
PROFILES: Improving Nutrition through Analysis, Advocacy, and Program Planning

PROFILES is a highly effective computer-based process for estimating the far-reaching consequences of malnutrition, assessing the short- and long-range benefits of combating nutritional deficiencies, and communicating these findings to decision-makers.

Poor nutrition significantly increases the burden of poverty and disease by diminishing people's health, reducing their educational and economic prospects, and shortening their lives. Poor nutrition also hampers economic and social development on a macro level by reducing labor productivity and increasing the costs of health and education programs. Improving nutrition is therefore an essential element of achieving the Millennium Development Goal to free the world's people from the "abject and dehumanizing conditions of extreme poverty."

A Tool to Improve Nutrition

PROFILES is a computer-based software and advocacy process that helps make the case for improving nutrition. PROFILES has three main functions:

- **Analysis:** Using and manipulating the PROFILES computer models helps people to better understand the functional consequences of nutritional deficiencies and the

potential benefit of addressing them.

- **Advocacy:** PROFILES engages experts, community leaders, decision-makers, policymakers, and others in a policy dialogue about nutrition.
- **Program Planning:** PROFILES helps nutritionists, public health officials, and others design new nutrition interventions and enhance existing programs and policies.

(To find out more about the PROFILES process, see "More Information on PROFILES" on page 5.)

A Decade of Success

PROFILES was first used in Bangladesh in 1993. The process has since been used in 25 countries and has proven to be a valuable tool for increasing awareness and understanding of the far-reaching consequences of poor nutrition, particularly among policymakers.

For example, in Ghana, a team of nutrition and health professionals from

various government ministries, universities, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) used PROFILES to estimate that 5,500 infants were dying per year as a result of sub-optimal breastfeeding practices. The use of PROFILES in concert with other initiatives helped nutrition advocates address poor infant feeding practices and helped mobilize the government to include breastfeeding and nutrition among its top five child survival priorities.

In Bolivia, PROFILES was used to develop a communication strategy that succeeded in garnering high-level political support for a National Nutrition Policy.

In Bangladesh, PROFILES helped quantify the benefits from salt iodization and child nutrition programs: over a million child deaths averted, nearly \$200 million saved due to increased breastfeeding, and a \$3 billion increase in productivity among agricultural workers — all in just seven years.

In the Philippines, a presentation created using PROFILES demonstrated that an early childhood development program with a large nutrition component would pay for itself through increased labor productivity.

In addition to this kind of direct policy results, the successful application of PROFILES in many different countries has led to a number of refinements and improvements to the process itself. To remain effective as a tool in the future, however, PROFILES must be further enhanced to meet new and emerging problems. These include the need to combat chronic infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS, TB, and malaria, and chronic diet-related diseases such as diabetes, and hypertension; the need to increase intake of additional nutrients; and the need to adapt to new environments such as war or disaster situations, newly decentralized health

systems, and shifting political landscapes.

Assessing and Improving the Effectiveness of PROFILES

In an effort to assess the strengths of PROFILES and to identify opportunities for future improvements, an interdisciplinary team of six professionals recently evaluated the use of PROFILES in three regional workshops and in ten individual countries in Africa between 1997 and 2001. (Figure 1 outlines how PROFILES was used in these ten countries.) The team conducted telephone and face-to-face interviews with 49 people familiar with PROFILES, including representatives of NGOs, universities, governmental agencies, and bilateral and multilateral donors.

The interviews followed a general guide that was developed to gather qualitative information on six topics:

- The policy environment in the country before PROFILES
- How PROFILES was implemented, including origin, key actors, and dissemination of the results
- How PROFILES contributed to national institutional capacity in nutrition policy analysis, advocacy, nutrition leadership, coalition-building, networking, and information exchange
- How PROFILES contributed to policy change (i.e., the policy environment and perceptions about nutrition among decision-makers)
- The role of PROFILES in advancing nutrition in the future
- Anecdotes, experiences, quotes

The interviews were conducted in French and English; audiotapes of the interviews were transcribed; and the results were text-coded using a qualitative data analysis software (“EZTEXT”). The text coding was used to flag evidence relevant to a set of 46

predetermined hypotheses about the strengths, weaknesses, and results of the PROFILES process. (“AnSWR” software was subsequently used to analyze the results more effectively.)

