



GLOBAL TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE MECHANISM FOR NUTRITION

LESSONS
LEARNED ON
GTWGWAYS OF
ENGAGEMENT

GTWG Ways of Engagement

Case Study: IFE Core Group

Background

The Global Technical Assistance Mechanism for Nutrition¹ (**GTAM**) is a common global mechanism endorsed by over 40 Global Nutrition Cluster (GNC) partners to provide technical assistance in order to meet the nutrition rights and needs of people affected by emergencies.

The **GTAM** has a core team (**GTAM-CT**) that includes the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF (lead)), World Vision (co-lead), Emergency Nutrition Network (ENN), the Technical Rapid Response Team (Tech RRT), the GNC Coordination Team (GNC-CT) and the GNC Technical Helpdesk (GNC-HD). When country and regional capacities are exhausted, unresolved technical issues can be escalated to the GTAM. In line with its key principle of maximising existing capacities, the core team works with already existing and willing global technical thematic groups (referred to as Global Thematic Working Groups (**GTWGs**)). One such GTWG is the IFE-Core Group² (**IFE-CG**), a global interagency collaboration on Infant and Young Child Feeding in Emergencies (**IYCF-E**).

The **IFE-CG** is coordinated by ENN, with guidance and support from a steering committee (SC). IFE-CG members are individuals in UN agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and independent agencies, academics and independent members. The group’s work involves development of policy guidance and capacity-building tools, provision of technical advice, experience capture on IYCF-E responses, and promotion of policy and practice change in the context of preparedness and response. It has also agreed to take on the role of GTWG for the GTAM.

The **GTAM-CT** manages the day-to-day functions of the GTAM. It receives and triages requests for technical support, including requests for technical advice and technical expertise. (These requests should only be submitted once national, regional and headquarter ports of call have been exhausted). Requests for technical advice that can be answered by applying existing knowledge and guidance are handled at GTAM-CT level, while more complex matters requiring expert consultation and/or consensus can be escalated to GTWGs.

The issue

In May 2019, the GNC-HD team was notified by a GNC Rapid Response Team (RRT) member deployed as Nutrition Cluster Coordinator (NCC) at provincial level in Zimbabwe that a large donation (over 50 metric tonnes) of breastmilk substitute (BMS) had been intercepted and that technical advice was being sought on what should be done with the donation. This question was escalated by the GNC-HD to the IFE-CG, with a request for members to share their “experiences and lessons learned” with regard to managing large donations of BMS.

¹ www.enonline.net//resource/gtamfornutrition

² www.enonline.net/ifecoregroup

Case study objectives and methodology

The example discussed here was one of the first instances of a request being escalated to a GTWG. An escalation process had not been formalised by the GTAM at the time. Therefore, the GNC-HD (which had recently become part of the GTAM-CT) adhered to previous ways of working. This case study aims to document this early experience to examine how ways of working with GTAM GTWGs can be strengthened in order to ensure available expertise and experience among GTWG members is maximised in a sustainable way, while providing sound technical advice in a manner that meets the needs of those working in emergencies.

Desk Review	2 Interviews GNC-HD IFE-CG Facilitator NCC	2 Group Interviews 2 IFE CG SC 3 IFE-CG Members	2 Group Discussions IFE-CG GTAM-CT

