

How to strengthen the influence of the Link NCA on the programmes?

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Study carried out between June and September 2017

By the Link NCA methodology Technical Unit based at ACF-France

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This report is a result of a number of interviews.

Certain verbatim are used to illustrate the analysis and can be found in boxes with a coloured background.

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1. Summary

This study on the interviewing methodology used for establishing the causes of under-nutrition known as Link NCA (www.linknca.org) has two objectives:

- 1/ Understand how the Link NCA is really used by operational teams;
- 2/ Identify, propose, and justify a set of modular solutions for improving the impact of the Link NCA studies on the operational programmes.

After performing a qualitative survey lasting 25 days during which 36 people were interviewed about the last 22 Link NCA surveys carried out, it would seem in particular that:

- The guide for the programming phase did not end up being used very much and was quite often modified. The internal programming phase was never developed in the end and it was in some cases the one that was modified the most.
- The operational objective of methodically preparing the programmes does not normally occur, however when it is, the influence of the Link NCA on the programmes is much better.
- Opinions are shared about how robust the practice of putting the causal hypotheses of the Link NCA into hierarchies actually is.
- Know how to create chemistry between the Analysts and the operational teams is an important success factor.
- The results of the Link NCA sometimes come up against technical or institutional obstacles.

Out of the eleven recommendations made by the report, three are of significant relevance:

- Design the Link NCA using the **logical framework of the project**: this logical framework, understood by all, requires that an operational objective is formulated not only as a general goal but also adapt it to simple Link NCA methodology so that it can respond to the same.
- **Improve the efficiency of the Link NCA**: specific pathways are proposed in order to optimise the resources and adapt the methodology for fulfilling the same specific objectives.
- **Put the Link NCA into context**: the latest 22 Link NCA can be classified into 3 operating modes (Define New Programmes, Start-up Phase, and Multi-Stakeholder Approach) and a specific humanitarian context (Refugee Camp). It has been proposed work from these 4 scenarios to prepare ad-hoc operational solutions.

2. Introduction

Since its development in 2012 by ACF France, more than 30 studies have used the Link NCA methodology (www.linknca.fr) in more than 20 countries. Link NCA methodology enables you to identify and prioritize the plausible causes of under-nutrition in a local context and is multi-sectorial with a holistic vision of the nutritional problem. Link NCA studies are therefore inevitably rather complex in a humanitarian context.

However, the main goal of the Link NCA is an operational objective: the human and financial resources required for a Link NCA study are to inform on the benefits to the communities of improving the existing programmes and/or developing new programmes.

The success of a Link NCA study is not measured on the quality of the analysis performed alone but mainly on the improvement of the under-nutrition prevention and treatment programmes which are expected to result from the same. In practice, the programming phase comes up against numerous obstacles.

In this way, the objectives of this study are to:

- 1/ Understand how the Link NCA are really used by the operational teams;
- 2/ Identify, propose and justify a set of modular solutions for improving the impact of the Link NCA studies on the operational programme.

After a short presentation of the methodology used, the report goes on to describe the current state of affairs followed by an analysis of the leverage and constraints on the programme for producing a list of operational recommendations.

Terminology:

Even though the term **Analysis of the Response** is probably the most appropriate scientific term for designing the phase between the results of a study and the implementation of the programmes (REF); the term **Programming Phase** is more direct and comprehensible. It is therefore more in line with the objectives of this study and the objectives of the Link NCA project.

3. Methodology

The study, lasting 25 days spread over June to September 2017, is rolled out in 8 successive steps:

Step	Activities
Step 1	Proposal of a Methodology
Step 2	Detailed meeting with the Link NCA Technical Unit
Step 3	Document review
Step 4	Meetings with key stakeholders
Step 5	Analysis of 11 Link-NCA studies
Step 6	Review documentation of relevant complimentary tools
Step 7	Interview in the form of a small questionnaire
Step 8	Summary and presentation of the results

First, 4 to 6 case studies were planned with a visit in the form of a programming workshop for the study. This visit was cancelled at the beginning of the survey which is a shame in terms of the quality of the information collected but freed up time to hold meetings on a larger number of contexts.

The documentation review (step 3) was carried out on the last 22 Link NCA between 2013 and 2017. The objective was ascertain for each study: the general objectives and specific objectives; the methodology used for the survey and the programming phase; a critical analysis of the results; the schedule of the process (from the beginning of the study to the publication of the results on the Internet) and the budget.

Detailed information (step 4) was collected from the last 11 Link NCA between 2015 and 2017 and from detailed interviews lasting 1 to 2 hours in each session. In total, 36 different individuals have participated in at least one interview.

The objectives for each Link NCA study are:

- Understand the nutritional, operational and institutional context;
- A critical analysis of the informal and formal reasons on which it was decided to perform a Link NCA;
- Clarification of the expectations of the different stakeholders ;
- A constraints and leverage analysis on the operational results of the Link NCA;
- The recommendations of the participants for improving the influence of the Link NCA on the programmes.

At the end of the study, a small questionnaire was sent to 42 targeted individuals (step 7). 24 individuals, representing 57%, have replied. The objective was to collect the opinions of the participants on the initial recommendations and clarify any outstanding questions.

3.1 Limitations of the study

The study must be operational and practical. The cancelation of the visit to the programming workshop scheduled in Dakar at the end of July 2017 has limited the study to telephone interviews inevitably a lot less rich in content. In turn, the study could cover a more important number of contexts.