What follows is a summary of the evaluation team’s key findings, namely, the primary strengths of PROFILES, key factors that help ensure the success of the process, and areas for future improvement and enhancement.

PROFILES Produces Positive Results

PROFILES Raises Awareness about Nutrition

In almost every one of the ten countries studied, nutrition had a low profile among political leaders, decision-makers, and the general public prior to PROFILES. As a result, there were many misperceptions about nutritional problems and there was a lack of human and financial resources directed toward improving nutrition. In most cases, the institutional framework was also inadequate and there was a lack of political support and leadership.

More than three-fourths of those interviewed reported that PROFILES raised awareness of the importance of nutrition and its consequences. They said PROFILES made a powerful impact on different audiences, including people in positions of authority in academia, government, NGOs, and donor agencies. By providing an overview of the consequences of malnutrition and offering clear alternatives to current programs and policies, PROFILES made a persuasive case for investing in nutrition that resonated with diverse audiences.

A senior-level government economist in Tanzania credited PROFILES with helping policymakers understand “the negative effects of malnutrition on

survival, growth, intellectual development, and future productivity.”

PROFILES Builds Consensus

PROFILES also helped develop shared understandings about nutritional problems, according to the majority of those interviewed. Several of the interviewees who work on a regional level noted that PROFILES has helped the nutrition community build consensus about the need to work together and also about the specific problems to be faced and the priorities for action.

The result of such consensus is more effective advocacy, according to an interviewee in Burkina Faso: “Since the nutrition community can articulate their better understanding of nutrition, the advocacy and communication efforts allow the general public to better understand the relationship between poverty and nutrition.”

PROFILES Provides a Flexible Communication Tool

In most cases, the PROFILES process involves a two-week workshop during which the participants develop a standardized analysis of the country’s nutritional problems. They also develop a policy presentation to summarize and communicate this analysis, particularly to policymakers.

PROFILES Produces Positive Results by...
...raising awareness about nutrition
...building consensus
...providing a flexible communication tool
...building capacity
...making nutrition a priority
...promoting more comprehensive strategies
...leveraging new resources
...better targeting existing resources
...promoting coalitions in support of nutrition
...developing the leadership skills of nutrition advocates

The evaluation team found that these generic presentations are often refined, refocused, and re-used for different purposes and, importantly, for different audiences. A number of those interviewed reported finding the standard PROFILES presentation to be easily adapted to serve various purposes, including one-on-one meetings, TV, radio, public events, and project planning.

In South Africa, “spin off” presentations have been prepared on so many topics — including vitamin A, breastfeeding, and IMCI (integrated management of childhood illness) — that the original all-purpose presentation is no longer in use.

PROFILES Builds Capacity

The evaluation team found that the PROFILES process (which as noted, is typically focused around a two-week workshop) is highly effective in developing the participants’ skills in several areas:

- analyzing relevant data about the extent and effects of nutritional deficiencies
- distilling clear trends and messages from the data available
- clearly communicating those findings.

One interviewee said, “PROFILES has really been like a god-send because it is one thing to understand your subject but it is another thing to be able to articulate the argument so convincingly.”

An NGO official in Ethiopia said that although her agency had already identified its nutrition priorities, “PROFILES helped us package (them), to use data to communicate information or to write proposals to make our activities stronger.”

PROFILES also builds capacity in other ways. PROFILES spreadsheet models are

being used in various countries to interpret new Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) data, to conduct situation analyses, and for long-term planning. PROFILES also has been incorporated into university courses and health worker pre-service training.

