



The politics of success in the fight against malnutrition in Peru



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ABSTRACT

The dramatic reduction in children's chronic malnutrition in Peru observed in recent years has defied the patterns of stunting reduction worldwide. After nearly a decade of stalled progress, the government reported a reduction in stunting rates of nearly 10 points, from 29.8% in 2005 to 18.1% in 2011. The specialized literature has acknowledged the critical role that immediate (e.g. increasing breastfeeding promotion) and underlying (e.g. investments to improve household food security) interventions have played in reducing stunting (Black et al., 2013), as well as the contributing role of enabling factors related to economic performance. This paper offers an alternative explanation to success by looking at the shift in the government's nutrition strategy after 2006 with the formation of the Child Malnutrition Initiative (CMI), a civil society working platform, and the adoption of a national poverty reduction strategy prioritizing nutrition interventions (known as CRECER) and conditional cash transfers (JUNTOS). The paper uses veto players theory to explain how these changes effectively contributed to policy change by reducing the effective number of nutrition stakeholders involved and facilitating policy agreements around a common policy platform and established goals. The Peruvian case also highlights the importance of the government's public commitment to reduce chronic malnutrition in children under five by 5 percent in 5 years ("5 by 5 by 5") and the accompanying role, advocacy and monitoring from civil society organizations.

The paper looks at the success of implementing the nutrition strategy in three dimensions. Horizontally, it looks at the coordination between government and non-government agencies to converge around a common policy discourse; vertically, it looks at the implementation of the nutrition strategy across national, regional and municipal governments; and financially, it looks at the coordinated and conditional allocation of nutrition funding and how this created greater incentives for horizontal and vertical coordination. The paper draws some theoretical and policy implications for improving the effective and accountable delivery of nutrition interventions in Peru and other countries outside Latin America.

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Introduction

Reviews explaining reductions in undernutrition have largely focused on the role of nutrition specific (Bhutta et al., 2013) and nutrition sensitive (Ruel and Alderman, 2013) programmes. Yet, only marginal attention has been paid to the political and institutional conditions that make these policy interventions successful. That is slowly beginning to change. Gillespie et al. (2013) review an emerging literature focusing on the set of enabling political conditions that facilitate effective policy changes beyond the technical design and implementation of policies. As their review notes, from a political and organizational perspective, it is relevant to ask for example why and when do key actors and government agencies

cooperate with one another to formulate adequate policies, why and when do national policies become effectively implemented at the state and local government level, and why and when does funding become available and effective to finance policy changes. Unfortunately there are too few country level analyses of these dimensions.

This paper looks at the case of Peru to explore the role of political and institutional factors in contributing to a dramatic reduction in child stunting since 2005. The DHS series of comparable surveys¹ show that in 1996 the rate of stunting in children under 5 years of age was 31.6%, in 2005 it was 29.8%, in 2009 it was 23.8% and in 2011 it was 18.1%. In other words, between 1996 and 2005 the rate of stunting decreased at approximately 0.2 percentage points per year and between 2005 and 2011 it decreased at approximately 1.95 percentage points per year—a ninefold decrease.

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¹ See the WHO Global Database on Child Growth for 1996, 2000 and 2005 and page 23 in the INEI 2012 report (in Spanish) for the 2009 and 2011 data.

This paper adopts a political economy perspective to explore the motivations and institutional incentives of different elected and non-elected actors to reduce undernutrition.

The Lancet framework for the reduction in child malnutrition (Black et al., 2013) builds on the UNICEF framework (1990) and highlights action at three levels: immediate, underlying and enabling environment. We acknowledge the critical role of action at the immediate (e.g. increasing breastfeeding promotion) and underlying (e.g. investments to improve household food security) levels. Here our focus is more on the enabling factors related to economic performance, social policy and civil society action that we suggest contributed to the sharp decline in stunting rates observed in Peru. From this perspective, the paper argues that government success in reducing stunting was the result of institutional changes that better connected economic performance to stunting performance. The paper concludes that this connection appears to be associated with a shift in the national Government's commitment to nutrition, the coordinated formulation, adoption, funding and implementation of new public policies, and the consistent support and monitoring by civil society coalitions. Long term policy coordination in Peru is the more surprising given that the country is known for a marked political disconnection between the center and the periphery and the prevalence of short term ambitions for elected politicians. Yet, the newly elected government in 2011 renewed and strengthened its political commitment to reduce children's undernutrition.