Indeed, given the turn-over and the workload, it was difficult to gather together the operational field staff for the last Link NCA. The Link NCA analysts are very enthusiastic about actively taking part in the study and making recommendations. Out of the 35 interviewed individuals, 12 occupied operational posts at the Head Office, 8 performed operational functions in the field, 11 were Analysts or Members of the Link NCA Technical Unit, 2 carried out advocacy functions and 2 were sponsors.

The information available about the Link NCA was scarce and at times incomplete. The budgeted amounts and schedules are much to be desired.

As author of this study, I was formerly the coordinator for the Link NCA project for ACF between 2010 and 2015. This previous experience has not only served the purpose of gaining time but also has become a *de facto* element towards my assumed responsibility.

4. Results part 1: current state of affairs

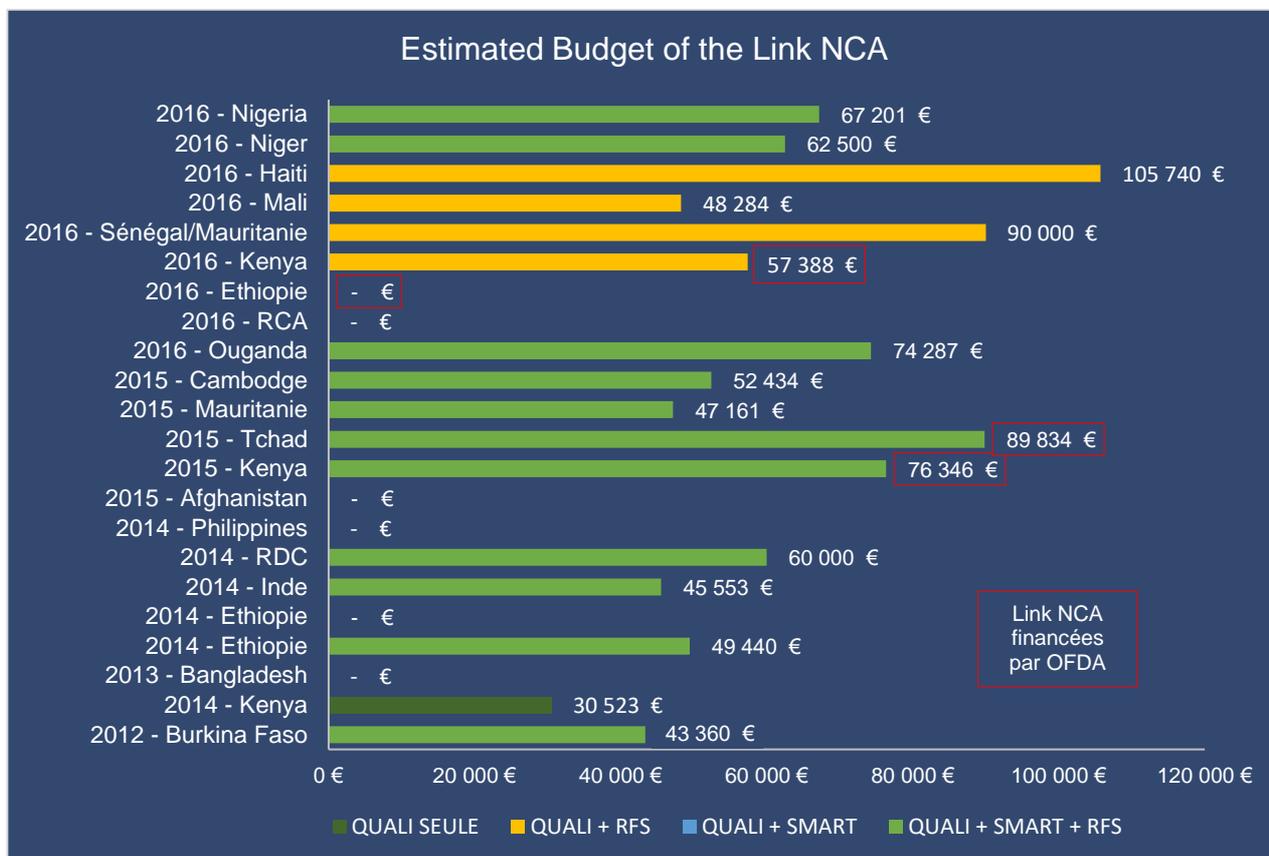
4.1 Current state of the last 22 Link NCA studies

Link NCA began in 2010 becoming a certified methodology in 2012. Since then, 22 studies have been performed. In order to reinforce the impact of the Link NCA on the programmes, a programming phase has been considered necessary. To fulfil this objective, a guide was published in October 2015. Since the publication of the same, 13 Link NCA have been carried out.

The guide on the programming phase is also multi-faceted. It proposes three approaches:

- A) An **internal programme** since the operational objective of a Link NCA is to define a programme at the level of the Organisation executing the study.
- B) A **community programme** (can be complimentary to the internal programming) since the Organisation executing the Link NCA needs to be present in the medium term in the zone with adequate funding. This approach ensures a high-level of ownership of the actions planned.
- C) A **multi-stakeholder programme** since the operational stakeholder defines a joint strategy involving several partners. In this case, the programme takes the form of a 3-day workshop regrouping all the partners to collate all the results of the Link NCA and define a multi-stakeholder strategy in which the Government takes a central role.