PROFILES Makes Nutrition a Priority

It is difficult to establish a cause-effect relationship, but about two-thirds of those interviewed credited PROFILES with directing more emphasis and support toward nutrition programs.

In Ghana, nutrition became the top priority of the Ghana Vision 2020 (First Step) health sector strategy. In Ethiopia, a nutritionist was hired to work in the prime minister’s office. In Kenya, nutrition received greater attention in the national food security policy. National Micronutrient Days were adopted in Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali.

PROFILES Promotes More Comprehensive Strategies

By providing an overview of the full range of nutrition problems, PROFILES helps decision-makers see the benefits of moving away from individual nutrition interventions and toward more comprehensive strategies. This was the conclusion of another recent study of PROFILES in Asia, which was supported by the evaluation team’s assessment of PROFILES in Africa.

One woman in Madagascar reported that, although PROFILES did not play a part in identifying the national nutritional priorities (they were already in place), it reinforced them by showing their inter-relatedness. The process, she said, also served as a departure point for discussions that led to better implementation of the existing policies.

A woman in Kenya felt the process made clear that “nutrition can no longer stand alone,” and pointed to the oppor-

tunities it created to demonstrate the links between nutrition and diseases such as HIV/AIDS, TB, malaria, diabetes, obesity, and hypertension.

PROFILES Leverages New Resources

The interviewees reported several instances where PROFILES led directly to increased financial support for nutrition. For example, in Ethiopia, the PROFILES process helped spur a partnership between USAID and the World Bank for health and nutrition sector development. And PROFILES advocacy led the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) to fund nutrition projects in Tanzania and Togo.

A UNICEF official reported that the PROFILES analysis was so effective in bringing the problems of child malnutrition to the attention of the Minister of Health in Togo that UNICEF almost immediately received a proposal from the Minister for a household food security initiative — a program that was funded and is now administered by a full-time UNICEF officer.

PROFILES Better Targets Existing Resources

The PROFILES process includes a situation analysis that examines the age patterns of malnutrition. In nearly every country, this analysis revealed the extreme vulnerability of infants and mothers. One health ministry official in Mali credits PROFILES with focusing the country’s attention on these high-risk groups.

Furthermore, PROFILES has also helped improve existing programs and policies. For example, in some countries where salt is required to be iodized, the practice is still not universal. A Ministry of Health official in Burkina Faso reported that PROFILES spurred them to develop a national plan of action for nutrition that “takes into account all of our priorities such as

iodine deficiencies (and) we decided to look again at the salt iodization policy.”

PROFILES Promotes Coalitions in Support of Nutrition

One important outcome of the process in most every country has been to build and reinforce networks and coalitions in support of nutrition. This has allowed the nutrition community to speak with a more unified voice.

One interviewee from Uganda reported that “people used to think and act as individuals rather than as a group to put across arguments. Now it is done by the coalition and it has managed to convince more people.”

And an official with USAID’s regional office in East Africa says that “PROFILES has greatly facilitated communications. We have a core group of people in each country who are interested and influential... PROFILES enabled us to identify and energize those groups of people.”

On the basis of such reports, the evaluation team concluded that “the social capital created with the strengthening of personal, professional, and institutional relationships among nutrition actors may be among the more valuable and enduring results of the PROFILES process overall, even though it may be less tangible than the more visible PROFILES products.”

PROFILES Develops the Leadership Skills of Nutrition Advocates

Nearly a quarter of those interviewed said that PROFILES increased the skills and confidence of nutritionists, helping them take the lead in advocacy efforts.

One NGO official who works in several West African countries said, “I see this growing confidence among nutrition people, this growing belief that nutrition is not a small thing but is central to the development of their

countries. A salesperson is someone that believes in the product, and I think that you see these people believe more and more in what they are selling.”