The paper proposes a framework to analyze coalitions for policy change, taking into consideration the different interests of government and nongovernmental agencies, the integration of agencies and programs between national, regional and municipal governments, and the allocation of government resources used to fund the government's nutrition effort. The paper concludes by reflecting on the extent to which the Peruvian case has relevance for other countries.

Approach and methodology

Producing policy change, whether is to reduce children's undernutrition by distributing conditional cash transfers to mothers or by improving the supply of micronutrients, requires the agreement and cooperation of key decision makers over a period of time. These critical policymakers without whose consent policies cannot be changed or implemented, are known as veto players (Tsebelis, 2002). Veto players are individual or collective actors that need to agree to a proposed change if it is to become a policy. As part of the complex policy process, these players can be elected or non-elected by popular vote (city mayors or high level bureaucrats), they can be single individuals or be clustered in representative bodies (Cabinet Ministers or Members of Parliament). What is common to them is their ability to block or veto any single policy that they oppose according to pre-established rules and procedures.²

The institutional literature on veto players argues that there are two complementary conditions for producing policy change: When there is an effective reduction in the number of potential veto players and when veto players share similar policy preferences (Tsebelis, 2002).³ According to the first condition, the number of required veto players could be reduced through the adoption of a more generous voting rule (e.g. a policy can be adopted by a simple majority instead of by consensus) or when many individual players

are subsumed into a collective actor (e.g. a political party). Along the second dimension, the ideological differences around policy choices can be reduced through the elaboration of a common narrative that unifies multiple veto players around a shared set of values. Both conditions reinforce one another. Swift policy change can take place when policymakers delegate authority to a single leader or an *agenda setter* to propose the desired changes, but the new policy can only be implemented and sustained when other stakeholders derive a visible benefit from this change in the long run. Otherwise the policy can be reverted in the next election (Haggard and McCubbins, 2001). In the absence of an agenda setter or *policy champion*, veto players could develop a firm and cohesive consensus around maintaining the status quo. Therefore, it is critical that a proactive agenda setter (or policy champion) forms and sustains reform coalitions with other (elected and non-elected) players to implement a new policy across different levels of government.

Building on these two conditions for policy change, this paper analyzes the extent to which a reduction in the number of veto players and a convergence of policy preferences helped produce policy changes that reduced children's undernutrition rates in Peru. This paper argues that the first condition was achieved through the formation of a common policy platform, the Children's Malnutrition Initiative (Iniciativa contra la Malnutricion or CMI) that convened the efforts of multiple stakeholders to provide technical, financial and monitoring support to advance government efforts to reduce undernutrition. The common policy platform motivated diverse stakeholders to develop and consolidate a single narrative around the benefits of reducing children's malnutrition. The narrative was endorsed by a policy champion, president-elected Alan Garcia who announced his governments' commitment to reduce undernutrition by 5 percentage points for children under 5 years old within 5 years ($5 \times 5 \times 5$). In this paper we analyze how the convergence of different stakeholders around a single narrative was reproduced at different levels of policy making including the horizontal coordination across government and non government actors and across different territories and local governments (vertical coordination). Finally, we argue that financial coordination of key nutrition programs at the national and subnational level was key to reinforce the coordination incentives of diverse veto players.

In order to document success strategies, the paper relies on case specific in-depth qualitative information regarding government efforts to fight chronic malnutrition, with some comparative quantitative information about trends. Qualitatively, the study builds on stakeholder interviews conducted during a one-week visit to Lima and Ayacucho during November 8 to 15, 2010. The interviews sought to explore and understand the coordination efforts and political dynamics around this successful nutrition effort (see Mejía Acosta, 2011 for questionnaire). In total, we interviewed 26 people selected from a broad range of elected and non elected government officials, non government and cooperation agencies, as well as regional and local governments in Lima and Ayacucho (see Mejía Acosta, 2011 for a list). Some of these stakeholders were key players in the national government (Ministry of the Presidency, Line Ministries), elected government officials (legislators, regional presidents and municipal mayors), donor and technical assistance agencies (USAID, UNICEF, World Bank), and research and civil society organizations such as IEP, PRISMA, IIN and CARE. In addition to the qualitative information, the study uses secondary data on nutrition and poverty obtained from a variety of sources.

Trends in enabling and underlying determinants

Might the rapid declines in stunting witnessed between 2005 and 2011 simply be due to trends in enabling and underlying and factors?

² We will not make an explicit distinction on whether veto players are critical for the adoption or implementation of policies, although it is feasible that selected veto players could block the implementation of a previously agreed policy.

³ The range of possible policy options that could replace the status quo is known as a *winset*; the greater the magnitude of the winset, the more possibilities for producing policy change.

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