One might reasonably expect that the effort involved in terms of time and cost of a Link NCA should go down or stabilise as the methodology is mastered providing an advanced standard for interview tools to gain time as the partners get to know the methodology better. In fact this is not the case, it is rather the reverse.



4.2 State of affairs of the influence of the Link NCA on the programmes

It is difficult to measure the influence of the Link NCA on the programmes for various reasons:

- The specific objectives of the study are always clearly defined but the final operational objective seldom is.
- When the Link NCA are concluded, there is very little follow-up and/or formal capitalisation of the same.
- The Link NCA could have an influence on the programmes on the medium-term and therefore the influence of recent Link NCA are underestimated.
- Lastly and above all, responding to questions such as "And if there had been no Link NCA, to what extent would the programme be measured differently to that observed?" would be rather precarious.

However, a global assessment can be performed based on impact criteria. The results of this assessment is detailed in Table 2.

Table 2: Impact assessment of the last 9 Link NCA

Impact Ref	Criteria	Link NCA Ref responding to this criteria
1	The specific operational objective has not been met or not defined Other, negative impacts have been identified E.g.: the Link NCA has generated great expectation that has not been fulfilled E.g.: the Link NCA has delayed the programmes	1
2	The specific operational objective has not been fulfilled	3

3	The specific operational objective has been fulfilled in part or full but not on time	2
4	The specific operational objective has been fulfilled on time	2
5	The specific operational objective has been fulfilled on time in the communities targeted by the programmes A multi-sectoral dynamic for nutrition has been created	1

It may be noted that:

- 2 studies out of the 11 have not been assessed because they are too recent
- There is a wide variety of local situations
- The positive results outweigh the negative

This diverse situation is important for identifying the leverages and constraints of the programme.

5. Results part 2: leverages and constraints of the programme

5.1 A clearly defined operational objective

As previously mentioned, the Link NCA have been performed without the operational objective being clearly defined.

Some Link NCA have been carried out without any real operational objective but with a technical objective of getting to know the causes of under-nutrition better. The idea is that the greater understanding the operational teams have leads to better programming. This logic comes up against several constraints. First of all, the constraint imposed by the **renewal of teams** which jeopardises this "greater understanding" is not sustained over time. Then, there is the **dynamic** constraint. The Link NCA groups together a number of stakeholders who create the opportune momentum for developing these multi-sectoral programmes. If the programmes are not put into place rapidly, the whole dynamic could turn into one of frustration ultimately resulting in an **ethical problem**. The Link NCA require the time of several individuals often in a vulnerable situation. The analysis of the costs (creating expectation and investing time) and the benefits ("obtain greater understanding into the causes of under-nutrition") are becoming less obvious.

The foregoing conclusion therefore poses a problem of relevance. With no operational objective, is it relevant putting the mechanism of the Link NCA into place?

"At the beginning of the Link NCA project inevitably one has very little idea of the relevance of carrying out a Link NCA but access to funding is easier because of its innovative nature. Now, one has a better idea of the relevance of the same but it is more difficult to obtain funding."

Other Link NCA have a strategic operational objectives that are defined or, at times, implied. In these cases, the Link NCA promotes the multi-sectoral approach, takes standard emergency operational programmes to a different level, and, in turn, influences the political bodies and Sponsors. Under this scenario, the influence of the Link NCA on the programmes is indirect, remote, and medium-term making it more difficult to assess.

"Here the causes of under-nutrition are above all perceived from a Food Security perspective. The Link NCA have tried to dismantle this standpoint."

Lastly, some Link NCA have had a clear operational objective, and have been targeted and scheduled. For example, a call for a multi-sectoral project on nutrition was requested and a Link NCA was funded to analyse the situation in question. The Link NCA has, at times, even been used during the initial phase of a pluriennial project.

Figure 2 presents the results of the impact measured of the Link NCA with or without clearly defined operational objectives within the scope of the study.



Figure 2: impact measurement range (from 1 to 5) of the 11 Link NCA analysed with or without operational objective clearly defined

The following observations can be made:

- **The operational influence of the Link NCA is more evident for NCA having a clearly defined operational objective and proper funding.**
- **For Link NCA with clearly defined operational objectives, it is impossible to respond to the question: if there had not been a Link NCA but a standard requirement analysis carried out, would the project in question have been different/less relevant/not funded?**

5.2 A phase of adapted programmes

Multi-stakeholder programmes is the most frequently used method but only corresponds however to very specific contexts (Haiti and Senegal/Mauritania) and have the tendency to, at times, go beyond the set operational objectives. Ethiopia is a good example of this. Now that ACF has the objective of developing an internal programme after the study, a multi-stakeholder programming phase has been scheduled 8 months after the Link NCA were concluded. During the programming phase, ACF had already integrated the results of the study in order to propose new programmes. This could have been done, quite simply, as part of internal programming as recommended by the programming guide. As a result, only 2 Link NCA have a clear multi-stakeholder objective and yet 7 programming phases have been defined for the multi-stakeholder method.

The Cambodge scenario is a good example of when the objective is well defined from the beginning with the need to develop community plans of action. With this clear objective in mind, the Analyst can adapt their survey to respond within the timeframe of this operational need.

It is at times difficult to anticipate the course the programming phase will take. With this in mind, in Haiti, the multi-stakeholder programme has been progressively developed and to the extent in which the parties involved support the methodology.

5.3 A quality Link NCA

To define the quality of the Link NCA, efficiency criteria is being used. A quality Link NCA is an efficient Link NCA, that is, one that fulfils the specific objectives of the methodology.

