

Nutrition policies at schools: Opportunities & challenges in Lebanon.

Sima Hamadeh, Ph.D.

Nutrition & Dietetics Sciences Department

Assistant Professor at Haigazian Univesrity

Lecturer at USJ

sima.hamadeh@haigazian.edu.lb / sima.hamadeh@usj.edu.lb

Background: Because youth's eating and lifestyle patterns are influenced by a range of social and physical environment factors, it is important to develop policies that target the different levels at which these influences occur. Programs and policies of health promotion at schools should not be based solely on the evidence of scientific research but also on other evidence such as inclusion of personal experiences, perceptions and preferences, attitudes, values, legislation and resources. Thus, the qualitative information gained in the context in which health promotion activities will take place is of great importance and can lead to formative assessment and understanding of the specific context in which an innovation is going to develop.

Objective: To explore the facilitators and the barriers to the SSH* project implementation by studying stakeholders' perceptions of an eventual national nutrition policy in Lebanese schools.

Methodology: An integrated conceptual framework was proposed to explore stakeholders and youth perceptions toward school nutrition policy implementation from different perspectives where various levels of action, namely community, individual and organizational variables, are presented. These levels of action integrate concepts stemming from theories and models based on the social marketing approach to guide the planning and evaluation of programs.

Setting: Social marketing suggests targeting schools and the community. This could be individuals who are recognized leaders in their environment, networks that promote program support, and coordinating agencies which maintain the programs. The target population of this study consists of 32 multidisciplinary stakeholders who are active in Lebanese communities and 35 adults (directors, food services managers, parents and teachers) and 48 youth (ages 10-14) from 8 schools (rural and urban, public and private). All participants were willing to express their perspectives to explore the determinants of deploying a national school nutrition policy in the Lebanese context.

Data collection: Directed and semi-structured individual interviews with key stakeholders, students, directors and food services managers were conducted. For teachers and parents, focus groups were conducted with 6 to 8 participants including both profiles.

During the interviews, adults and youth participants were asked to answer a questionnaire of 25 and 30 open-ended questions respectively. Both questionnaires are related to the variables of the integrated conceptual framework of this study, which are grouped under individual, community, organizational and other variables.

Analysis strategy: Data from this research have been submitted to a thematic qualitative analysis. The first stage of this analysis involved the production of major findings for each interview. They were then grouped and reduced into common themes under the four categories of variables of the conceptual framework. The synthesis was iterative. Whenever new themes emerged, they were retained to be considered as facilitating factors or barriers to school nutrition policy development.

Next, the major findings were synthesized per respondent group (stakeholders, directors, food services managers, parents/teachers, and youth) to identify similarities or differences in their perspectives

according to the school profile, namely the geographic area (urban, rural) and the socioeconomic school profile (private, public).

Finally, the themes and synthesis of this study were thoroughly interpreted leading to a final exhaustive and complementary perspective from different interviewees.

Results: Data generated from our exploratory qualitative study using the integrated conceptual framework suggest that the following considerations may ensure school nutrition policy deployment and sustainability: 1. It is built on theories that can be overturned or confirmed; hence, it helps to improve knowledge in health promotion; 2. It is designed progressively so that interventions are appropriate for the stage of development of children and adolescents; 3. It seeks to tailor each intervention to the specific socioeconomic and cultural characteristics of the community members; 4. It emphasizes active participation of the community and incorporates ongoing consultation as an essential activity to identifying the real issues and challenges encountered in the community; 5. It focuses on the time commitment for success and good relationships between partners to facilitate activities in the community; 6. It uses multichannel communications, resources and services in place in schools to promote the concepts of ownership and belonging to the community; and 7. It reduces the overly heavy emphasis on school-centric approaches.

Conclusion: The exploratory qualitative research can help to better define a problem, to suggest hypotheses to be tested later and to gather perceptions of new concepts. Particularly in this study, the innovative integrated theoretical framework allowed enrichment of knowledge about the barriers and facilitating factors envisaged in the deployment of school nutrition policy in Lebanon as they are perceived by adults and youth stakeholders. These predisposing, enabling and reinforcing factors help the stakeholders and the decision makers in their promotion and communication practices during planning, developing, implementing and evaluating an eventual national school nutrition policy.