The Keys to Success

The Research and Data Must Be Sound and Credible

In order for the PROFILES analyses and presentations to succeed — that is, to be persuasive enough to spur action — the research and data used in the applications must be considered sound and credible to the local scientific community and to policymakers. The conclusions must be strong and the recommendations for action must be clearly stated and supported by evidence. Furthermore, the evidence must clearly demonstrate that the magnitude of the potential improvements is significant enough to outweigh the political costs of allocating scarce resources to address the problems.

Technical Guidance and Follow-up Are Critical

Making a convincing case for investing in nutrition often requires continual dialogue with the target audiences and ongoing refinement of the analyses and advocacy presentations. This generally requires technical guidance beyond what is offered in the typical two-week PROFILES workshop. In fact, the countries where PROFILES was considered most successful were the same countries where technical assistance and other follow-up were provided: Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Madagascar, and Togo.

Strong Leaders Are Required to Sustain the Advocacy Effort

In most cases, an advocacy effort must be sustained at high levels for several years to produce lasting changes in policies and programs. Those who lead the effort must be able to balance the technical and political aspects of the

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process, and they must be able to solicit the involvement of leading scientists and professionals as well as key stakeholders (including policymakers).

Therefore, another important factor for the success of PROFILES and of nutrition advocacy in general, is the availability of strong and effective leaders (individuals and institutions) who are national “champions” for nutrition.

The evaluation team noted the importance of “very vocal, very eloquent speakers” to the effectiveness of the advocacy effort in Ghana. In other countries, such as Mali, Madagascar, and Kenya, leadership was provided by a strong, broad-based, multisectoral coalition of professionals.

Some Opportunities to Enhance and Improve the PROFILES Process

The 49 people interviewed by the evaluation team were asked for their thoughts about how the PROFILES process could be improved. Based on their responses, and on feedback from others familiar with the process, the PROFILES team at AED is now pursuing a number of opportunities to enhance and improve PROFILES for the future.

Nurture Nutrition “Champions”

The evaluation team’s findings emphasized the importance of exposing more people to the PROFILES process, particularly decision-makers who can become champions for nutrition. Strong leaders are essential for sustaining the policy dialogue over time and for providing a broad vision for action.

Institutionalize PROFILES at the National Level

Another way to broaden support for nutrition is to integrate PROFILES into national poverty-reduction programs and strategies. This will make explicit the links between nutrition and human development and will thereby help ensure adequate institutional support for designing appropriate nutrition interventions and for securing the funding required to implement them.

Integrate PROFILES into Education and Training Programs

Integrating PROFILES into local capacity-building mechanisms is another way to build support for nutrition. PROFILES can be integrated into university curricula, continuing education programs, and pre- and in-service training programs for professionals. Again, the emphasis should be on the role of nutrition in poverty reduction and human development.

Improve Follow-Up to Support the Advocacy Effort

The typical two-week PROFILES workshop succeeds in laying a strong foundation for nutrition advocacy, but there is a need for follow-up over the longer term. Nutrition advocates need technical assistance to refine and refocus their messages to address specific nutrition problems, to translate their messages into multiple languages, and to communicate effectively with particular target audiences.

Strengthen the Scientific Basis of PROFILES

One of the strengths of PROFILES is its firm grounding in the scientific literature. To ensure its continued effectiveness, there must be an ongoing effort to verify and update the assumptions in the spreadsheets and models against new research.

Addressing New and Emerging Needs

PROFILES should be enhanced to include models and tools to address new and emerging problems and to help track progress in meeting various nutritional and development goals. One important need is to demonstrate the interrelationships between nutrition and specific infectious diseases such as

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...addressing new and emerging needs

HIV/AIDS, TB, and malaria, and diet-related diseases such as diabetes and

hypertension. Another is to provide advocacy tools for specific, targeted programs such as salt iodization or initiatives to address the nutritional needs of people in war or disaster situations or economic transitions.

Looking Ahead

A key strength of PROFILES is the fact that the process has been continually refined over the past ten years in a variety of settings, for a variety of purposes, and by partnerships among a variety of agencies and organizations. The emphasis now is to continue to enhance and improve the PROFILES process to be a more effective advocacy tool for the next decade and beyond.