When there is a strong consensus that the Link NCA helps to understand the causal mechanisms better, is able to measure the extent and severity of under-nutrition, and risk factors, then opinions are shared more extensively about the prioritisation of the causal hypotheses.

However, based on this criteria, the Link NCA are regarded as inadequate when compared with the initial baseline expectations that this type of consensus about the results, recommendations, and *in fine* use of the results for the programmes convey. Conversely, the Link NCA have created a strong dynamic amongst the activity leaders involved who are now more easily mobilised towards strategies and programmes.

It is worthy a mention at this point that the prioritisation of the causal hypotheses is probably the most difficult part of the Link NCA. The objective is not to demonstrate the casualty in the local context of the study (unattainable objective) but to base it on the cause/effect relationship and assesses if these relationships appear to be valid within the context of the study. The Link NCA prioritises better with triangulated data by the Analyst. Indeed, this prioritisation also reflects the objective that facilitates the clarified opinion of the stakeholders involved in the study.

In continuation, two examples are given that demonstrate the strengths and weaknesses of this exercise:

- Au Burkina Faso, a Link NCA identified the access to funding as the biggest cause of severe-acute malnutrition. The consensus was strong. A random, double-blind test revealed that the distribution of money had not reduced the prevalence of severe-acute malnutrition.
- A number of Link NCA have revealed that the time women spend working is the main cause for undernutrition. The time worked is difficult to measure and is given little consideration by Researchers, there are very few studies on this topic and show to-date rather contradictory results.

It is therefore perfectly acceptable to assume that future studies are going to prove contradictory to the results of the prioritisation exercise. Performing random tests on all hypotheses for all contexts is not realistic or feasible. Triangulated information by the Link NCA are, in some instances, sufficiently tried and tested to be used as long as it is understood that some results might be misleading.

5.4 Link between the Analyst and the Operational Teams

To be able to influence the programmes, the new knowledge obtained from the Link NCA must be transferred to the operational teams. At the same time, the Analysts must have strong support from the operational staff so as to carry out the study and understand the context. The link between the Analyst and the Operational Teams is therefore a key factor. During the interviews carried out, the following points were observed:

- The preparatory phase of the Link NCA is seldom performed by the national teams
- The Analysts take a lot of time managing Logistics and the Human Resources (HR)
- The Logistic and HR teams have a poor notion of the purpose of the work and the constraints of the Analysts
- The Analysts labelled with the being "multi-sectorial" and "scientific" feel, at times, solitary and even isolated which could result in them experiencing a "burn-out".
- The Link NCA can cause varied reactions from the Operational Teams. Some demonstrate a strong interest in the study and put themselves out to find the time to support both the technical and operational plan at the same time. Others show very little interest in supporting the same.
- A similar comment can be made on the institutional level; some organisations show interest and provide strong support, others less so.
- With respect to Link NCA recommendations, the same differences prevail: a Link NCA can be considered to be "not very operational" in a country and at the same time be considered "very operational" by the same Analyst.

This chemistry is very difficult to get right due to the human factor involved but is very important. Certain factors however have been highlighted by the interlocutors:

- Mission training (technical teams) on the Link NCA has proved positive. Conversely, Logistics and HR teams never receive training and know very little about the methodology and its specific needs.
- Likewise, the Analysts are not trained on managing Logistics or HR resources.
- The presentations/workshops between Analysts and Operational Teams and between the team should be encouraged in addition to those workshops covering the methodology. It is during these sessions that knowledge can be transferred more so than in an official workshop with external partners.
- Having a focal point in terms of funding is essential but to have one at regional level would be a positive addition.

"The technical recommendations I make are not sufficiently technical."

"The results of the Link NCA are not sufficiently operational."

"Hunger prevails, not precise enough, too general."

"The operational recommendations are not the strong point of the Analysts but it is what the reader reads first and can leave a rather detrimental impression."

"I love reading the 150p report."

"It is important to have a true vocation for the mission when carrying out the Link NCA. Quality information with respect to the extent of the workload needs to be available."

5.5 Institutional framework not always adapted

One of the ethos of a Link NCA is the promotion of a very open approach to new intervention strategies. The new proposals made for the Link NCA come up against obstacles when practices need to be adapted.

From personal experience after having carrying out the interviews, I could make the same comment I made five years ago: despite the fact that virtually all of the 30 Link NCA performed have identified that the time the women spend working is a significant contributory or main contributory risk factor, no project to-date has focussed on this specific objective to reduce the workload of these women. It is clear that the work load is considered more and more from the perspective that "this farming program is not going to increase the work load" and yet there is no initiative that makes this issue its central theme. The Link NCA has done its work identifying and prioritising the risk factors but the institutions have not adapted their operational programmes because it does not form part of the strategy framework established, above all for such a complex issue.

"The Link NCA has shown that the traditional healers are very familiar with the condition of under-nutrition and they know the existence of the under-nutrition treatment programmes. The project directly after the Link NCA almost always focuses on making the traditional healers aware of the same models of the previous project."

"Using the results from the Link NCA there is the requirement to go beyond the under-nutrition prevention operational programmes. A global project has been proposed costing €15M. The sponsor has donated €2M."

Internally it has been decided to destine this funding to treating under-nutrition, the complete opposite to the initial objective. This is a strategic decision, not a technical one.”

“A day-care system for children has been proposed, but the Authorities are not in the least interested.”

