure a coherent approach across food security and nutrition, other FSN stakeholders from the United Nations family should also be involved.

² Please refer to the following document which was submitted to the 2018 second regular session of the WFP Executive Board: [“Management response to the recommendations set out in the summary report on the strategic evaluation of the pilot country strategic plans \(2017 – mid-2018\)”](#).