Participatory Strategy Development at the United Nations (long case study version)

The need/opportunity

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations is funded by its 192 member states, employs around 6,600 people in 150+ countries and is headquartered in Rome. Its role is to lead international efforts to eradicate world hunger and poverty and ensure good nutrition for everyone. Nutrition is an extraordinarily complex technical area and malnutrition has persisted for many years around the globe. The reasons for its persistence are very complicated.

An external evaluation in 2011 of FAO’s nutrition work, funded by its member states, was highly critical and recommended that FAO put in place a vision and strategy to guide its nutrition activities over the next five years.

Stakeholder analysis

There are many public, private and not-for-profit organizations involved in nutrition, including organizations such as the World Food Programme, World Health Organization, Biodiversity, Oxfam, the Gates Foundation and UNICEF amongst others – plus many companies in the private sector. The international stage is crowded and the role of different organizations is often unclear. Internally, within FAO, there are also multiple stakeholders involved in nutrition work. They are tasked with working together to deliver FAO’s mission, but as is often the case, this can be difficult given competing priorities, high workloads, organizational boundaries and personal agendas.

External stakeholder analysis was a necessary first step in putting together a vision and strategy. Bringing together internal stakeholders early on was also critical, as their input would heavily influence both the content of the strategy and the way in which it would be rolled out.

Goals and objectives

The goals and objectives of the strategy work were to:

- Develop a new strategy and implementation plan for FAO’s nutrition work, covering the period 2012-2017, allowing FAO to reclaim its global leadership role in nutrition
- Think differently, challenging existing thinking rather than doing what has always been done
- Develop the strategy with the people who would be responsible for implementing it – i.e. take a participatory approach vs. imposing it later
- Align the nutrition strategy work with the simultaneous development of FAO’s overarching Strategic Framework
- Articulate all elements of the strategy clearly and compellingly for all audiences, and ensure nutrition could be “mainstreamed” across FAO.

Solution Overview

Helen Coley-Smith was brought in to work with the nutrition community and facilitate the strategy development process. Given the complexity of the task, the number of people involved, and the need to manage problematic relationships and divergent views, it was felt that an external facilitator could help get the job done more
effectively. Helen set to work by establishing relationships with the key stakeholders, clarifying with them what the objectives of the assignment were, what they expected from her and wanted out of the process, what a good development process would look like and what the deliverables and timescales were. She also talked to them about potential problem areas, pitfalls and risks, so that these could be taken into account from the outset.

Working with James Garrett, the FAO technical lead on nutrition strategy development, Helen put together a participatory strategy development process, which reflected the need to start the strategy thought process from scratch, whilst taking into account the findings of the external evaluation and existing nutrition work. It also took into account the need for a logical flow in people’s thought process, their relative inexperience in strategy development and the need to consult internal and external stakeholders along the way as the strategy began to emerge. The development process was shared widely and people invited to take part in it.

Alongside the development of this process, a number of key groups were formed:

- One cross-functional task group comprised of 30+ people, whose role was to provide input and give feedback as the process evolved – on content, tricky issues and process
- A strategy development group, which was the group that came together to develop the strategy and implementation plan, facilitated by Helen
- A Guiding Team, made up of senior managers with a stake in making sure that the strategy was robust, and developed and implemented well.
Helen facilitated a series of half and full day workshops, each designed to build on the other, focusing on:

- Vision and purpose
- Nutrition objectives
- Stakeholders and comparative advantages
- Work focus areas
- How to prioritise nutrition work
- Planning for implementation

Helen and James worked to ensure the participatory workshops:

- Were creative but logical in their content and flow
- Allowed everyone to take part, no matter what their grade or role and technical focus
- Had pace and direction
- Encouraged people to quickly fall into a pattern of constructive, respectful behavior
- Generated relevant, well thought-through content, building on the best of FAO’s nutrition expertise.

Alongside these workshops, James and others were having a lot of one-to-one and other group meetings to “thrash out” issues and content, however the workshop process was the backbone of the process.

Implementation and challenges

There were a number of challenges with the assignment, which we had to overcome:

- The number and nature of the people we had to keep involved, particularly the Strategy Development Group. We had people who had been working together for years, and didn’t always agree technically or respect each other personally. This could erupt in workshops if not managed sensitively. We also had people who didn’t know each other at all, and others we had to involve remotely. Many people had English as a second language. All of this was addressed through relationship building, by setting a constructive, respectful tone early on and by encouraging people to be more open and honest with each other. Facilitation had to be firm, confident and very well planned.

- The complexity and the intellectual challenge of the strategy development work was difficult for some people: for example some staff wanted to package together what was already being done and re-present it, others understood how to develop strategy and had more experience of strategy development processes, understanding that working “backwards” from Vision and Purpose results in a better thought process.

- Differing technical views were an ongoing challenge. People disagreed for example how much to focus on rural vs. urban communities, obesity vs. under-nutrition, regional vs. country level work, quantitative analysis vs. field work and so on. This is still an issue, but participatory strategy development flushed out many other technical disagreements or uncertainties, and an amount of technical disagreement is constructive in a scientific organization like FAO.

Results and evaluation

The goals and objectives have been achieved:
FAO now has its first ever Strategy for Nutrition and supporting implementation plan, which brings together thinking from across the organization. It provides a structure to mainstream nutrition across FAO, as well as reposition FAO within the nutrition architecture at country, regional and global levels.

The strategy has been developed with the participation of many FAO staff. It has a purpose statement, guiding principles, three core nutrition objectives, agreed target groups and prioritization criteria – all of which have been developed through participation. Reaching agreement through participation in an organization, which is very hierarchical and political is a significant achievement. The implementation plan details action by action what needs to be done, by whom and when.

Levels of participation in the development of the strategy have been high. Staff have taken part, who are both nutritionists and non-nutritionists, investing a significant amount of time and effort. External partners and representatives of member states have also taken part.

The new strategy responds to many of the findings and recommendations in the Evaluation carried out in 2011. It is also aligned with FAO’s mandate, constitution and goals and with the Strategic Development Process underway across the organization, in which staff have been reformulating FAO’s overall Strategic Framework.

For more information:

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