The Link NCA is a tool adapted to provide input to a multi-sectoral, technical strategy of an organisation. This strategic approach can vary from one organisation to another. There appears to be a tendency not to centralise, nor standardise the strategic approach. Indeed, the Link NCA can only provide input to the technical strategy on a case-by-case basis having to adapt on each occasion.

“The problem does not lie with the Link NCA but on how we plan the projects. The 6-month long projects must align with a more long-term strategy.”

“It is difficult to implement the recommendations made by the Link NCA since the majority of them are medium-term, and funding is only available for emergency situations.”

“The years between 2009 and 2015 were more buoyant, but thereafter a multi-sectoral action plan for the Link NCA could not be developed.”

6. Recommendations

6.1 Logical Framework: technical results for an operational objective

Faced with the problems identified, the use of a logical framework presents several pertinent and pragmatic advantages:

- **The global objective and specific objectives must be formulated and validated:**
Currently, the Link NCA are fixed by objective to fulfil the 6 standard results (assess the prevalence of under-nutrition, and risk factors, identify the possible causes, etc.). The specific operational objectives (“develop a new programme”) are not always formulated which gives way to misunderstandings and under performance resulting in the specific operational objectives appearing to not have been fulfilled.
- **Use the specific operational objectives to define the technical results and the required activities not the other way around:**
To improve the operational impact, it would be preferable to assure that the survey responds to the operational objective delimited above all to guarantee that a complex survey has the potential to respond to a multitude of theoretic objectives.

“It is essential to assure that the missions understand the purpose of the Link NCA and how the results are going to be integrated. What is the added-value of the Link NCA? How am I going to use the results? The answers to these questions are not clear to the teams.”

- **Use a programming tool that everyone can understand:**
The logical framework is a tool that everyone can understand, easy to use, and to read. It is an efficient communication tool underpinning the contribution of each individual, the expected results and the logistics and human resources needed.
The logical framework supports the programming tools proprietary to each organisation (operational schedule, budget, and activity monitoring) that are easy to use for managing a Link NCA without creating other side-by-side tools.
- **Control the deadlines:**
A schedule is planned for all Link NCA. Including the Link NCA in a logical framework with a specific operational objective can also be an opportunity to coordinate the operational schedule with the survey schedule. The objective is not just performing the survey in 5 months rather being able to produce the report on time or to hold the workshop when it needs to take place.

“There is always so much work to do that the set deadlines are never met. There is a need to improve the pre-visibility of the Link NCA and be able to give advance notice on when it is going to end with a high-degree of certainty and without burning out the teams.”

The experience gained can now be used to define realistic schedules without too much pressure being placed on the Analysts.

- **Identify the steps missing in the process:**

The logical framework identifies the results but also a process. It highlights if the results once obtained are necessary or sufficient for fulfilling the specific operational objective. In this way, if the operational objective is to redirect a logical framework to a new programme, the question of how to pass from the Link NCA report (result) to the logical framework (specific operational objective) is clearly posed. Who is responsible for the preparation of the logical framework? What needs to be done to redirect the logical framework? These questions must be raised and answered when preparing each Link NCA. The logical framework helps to identify these questions.

6.2 Follow-up, Assessment, and Evaluation of the Link NCA

During this study, it has been difficult at times to collate and centralise information about the previously performed Link NCA and, in turn, their efficiency and impact on the programme the format of the logical framework could be used to define and follow-up on objective indicators.

Evaluate that which is not measured:

The logical framework also evaluates the participative approach to the Link NCA. However, the Link NCA does not only produce a report with recommendations but also the prerequisites for guaranteeing the quality of future food security programmes.

- The Link NCA structures, justifies and **conveys the opinion of the communities**. The scientific knowledge and technical expertise are confronted with the reality of the human condition that is diverse and complex.
- The Link NCA also makes the **operational stakeholders and decision-makers more aware** of the multi-sectoral approach towards under-nutrition. In particular in just two workshops, the Link NCA can **create a dynamic** between the stakeholders. This dynamic is very difficult to generate otherwise.

The objective of a programme is to strengthen the capacity of the decision-makers towards the multi-sectoral approach, to debate and make the communities and decision-makers question the contextualised problems of nutrition; a pathway not so different to a Link NCA.

These two results cannot be an end unto themselves neither can they be "in the clouds". The road map of the Link NCA methodology is clear, the objective is above all "to be operational". The logical framework reaffirms this priority in placing the specific operational objective as the starting point for defining the expected results.

6.3 Improve the efficiency of the Link NCA

This section is a compilation of the recommendations to improve the efficiency of the Link NCA formulated for survey participants. The purpose is not to propose a more streamlined version of the Link NCA rather to optimise on the resources and adapt the methodology to fulfil the same objectives with less resources.

Manage the Link NCA as a project

This is along the same lines as using the logical framework. Make the Analyst responsible for the project could solve some constraints dictated from above.

“There is work to be done such as the Log that requires more knowledge about the methodology and the Analyst should know the logistical procedures better.”

“There should be a funding focal point as well as a base-line focal point for Link NCA.”

“The Analysts have no idea about the budgets.”

Structured awareness raising initiatives for the Logistic Department with regards to Link NCA appears to be essential since a lot of time is lost by the Analyst, unaware of the constraints and procedures, and the logistics team to use the Link NCA as a variable adjustment when managing cars and security constraints. An Analyst should be able to control his allowance, manage their expenses and priorities.

