ADVOCACY FOR STRONGER INFANT AND YOUNG CHILD FEEDING POLICIES AND PROGRAMS FOR DECENTRALIZED GOVERNMENT MODELS:

Lessons Learned From Alive & Thrive

Workshop participants show their commitment and support for PPN.
Overview and Introduction

As the government of Viet Nam decentralizes, planning and investment decisions are increasingly made at the provincial level. The Protein Emergency Malnutrition Control Program (PEMC) is the main programming mechanism for the National Institute of Nutrition (NIN) to deliver services. In order to implement this program on a nationwide scale, the government issued a decentralization policy to support provinces in developing more tailored and effective plans for health and nutrition to meet the needs of their own communities.

With the government’s move toward decentralization, Alive & Thrive identified an opportunity to influence localized nutrition policies through the annual Provincial Planning for Nutrition (PPN) process. PPN is an annual process in which provincial officials determine plans for nutrition-focused programming and then request funding allocations for the next year from the Ministry of Health and the Provincial People’s Committee to support implementation.

Alive & Thrive’s opinion-leader research conducted in 2010 found that while the national nutrition program is strong at the central level, it is not adequately prioritized or funded within the provinces. Additionally, the research found that there was a lack of awareness among provincial leaders about Decree 21, Viet Nam’s law to regulate the marketing of breastmilk substitutes. Subsequent research also found that key violations of the law were happening in provincial health centers.

Alive & Thrive worked with provincial authorities to build advocacy capacity among provincial officials to support their efforts to mobilize increased resources for nutrition, identify opportunities to better integrate infant and young child feeding into provincial planning and priorities, and strengthen compliance with the national code at provincial level.
Goals and Activities

Alive & Thrive set out to achieve the following ambitious objectives for its provincial planning for nutrition work:

- Develop plans that are locally contextualized and evidence-based;
- Integrate nutrition programs with other sectors in their localities to enhance cross-sectoral resources and impact; and
- Build political support and mobilize increased resources for nutrition.

To strengthen compliance with Decree 21 in provinces, Alive & Thrive set out to train provincial health leaders on the role of health workers and hospital and healthcare settings in complying with the law. The ultimate goal of the work was to raise issue salience and stop violations.

In 2010, Alive & Thrive, in partnership with Save the Children, developed and introduced operational PPN guidance to support provincial authorities in creating evidence-based, localized nutrition plans tailored to meet the needs of their communities. The guidance suggests a step-by-step process for provincial officials to follow—starting with consultative workshops to engage stakeholders, and data synthesis and analysis to support a plan tailored to meet local needs. The guidance included a profile on the nutrition status of each province, to be used as an evidence-base for planning; an integrated list of child malnutrition prevention activities across provincial/city departments; and planning tools and guidelines with updated knowledge, skills, and experience to replace top-down planning.
Alive & Thrive’s opinion-leader research revealed an evidence-gap that hindered decision-making in support of optimal IYCF practices. In addition to the operational PPN guidance, new province-specific data was gathered through an updated surveillance tool developed by Alive & Thrive, and incorporated into NIN surveys. This data served to inform the annual development of specialized PPNs in each province.

After the tools were developed, Alive & Thrive provided technical and financial support to NIN to present the new planning guidelines at regional workshops for all provinces in 2010 and 2011. The guidelines were refined in 2011 based on input from provincial nutrition planners. In addition, since 2010, Alive & Thrive has provided technical assistance to 15 provinces in Viet Nam to operationalize the guidance through a series of workshops and direct technical support. At the provincial level, the primary activities included: organizing consultative workshops from 2010 to 2012; organizing resource mobilization workshops in 2012; and organizing advocacy workshops at the provincial and district level in 2013 (see timeline).

**TIMELINE: Provincial Planning for Nutrition**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2013</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Partnerships</strong></td>
<td>Established key partnership with National Institute of Nutrition - NIN (supported in surveillance form development, data analysis, training and workshop)</td>
<td>Strengthened the partnership with NIN (supported in surveillance form development, data analysis, training and workshop)</td>
<td>Continued the partnership with NIN (supported in surveillance data analysis, training and workshop)</td>
<td>Continued the partnership with NIN (supported in surveillance data analysis)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Evidence base</strong></td>
<td>PPN Content Analysis</td>
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<td><strong>Materials</strong></td>
<td>Developed PPN Guidance for A&amp;T provinces</td>
<td>Developed PPN Guidance for all 64 provinces</td>
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<td><strong>Building consensus</strong></td>
<td>Initial meeting and discussion with PEMC (NIN)</td>
<td>Organized workshops with provincial stakeholders to comment on PPN and for resource mobilization. Supported NIN organizing regional workshops on PPN</td>
<td>Organized workshops with provincial stakeholders to comment on PPN and for resource mobilization. Supported NIN organizing regional workshops on PPN and disseminated the PPN Guidance</td>
<td>Organized workshops with provincial stakeholders to comment on PPN and for resource mobilization.</td>
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Key Results

• Annual evaluations demonstrated overall improvement in the quality of the provincial plans for nutrition in Alive & Thrive provinces across multiple indicators where technical assistance was provided along with the new guidance. The findings showed that the overall quality of PPNs clearly improved from 2010 to 2012 for almost all evaluated elements (i.e., objectives, evidence-based planning, multi-sector integration, resource mobilization, contextual data use, feasibility, and creativity), with the greatest improvement shown in evidence-based planning. Nutrition objectives on reducing stunting and underweight were set for almost all provinces, and thus were in line with the goal of Alive & Thrive. The number of PPNs involving sectors other than health was maintained over time, highlighting the challenge to significantly involve other sectors in the planning process. The number of workshops organized had some effect on the quality of PPNs; PPNs which followed the new guidelines tended to have better quality. Resource mobilization was maintained or increased by most of the provinces.

