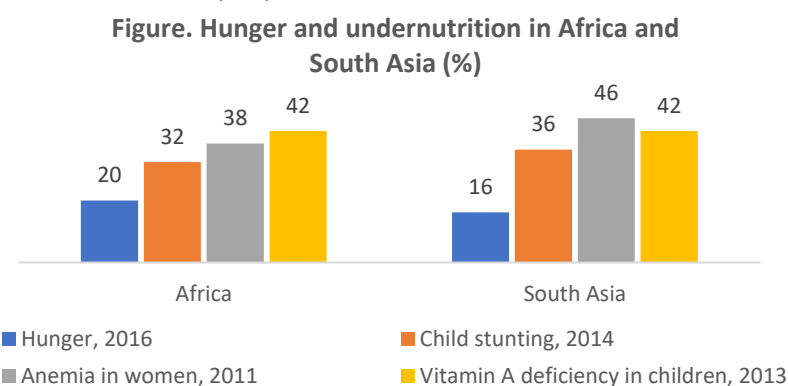


## South-South Learning Workshop to Accelerate Progress to End Hunger and Undernutrition

A South-South learning event was held in Bangkok, Thailand, on June 20–21, 2017, to share the lessons from Thailand’s experience in nearly eliminating hunger and undernutrition. The workshop brought together more than 50 stakeholders from government, the private sector, academia, and civil society from Africa and Asia—including from the Compact2025 focal countries Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Malawi, and Rwanda, and Food Security Portal project countries Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Senegal, Tanzania, and Zambia. The event was hosted by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) and Mahidol University and developed in partnership with [Compact2025](#) and the [Food Security Portal](#) project,<sup>1</sup> with support from [Nourishing Millions](#) and the [Asia Roundtable on Food Innovation for Improved Nutrition \(AROFIIN\)](#). A synopsis of the discussions is provided here.

### Lessons from Thailand for accelerating the end of hunger and undernutrition in Africa and South Asia

Hunger and undernutrition in Africa and South Asia are still at high levels, and progress toward ending them is not fast enough. In Africa, 20 percent of the population—230 million people—suffer from undernourishment and 32 percent of children under age five are stunted (Figure). Africa also suffers from high levels of micronutrient deficiency: 38 percent of women of reproductive age are anemic and 42 percent of children under age five are vitamin A deficient. In South Asia, the story is similar: 16 percent—281 million people—suffer from undernourishment; 36 percent of children are stunted; 46 percent of women of reproductive age are anemic; and 42 percent of children are vitamin A deficient.



Thailand has faced similar hunger and undernutrition problems. In 1990, nearly 35 percent of the Thai population was undernourished. Undernutrition was prevalent in nearly all forms—micronutrient deficiency in iron, iodine, and vitamin A, as well as child stunting and wasting—with alarming impacts on human growth and potential, as well as economic development. Yet through a massive effort, the country drastically reduced child and maternal malnutrition, as well as overall undernourishment, in a relatively short time.

From the 1960s through the 1980s, Thailand addressed high levels of undernutrition through several generations of planning and implementation of its Poverty Alleviation Plan (PAP). The PAP served as an umbrella for multistakeholder interaction, integration of nutrition goals into strategies and actions, community-based approaches, provision of basic services, and supplementary and complementary food production.

Multisectoral collaboration was enabled by Thai leaders, who championed poverty alleviation and nutrition. Moreover, Thailand used Basic Minimum Needs assessments to allow stakeholders to learn from each other and set

<sup>1</sup> **Compact2025** is an initiative for ending hunger and undernutrition by 2025. It brings stakeholders together to set priorities, innovate and learn, fine-tune actions, build on successes, and synthesize lessons to accelerate progress. Compact2025 facilitates knowledge-sharing and disseminates evidence-based research through its global and country K&I hubs. The **Food Security Portal**, facilitated by IFPRI, presents up-to-date data and information about dynamic developments in the world food system and increases policy makers’ ability to respond quickly and adequately. The Portal currently provides open access information on food policy developments for 29 priority countries in Africa south of the Sahara, Asia, and Central America and the Caribbean. It also includes research-based capacity-strengthening tools to help guide appropriate, timely responses and provide policy advice.

goals and indicators. Thai policy makers also established nutrition as the link between agriculture and food to health through, for example, the School Lunch Program and School Milk Program. These programs, by linking to local food and agriculture industries, helped to reduce child malnutrition.