The same goes when managing human resources. The Analysts seldom help out in the recruitment phase. Recruitment (advertising, initial HR interviews...) should never start when the Analyst kicks in. Ideally, the name and the profile of the resources to recruit must be known in advance and the Analyst should manage the final selection of the applicants.

Simplify the sampling

The Link NCA methodology proposes a sampling equation for calculating the prevalence of under-nutrition and the risk factors. The size of the sample depends on two factors: the level of prevalence expected and the level of accuracy required.

In practice, the size of the sampling is often similar from one Link NCA to another which means that all that needs to be done is to define one. A more drastic approach recommended by some, would be assume a reliable level of accuracy in order to obtain a more reasonable sample size and to control the human resources and logistics. Anything is possible as long as the inherent risks are identified and assumed.

“The size of the sample could be smaller. For the purpose of generating data, such a large sample is not really necessary.”

Fix a quantified efficiency objective

It would seem reasonable for a standard Link NCA that the duration of the survey not exceed 5 months on a 50,000 euro budget. If these variables are greater a justification of the same needs to be given. The Technical Unit would be responsible for fixing these thresholds. This would lend greater pre-visibility to the Link NCA. The compilation of the budgetary information for the last 22 Link NCA is rather confusing with budgets being as much a three times higher than others. A budgetary comparison narrowed down to 5-7 Link NCA would no

doubt shed light on the source of these variations and give an indication on how to contain the budgets within a more realistic scenario.

Endorsement of the survey by an Ethnic Committee when deemed necessary

During the research phase, the Link NCA methodology must respond to strict, ethnic criteria. Now that the methodology is well defined and as it is already described in the Guide, it would be opportune to consult an Ethnic Committee just like it is for a SMART survey since the ethnic criteria are very similar. In a country where there is no need for an Ethnic Committee to carry out a SMART survey (the majority of countries) by default it would not be necessary for a Link NCA survey.

Capitalise, assess, standardise, and anticipate

Many elements have already been capitalised (questionnaires, sampling, causal diagrams...) but it is without doubt possible to go further with the objective to gain time. The methodology part of the report for example could be 1) simplified making reference to the methodology guide, and 2) standardised to save time when preparing it. The presentation format (causal diagrams, hypotheses priority tables, presentation of the results of the quantitative survey) could also be standardised. The tools in French at times fall short.

The recommendations in the section on communicating the report in this document gives some tips on how to spend less time preparing the survey report.

With more than 30 Link NCA completed, it is now feasible to carry out a meta-analysis similar to the one in progress on gender approach. For this purpose, the task of standardising the names of the variables for the key indicators could greatly facilitate the potential of quantitative analysis on a consolidated database. This standardisation could also make way for coding which could make the task easier out on the field. It is important to back up the database in a secure way subject to standards governing the same.

Lastly, with a little hindsight, a large part of the results of a Link NCA can be anticipated. The Link NCA are by definition specific to the context. However, almost all the Link NCA completed to date:

- Promote the multi-sectoral approach coordinated by activity leaders;
- Deliver advocacy messages;
- Identify the gender approach as key but underestimated in the fight against under-nutrition;
- Never identifies a unique and simple solution;
- Seldom identifies causes up to now ignored or unknown.

The preparatory phase is also performed in a very random way. For certain Link NCA, this phase if completed correctly saves a lot of the Analysts time. For many others, this phase is non-existent and the Analysts have to start from zero. When planning the survey, ascertaining if the preparation phase needs to be done in advance is an important factor.

6.4 Improve the coverage and validity of the Link NCA in the field

A strong constraint to development of the methodology is insufficient validity and coverage of the same due lack of local knowledge of the zone targeted for the survey. For example, in Kenya, in the same district, two zones were clearly identified giving rise to 2 different Link NCA. With this constraint, 2 approaches were needed to respond without jeopardising the contextual approach of the Link NCA:

1) Consider the validity in the field of the survey.

In this way, the results of a Link NCA carried out in a pastoral zone of a district are more likely to be valid in the similar pastoral zone in a neighbouring district.

2) Work on common points rather than differences.

Even if two refugee camps are different but close, some of the problems found are quite likely to be similar. Rather than performing two different surveys, one, more comprehensive survey is probably

sufficient to optimise the resources used to identify the common hypotheses than in studying the differences. This approach is already being deployed in the refugee camps in Chad. This approach is more appropriate in certain contexts where the heterogeneity is stronger in small zones (Ethiopia, Kenya).

In a region of Mauritania, there are 3 very different agro-ecological zones. However, there are also many similarities from one region to another and even between the Sahel Link NCA.

After having passed through 2 districts, I quickly recognised the saturation point because the responses were becoming repetitive.

The initial model of a Link NCA is based on 1 community = 1 Link NCA. If past experience is capitalised on efficiently, it would seem possible to make a more comprehensive and streamlined approach to the context and operational constraints. This is more widely known as a “homogenous zone” and, conversely, it should be considered how to study not very homogenous zones to optimise the resources available and, in turn, define what is a “not-very-homogenous zone”.

6.5 Keep the methodology flexible

Link NCA methodology is very flexible. The study can be a quantitative survey, or not. The quantitative portion can be quasi-accurate depending on the needs identified and the indicators recommended but neither are mandatory. The programming phase *per se* is multi-faceted and can be multi-stakeholder or quite simply internal to the organisation.