More Information about PROFILES

PROFILES was originally developed by the Academy for Educational Development (AED) in 1993 with funding from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). PROFILES has been used in 25 countries worldwide and has been continuously revised and updated. Enhancements to and implementation of PROFILES have been funded by USAID, a number of international agencies, including UNICEF, the Asia Development Bank, the World Bank, and the Micronutrient Initiative, and the governments of the implementing countries. PROFILES has been used in the following countries, among others:

- West Africa — Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo
- East Africa — Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda
- Southern Africa — Madagascar, Mozambique, South Africa, Zambia, Zimbabwe
- Asia — Bangladesh, China, Indonesia, Philippines, India
- Latin America — Bolivia, El Salvador, Guatemala
- Middle East: Gaza
- Eastern Europe and Eurasia: Russia

For more information about the Profiles process, methodology, and tools, contact:

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Figure 1. Country Applications of PROFILES in Africa, 1997-2001

Country	Issues Addressed	Purpose(s) of the Profiles Workshops	
		General	Specific
Burkina Faso	Inadequate intakes of energy and protein, micronutrient deficiencies, suboptimal infant feeding	General awareness-raising at the national level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adopt the “Plan National d’Action pour la Nutrition” • Make nutrition a specific subset in the “Politique Sanitaire Nationale et du Programme National de Développement Sanitaire”
Ethiopia	Growth failure, Vitamin A and iodine deficiencies	Food security paradigm shift (focus donor policies)	Develop and implement an integrated National Nutrition Policy
Mali	Inadequate intakes of energy and protein, micronutrient deficiencies	Food security paradigm shift (focus government policies); general awareness-raising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement a national nutrition strategy • Implement iodized salt legislation
Ghana	Inadequate intakes of energy and protein, micronutrient deficiencies	General awareness-raising (national and sub-national projections)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen iron-folate supplementation program (pregnant women) • Strengthen Vitamin A supplementation program (lactating women; children)
Kenya	Mild and moderate malnutrition among children under age 2 and/or their mothers, inadequate attention to preventive solutions and lack of awareness among decision-makers	Help mobilize multi-sectoral nutrition groups; general awareness-raising at the national level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen Micronutrient Supplementation Program (distribution of Vitamin A and iron folate supplements) • Enforce the Food, Drug and Chemical Substance Act
Madagascar	Breastfeeding practices, intake of protein and energy, micronutrient deficiencies	Help multi-sectoral nutrition groups to present vision (national and sub-national projections)	<p>Implement the five priority actions of the Nutrition Service, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enforce legislation on the marketing of breastmilk substitutes • Baby-Friendly Hospitals • Enforce existing legislation on mandatory fortification of salt with iodine
South Africa	Training	University training tool	
Tanzania	Inadequate intakes of energy and protein, micronutrient deficiencies	Help mobilize multi-sectoral nutrition groups; general awareness-raising at the national level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen micronutrient supplementation program • Enforce code on marketing of breastmilk substitutes • Strengthen inspection system for iodized salt
Togo	Inadequate breastfeeding, protein-energy malnutrition, micronutrient deficiencies	General awareness-raising at the national level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Plan National d’Action pour l’Alimentation et la Nutrition” • “Code de Commercialisation des Substituts de Lait Maternal”
Uganda	Inadequate intakes of energy and protein, micronutrient deficiencies	Help mobilize multi-sectoral nutrition groups; general awareness-raising at the national level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enforce Food & Drugs Control of Quality (Iodized Salt) Regulations • Form/convene Infant & Young Child Nutrition Committee (1997 food & drugs regulations)

Source: Aguayo, V, Gachuhi D, Giyose B, Johnston B, Lwanga D, Mitchell A, Ross, J, Samba K, and Stiefel H. PROFILES: A process for nutrition policy analysis and advocacy — An evaluation of PROFILES applications in ten African countries. Washington, DC: Academy for Educational Development, February 2003.