Of particular importance was Thailand's community-based approach, which was underpinned by national commitment to sound nutrition strategies, goals, and support at local levels. Communities assessed and addressed basic services and made use of mass mobilization to prevent malnutrition. Thailand was able to mobilize volunteers through preexisting social structures. For example, individuals were identified by their own communities as natural leaders to turn to for help or advice. These volunteers participated in two- or three-week training courses provided by health facilitators and were supported with supervision, follow-up visits, moral support, and recognition. They became critical links between service providers and the community at large.

With this approach, Thailand made great progress and achieved the Millennium Development Goal on hunger. Yet, undernutrition has not been entirely eliminated, and the rising trend of overweight, obesity, and associated noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) raises concerns—a trend that is also occurring in parts of Africa and South Asia. To address these problems, Thailand is increasing its focus on food safety and quality, and on the inadequate consumption of fruits and vegetables. The country's current approach is led by a vision that “ensures food and nutrition security and is a sustainable source of nutritious and safe food with premium quality for Thailand and the world.”

At the learning event, presentations by distinguished experts were followed by roundtable discussions on (1) strategic planning and coordination; (2) community-led nutrition mobilization; and (3) tracking and monitoring progress.

## **1. STRATEGIC PLANNING AND COORDINATION**

A Senior Advisor of the National Health Commission highlighted the role of multisectoral planning and coordination in the Thai experience and pointed to several major enabling factors for progress on hunger and nutrition: clear top-down policy, vision, and targets; multisectoral coordination; sound strategies based on Basic Minimum Needs and quality of life; good health infrastructure from central to local levels; and a strong and consistent monitoring and evaluation (M&E) framework. The Basic Minimum Needs indicators linked the village development plans, through the subdistrict councils, to the district, province, and central levels. The provincial health infrastructure, which consisted of village health communicators and volunteers, and the provincial governance structure were also important for communication among stakeholders.

Participants discussed the key elements of the Thai strategy and policy for coordination between national and local levels and compared the Thai experience with nutrition policy integration to that of their countries. They agreed that the integrated approach involving multisectoral coordination and community participation was central to national and local-level coordination on nutrition. Additionally, political commitment, integrating nutrition goals in country targets, and an M&E system with rich data were identified as contributors to Thailand's success. Some participants mentioned that, unlike Thailand, other countries lack integration at national and local levels, and nutrition action is largely confined to the health sector. The lack of political will and leadership, particularly for coordination, budgets and a robust M&E system, were among other differences.

## **2. COMMUNITY-LED NUTRITION MOBILIZATION**

A representative of the Sustainable Community Development Foundation of Ubonrat Hospital of Thailand shared the experience of a community hospital, which was important for increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of community-led nutrition and health activities. Faced with limited capacity and overcrowding, the hospital implemented a new strategy to help staff provide care directly in the communities and in cooperation with the communities—including traditional doctors, health volunteers, and small grocery stores to provide essential

medicines. The hospital also worked with public schools to involve children and youth in planting fruits and vegetables and with nursing schools to train volunteers.



*Participants with Thai farmers at a farm demonstration site in central Thailand*

Discussions centered around the means of supporting community mobilization at scale in Thailand and current gaps in service delivery, as well as main lessons for other countries. Community-led selection of natural community leaders as volunteers, who were then supported with government incentives and active leadership, was deemed especially important. Broad community mobilization was also fostered by sharing of knowledge and skills and by formal training opportunities. Participants added that learning from others, especially regarding new ideas and innovation, are also important for scaling up. They identified current gaps in service delivery in their countries, mainly in communication, logistics, infrastructure, and motivation. The main

lessons participants drew from the session were the importance of community ownership and authority within a strong network, of making the link between food, nutrition, and agriculture, and of incentives for volunteers at a high level.