Indeed, the Link NCA *can do* many things. However, what the organisation *wants to do* is sometimes only a part of what a Link NCA can do. Out of the 22 completed Link NCA, the vast majority used the most comprehensive model (and also the most complex). This comprehensive model at times resulted in a disassociation from the operational demands that would have been satisfactory with a more streamlined model. Furthermore, the more comprehensive model is an inefficient way of using resources and due to its complexity could even give erroneous results than a model with more simple concepts. In fact, the more comprehensive model with a multi-stakeholder programming phase responds to an operational need that is not very common (Haiti, 2016; Senegal-Mauritania, 2017).

It is therefore strongly recommended that the priority operational objective is identified and the simplest Link NCA chosen to respond to the same.

6.6 Put the Link NCA into context

The flexibility proposed in the foregoing recommendation is a strength but could also be seen as a weakness. If, to questions such as: How long does a Link NCA take? How much should I set aside in the budget? What is the added value of the Link NCA? and the response is “that depends”, it will make the task of explaining and promoting the approach complicated in an active way.

It is therefore proposed that the Link NCA be put into context depending on what is expected of the Link NCA and of the humanitarian context. Out of the last 22 Link NCA completed, 3 operational approaches and 1 specific humanitarian context have been identified:

- MODEL 1: Link NCA to define new programmes (standard approach)
- MODEL 2: Link NCA in initial phase of a multi-sectoral project with a nutritional objective (often within the consortium framework requiring substantial customisation of the programme with the operational staff)

- MODEL 3: Link NCA for a multi-stakeholder approach (longer and more expensive but strong advocacy tool at national level)
- MODEL 4: Link NCA for refugee camps (close collaboration with the HCR for adopting the approach)

“The sponsors tend to fund large consortiums with an initial, preparative phase lasting 6 months to better define the programmes and develop a community approach.”

“During the initial, preparatory phase of a Consortium it is difficult to have just one interlocutor. If there are to be several studies, it is also difficult to have the same leader for all studies.”

“The quantitative phase in the camps could be skipped since there is a lot of data available coming from the SMART SENSE method.”

6.7 Clarify the programming phase guide

The guide on the programming phase published in 2015 is used very little in the field. It is recommended review this guide and in particular:

- Re-emphasise the “internal programming methodology” that has never been implemented properly since it corresponds to the majority of the contexts.
- Highlight the “multi-stakeholder methodology” corresponding to very specific, out-of-the ordinary contexts.
- Clarify the “community programmes” that have been adapted and modified in nearly each context. A summary of these experiences could lead to a methodology more in line with requirement.
- Simplify the guide in general above all when describing the needs/contexts/methodology. Which context corresponds to which methodology?

6.8 Reconsider the recommendations

The readers expect a great deal from the operational recommendations resulting from the Link NCA. It is important to stress here that the specific objective of the Link NCA is to recognise and understand the challenges of the programmes implemented in the zone being studied. The resultant operational recommendations can be at times too general for the operational teams (“improve access to household hygiene”) and do not necessary respond to their operational issues.

It is proposed that any operational questions from the sponsors of the study be clearly formulated at the very beginning of the Link NCA (in the terms of reference for example). In this way, the recommendation section could be changed into an operational question/answer section by the analyst.

Examples of operational questions:

- Is the selection criteria of the beneficiaries of the Cash-For-Work programmes appropriate in light of the Link NCA results?

The Analyst could justify the work load of the women, seasonality, interest or no interest in giving cash directly to women, etc. and also highlight the problems of caring for children.

- Is the awareness programme on nourishing pregnant and breast-feeding women sending out messages adapted to the context? What are the messages to be prioritised?

The Analyst can make a case in function of the obstacles identified on the causal hypotheses (lack of knowledge or practice or means). The Analyst could, if possible, extend the theory of change exercise to back up their response.

- The nutrition team have the impression that they see a lot of pastoralist families in the nutritional centres in March and many more farming families in August. Is there a feasible explanation for this subjective observation?

With this observation in mind, and trying not to be biased during interpretation of the same, the Analyst could justify the risk factors of under-nutrition according to seasonality and assure group discussions with pastoral families and farming families on the same.

This exercise has potentially four advantages:

- Pre-empt in advance the need and convince the sponsors to consider more specific expectations. These queries are also an opportunity to clarify if the Link NCA questions are able to respond, or not.
- Guide the Analyst to respond more accurately to specific questions rather than formulate global recommendations above all.
- The Analyst can also, depending on the time they have available, adapt or add tools to their survey to respond to the operational demand (e.g. theory of change on an objective of a programme in progress).
- These questions are a specific means to initiate exchanges between operational teams and the analyst.

There are two potential risks involved this exercise:

- The Link NCA Technical Unit needs to make sure that the operational questions are realistic to the risk to align the expectations of the Sponsors and not place the Analyst in a difficult situation.
- The Analyst must remain holistic in their approach at all times. The Analyst must create an overview of the nutritional problem to be able to respond to operational questions in an easy way.

6.9 Improve how the results are communicated

6.9.1. Review the reports

Currently, the full Link NCA reports have an average of 100 pages (average calculated on the last 27 reports) plus annex information. Certain reports reach up to 170 pages. These reports are very detailed, at times fascinating but very disparate and often overpower the reader.