• PPN-related activities helped increase awareness of the importance of IYCF among local authority bodies, and led to stronger commitment and action. In Viet Nam, political commitment is crucial to ensuring the success of social programs. In some provinces like Ca Mau, the Provincial People’s Council (PPC)—the body that determines the provincial annual budget and objectives—became interested in IYCF, and hosted workshops on the importance of nutrition in the first 1,000 days. In Thanh Hoa province, representatives of neighboring districts (District Health Center, District Propaganda, and Education Commission) attended to gain experience on how to organize the workshop. At the communal level, some commune chairmen shared their interest in the franchise operation and committed budget to support and sustain the franchises in their commune. In 2012-2013, three provinces, and 18/66 districts of Alive & Thrive included “stunting reduction” as an objective of the provincial and district annual socio-economic development resolution, a direct result of Alive & Thrive advocacy efforts.

• The PPN process served to support sustainability of the Alive & Thrive franchise, and community support group models. In September 2013, a letter from NIN to all Alive & Thrive provinces announced that NIN would permit the use of National Target Program funds to support the Alive & Thrive models, and disseminate Alive & Thrive communication materials. Alive & Thrive encouraged provinces to include the model in their provincial plans.

“I am surprised at the situation of children malnutrition at our province. Although the budget allocation 2013 has been done, I will advocate the People’s Council to make a budget line of the province for nutrition issue in 2014.”

– Mr. Dinh Viet Ba, Deputy Head of Thanh Hoa’s Propaganda and Education Commission
RESULTS: Sub National
Improvement of Provincial Planning on Nutrition (PPN)

- **Conducting code monitoring and compliance trainings increased implementation.** On code monitoring and compliance, Alive & Thrive trained Women’s Union members on code monitoring, and in Alive & Thrive provinces trained 70 percent of Commune Health Center’s staff and 20 percent of Village Health Workers on the national code (compared to 2 percent in non-Alive & Thrive areas). Alive & Thrive also supported provinces to conduct Decree 21 monitoring; reports on violations were produced by an external research partner for each province, and were shared at provincial advocacy workshops. As a result, provinces have become more proactive in monitoring and training on Decree 21 with their own resources. In addition, all Alive & Thrive franchises committed to follow Decree 21.

**Lessons Learned**

- **Target high-level decision-makers to increase issue salience.** Working across multiple sectors and mobilizing additional resources were the most challenging aspects of the PPN work. Over time, the work adapted to include direct work with the political system and those with decision-making powers (in the case of Viet Nam, with the Provincial People’s Committee) to raise issue salience at the sub-national level in the same manner as activities at the national level. Governments are the custodians of policies, and therefore, engaging with the appropriate government partner from the start is essential. This often requires investment of financial and technical resources.
• **Capacity is needed at the provincial level for policy change.** Although decentralized planning and budgeting for nutrition is advantageous in that it avoids traditional top-down models and vertical planning approaches, it also raises a significant challenge of capacity for provincial advocacy and provincial planning for nutrition. Specifically, the planning process requires that provincial health planning teams have the ability, capacity, and authority to advocate with the provincial government for the inclusion of nutrition in the provincial plans and budgets.

• **Annual planning is an iterative process that requires regular adaptations.** On an annual basis, activities and results were reviewed, and lessons learned were incorporated into the following year's activities. Lessons emerged from feedback provided by provinces throughout the process, ranging from the need for more precise template materials, to ongoing technical assistance and feedback on nutrition plans once they are developed. We responded by refining and simplifying the operational guidance, creating new tools to address emerging needs of the provinces, and providing more in-depth technical support to develop the provincial plans.

• **Early engagement of government partners as full collaborators and implementers can offer opportunity for scale-up.** While the PPN process was initially an opportunity to build capacity in Alive & Thrive provinces, because NIN saw the value of the activity, they decided to brand the guidance as an official tool from NIN, providing it to all 63 provinces and encourage its use.

• **When possible, utilize opinion-leader research to guide strategy.** Alive & Thrive had the benefit of research findings that highlighted confusion about the planning process, and provincial stakeholders cited a lack of local evidence to tailor their annual nutrition plans to meet the unique needs of each province. These findings informed strategy, which involved developing the localized evidence-base and creating operational guidance to inform provincial leaders about the process, and to walk them through a step-by-step approach.
• **Key to success is the strong leadership of provincial health actors in nutrition activities.** The provinces that had the most improved PPNs were those in which strong champions emerged to effectively advocate to local bodies.

• **Stunting reduction must be formalized as an objective in the provincial and district annual socio-economic development resolution.** Experience with the provincial planning process in Viet Nam demonstrated that it is very important to have stunting reduction as an objective in the provincial and district annual socio-economic development resolution. This is a fundamental step to ensure nutrition is prioritized for additional resources.

• **Simultaneous advocacy at national and sub-national levels is needed for success.** While a decentralizing government offers opportunities, the reality is that Viet Nam continues to have a strong central government that holds significant authority and influence. Given this, provincial outreach was complemented by a central level advocacy plan conducted in coordination with key partners.