### **3. TRACKING AND MONITORING PROGRESS**

A representative from the Institute of Nutrition of Mahidol University discussed key elements for tracking and monitoring progress in Thailand. His findings showed that volunteers and mothers' groups were key to providing manpower, and the village development fund provided financing. Growth data from the monitoring program indicated a decreasing trend in severe malnutrition, but discrepancies in the level of malnutrition were noted. Several critical issues for further consideration were raised: precision and accuracy of data; timeliness of decisions and action; community participation in all processes; and community support through supervision and training.

Participants discussed the effectiveness of and improvements for the Thai system of tracking and monitoring, as well as how other countries could track progress on food security and nutrition. Many agreed that the Thai system was effective, especially in its community-led actions. Further improvements were suggested to involve the community in interpreting and learning from the data collected, and to incorporate modern technology such as GPS, mobile phones, and other digital platforms. Participants exchanged ideas on how the Thai system could be applied to other countries. Some noted that existing local community leaders, such as religious or local opinion leaders, could serve as leading actors at the community level, with appropriate organization. Many pointed to existing institutions or mechanisms that could serve as the foundation for tracking and monitoring, including active NGOs, agricultural investment tracking systems, multisectoral information systems, and focal points in various ministries. Participants noted the importance of capacity building at the local level to collect data, as well as the need for detailed planning of timelines and frequency of data collection.

## **Panel discussion: Accelerating Progress in the Face of Evolving Challenges**

A multistakeholder and international panel offered perspectives on how progress in nutrition can be accelerated. Panel members agreed that the challenge of nutrition is the business of many stakeholders, and that nutrition must be embedded into national development efforts. A common goal is essential to coordinate work effectively across multiple sectors.

Regional differences also play a role: Thailand was able to achieve cross-sectoral cooperation in large part due to its culture of inclusion. In Africa, how ethnically and linguistically diverse communities can best be organized in the context of cycles of political change remains to be seen. More integration of nutrition into African Union priorities

and plans would help guide country efforts. In South Asia, Bangladesh is moving in Thailand's direction, with organizations like BRAC leading the way for community-based nutrition programming. However, more multisectoral collaboration and strong leadership are needed to take national plans to action.

Data is key for guiding decisions from the policy level to the community level, and the need for more data, tracking, and monitoring was emphasized by the panel. Research can also help to reshape agriculture by integrating nutrition and health aspects, broadening the focus of policy beyond productivity goals. Developing curricula at the university level will help strengthen capacity for research and development.

The private sector is critical for advancing food security and nutrition. However, trust must be built to enable private and public sectors to work together effectively, and finding common values and language is critical. Engagement with commitment—beyond corporate social responsibility—from all stakeholders is necessary. Policies that help curb unhealthy diets—for example, a “sin tax” on sugary drinks—would not scare off the private sector so long as the playing field is level.



Multisectoral panel discusses how to accelerate progress

## Conclusion

Among the many lessons emerging from the workshop were five salient points:

- 1. Nutrition efforts must be country-driven.** While international organizations, development partners, and others outside of Thailand helped play a role, Thailand's success was driven internally.
- 2. Research is critical for producing knowledge, research, and policy advice for government.** Thailand established institutions such as Mahidol University that help guide national development and build capacity for decision making and implementation.
- 3. Community-led mobilization with monitoring and evaluation (M&E), supported by modern and innovative technologies, can improve tracking at all levels.** The mass mobilization of volunteers to track progress was a key feature of Thailand's success, and the experiences of African and South Asian countries suggest that information and communication technologies (ICTs) can be leveraged for even more effective and efficient M&E.
- 4. The private sector can play a key role in supporting nutrition efforts, given the right policy environment.** Policies such as taxes on unhealthy foods can be effective in fighting malnutrition, but they must be carefully crafted and enacted to promote productive engagement with the private sector. Finding shared values and language is critical.
- 5. Mutual learning by bringing together different countries and stakeholders is critical.** Participants called for additional knowledge-sharing workshops, including on how to build capacity for engaging with the private sector.

These lessons can shorten the learning curve for countries aiming to accelerate progress to end hunger and undernutrition. To that end, the findings from this event will feed into Compact2025's global and country K&I Hubs and will be communicated in participating countries and beyond.