It is quite feasible to suppose that an operational reader has very little interest in reading a Link NCA report describing the methodology and context analysis. Conversely, these readers are more interested in the summary, the prioritisation of the hypotheses and the operational recommendations. Frequently these sections are barely covered. The summary is at the very end of the study, it is appended to the work of the report and it is really complicated to summarise in 3 pages. The prioritisation of the hypotheses is a delicate exercise of the Link NCA as well as the operational recommendations.

I do not know how to reproduce the results of the Link NCA?

The following is proposed:

- Draft a full *summary* focussing on the main results in 10 pages. This summary must be *carefully written* and could include, for example:
 - o An introduction, the objectives (1 page)
 - o A brief synopsis of the methodology (1 page) with a caveat about the limitations in the interpretation of the results and in particular the causal analysis. The methodology could

- make reference to the Link NCA guides and even the annex information to back up the calculation of the sample.
 - The prevalence of malnutrition results and the risk factors (2 pages) in the form of a dashboard (see example below)
 - The presentation of the hypotheses and prioritisation processes (2 pages)
 - Conclusion and answers to operational questions (see example below) excerpts taken from the interviews (4 pages).
- Draft a *supporting report* of 30 pages (not including the summary of 10 pages resulting in 30 pages plus the 10 pages) providing detail in the form of causal diagrams and their descriptions and complimentary quantitative results. The narration detail of this report in terms of explanation could be inferior since its target audience is narrower and more informed.

It is recommended reducing its content to the most pertinent, even removing the “context section”. The understanding of the context is a major component and key to the Link NCA but it is not a subject that interests the reader who probably already knows. Furthermore, this section is too long and contains information already available in other sectorial reports. To this end, the new elements provisioned by the Link NCA and that refer to relevant studies should not be mentioned in this section since it has been reported elsewhere.

The 10-page summary must therefore be carefully written and visually attractive because it has a large target audience. It must be a top priority of the written work of the Analyst who should be capable of focussing on the main results of the survey.

6.9.2. Dashboard of the quantitative results.

The target audience for the Link NCA are particularly interested in the results of the quantitative survey on the risk factors (see figure 4). The Link NCA uses *standard indicators for each sector*. Each technical expert can therefore find information that will interest them. A standardised, more visually attractive presentation can therefore create an *engagement point* or “springboard” for each expert to view things outside their area of expertise.

As these standard indicators are almost identical from one Link NCA to another, it would seem like a good idea to *standardise* this tool in order to (1) optimise the working time of the Analysts and (2) propose a good, *highly-effective visual tool*.

The dashboard *should not be longer than 2 pages* and should be included in the summary. The results of other indicators can form part of the report.

The dashboard can be easily produced from an *EXCEL* spreadsheet from which you can export a summary graph, indicator definition, a graph containing the raw data and the *information sources* completed by the Analyst.

6.10 Adapt but also question the institutional framework

The multi-sectional approach is becoming the most frequently used approach in programme frameworks fighting for and preventing under-nutrition. These approaches are managed in different ways in one organisation to another and the Link NCA has no alternative but to adapt to each organisation.

Moreover capitalising on the experience gained from Link NCA is also a powerful tool for questioning the institutional framework. The most talked about example is that of the **gender approach and in particular**

the time women spend working being repeatedly identified as a major risk factor. The operational teams often have “their hands tied” and are unable to provide a solution within the technical guidelines.

“Whilst I would recommend a programme to reduce the time the women spend working, I am under the impression that they are waiting for a turnkey programme but do not have a solution to the problem.”

Likewise, since low-birth spacing was identified as a major risk and the organisation had no experience in this area, the situation reached the point of becoming an operational obstacle.

The Link NCA is required to look at these issues, based on experience gained and questioning the organisations: What is your position on family planning? What operational solutions would you recommend for reducing the workload of the women? It seems to be the right thing to do to develop an **advocacy** activity to put the operational teams to work on questions raised by the Link NCA.

7. Conclusion

A programming or strategic tool?

As explained in this report, **the influence of the Link NCA on programmes is more evident when the operational objective is clear, delimited, and defined within a scheduled period of time.** In this case in point, the influence is direct, in the short term, on the next programme. Within this scenario, the methodology needs to adapt to the operational needs of each context.

The Link NCA can also be a potential influencer on the **operational strategy** in the medium term of the stakeholders involved in nutrition. In this case in point, the influence is indirect, in the medium term, more difficult to measure and carry forward to future programmes. Within this scenario, **the methodology is more complex and can look like an advocacy strategy.**

For all cases, it is essential **to formulate better the initial demand**, understanding the context and adapting the operational method to be followed. Trying to use the Link NCA to respond to a programming and strategic approach at the same time is risky and could be counterproductive.

There is an urgent need **to improve the efficiency and coverage of the Link NCA** and assume the limitations of the same so as not to create unattainable expectations. The Link NCA proposes an analysis that is modest, without any degree of certainty but that could create the missing link between the knowledge of the communities and that of the international scientific community.

This study has addressed the question of measuring the influence of the Link NCA on programmes. It is also important to remember that the process of the Link NCA has a strong, less tangible, impact and yet essential at local level.

“The Link NCA takes you back to basics and changes the balance of power putting the communities on the same level as the experts.”

“The secondary effects are very positive: you can see that the relationship between the local authorities and the team out in the field are strengthened and this is where the knowledge is appreciated.”

“The Link NCA is a powerful vehicle through which the communities can express themselves which is seldom the case.”

The results of the study are presented to the communities but more should be done. **The communities need to know about the plans of action and be told that they are able to influence the new programmes, the action plans, and the new laws.**