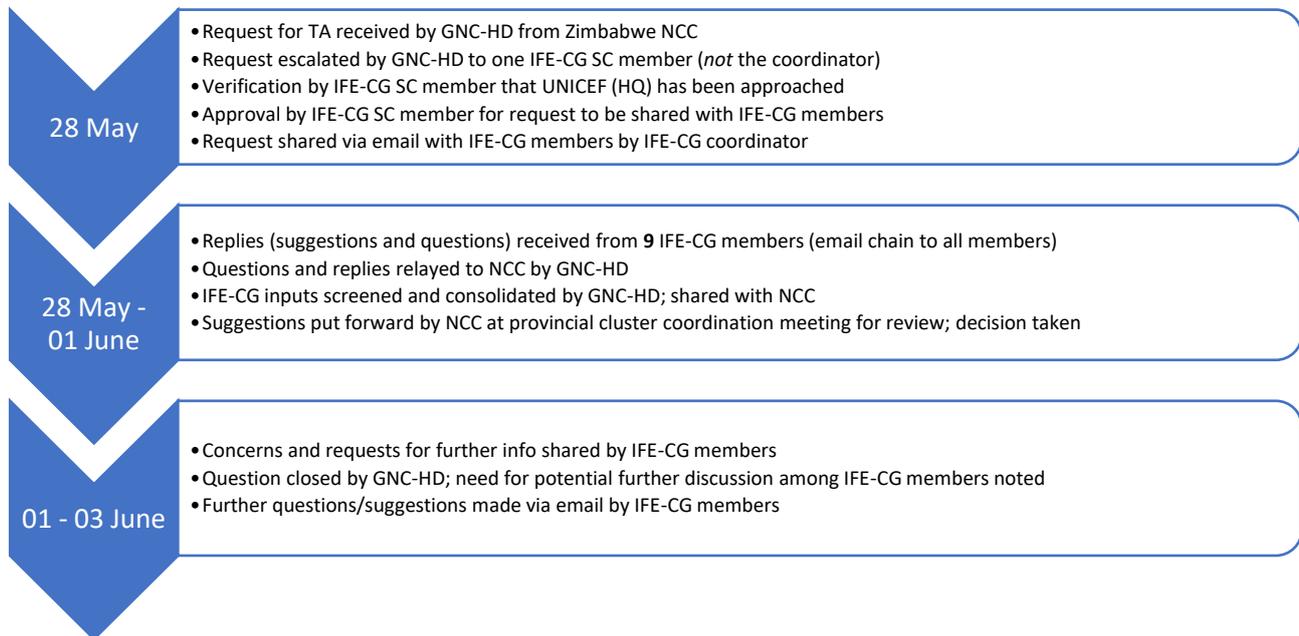
Results

GTAM Pillar 1 Objective: Provide technical advice in a timely, coherent and equitable manner, responding to questions from individuals who are working in countries in emergencies to help apply normative guidance to the specific country context.

From a **service user perspective**, support needs were **partially met**; the NCC felt that their request to the GNC-HD for regional and/or global-level advocacy to stop the donations at their source was insufficiently addressed, but **timely** technical advice was provided by the GNC-HD, with support from the IFE-CG, with regard to BMS donation management. Provincial nutrition cluster members reportedly found it **useful** to learn about different ways in which the BMS could be used, while receiving multiple suggestions for consideration promoted **ownership**. The NCC also reported that the grouping of questions and screening/summarising of suggestions from IFE-CG members by the GNC-HD was **helpful**.

The options provided generated debate among nutrition cluster members; requests were made by provincial cluster members for concrete examples of how suggestions being shared had been successfully implemented in the past. More technical questions followed from the national nutrition cluster, which was looking to replicate decisions made at provincial level. It was felt by the NCC that provision of greater detail by an authoritative voice would have improved acceptance (particularly at national level) and helped with decision-making. As it was common practice in Zimbabwe for hospitals to request BMS directly from manufacturers, a decision was taken by the provincial nutrition cluster to use the BMS to supply hospitals upon request to the provincial office. Once the decision was taken, follow-up support was provided by the GNC-HD; it was noted by the NCC that this continuous engagement was **valuable**.

Actions taken



Lessons learned

1. [Screening a request](#)

1.1 The GTAM-CT is well placed to guide country teams in where to seek technical support and to facilitate the provision of technical support by accountable bodies at the appropriate level, but we aren't there yet. Support should only be requested from the GTAM once national, regional and headquarter capacities have been exhausted. A lack of clarity was detected on what exactly this means and how it should be verified – if at all. In this case, as the NCC at the time was a GNC RRT member: the GNC-HD was their go-to source for technical support. There was reportedly no in-country capacity to address the issue and the responsiveness of two staff contacted at UNICEF regional and headquarter levels was limited, as both were travelling. Several IFE-CG members felt that this was not an acceptable reason to escalate. A challenge reported by the NCC is that “it often isn't very clear whom to contact at (UNICEF) regional or headquarters.” This is reflective of findings from previous evaluations³, which inspired the creation of the GTAM, that the variety of ad hoc initiatives and models linking country, regional and global-level technical expertise has previously resulted in disconnected resources, unclear processes, duplication of effort and over-reliance on personal networks. This is a problem the GTAM seeks to address. It is a GTAM guiding principle to maximise existing technical resources at country, regional and global levels; as the GTAM-CT has good links with

³ Le Cuziat, G. and Frize, J. (2015) *Position of the GNC on Providing Technical Support to Country Clusters*. Save the Children USA, GNC and UNICEF and Richardson, L. and Ververs, M. (2015) *Evaluation of the support provided by the GNC to National Coordination Platforms*. GNC and UNICEF.

GNC members and a good understanding of their internal technical support mechanisms it is well placed to connect country teams with appropriate existing regional and HQ technical support if appropriate.

“Just because someone doesn’t respond, isn’t a reason to escalate.” – IFE-CG SC member

1.2 There is a need to clearly articulate the issue (in as much detail as possible) and what avenues have been pursued to answer it in order to justify escalation to a GTWG. There is disagreement among IFE-CG members about whether the escalation of this question was appropriate or not. Many felt that such a general question (request for sharing of experiences, lessons learned and guidance on managing large donations of BMS) could have been answered at lower levels (e.g., en-net, UNICEF regional office, etc.) Checking in with other GTAM-CT members has also been noted as a missed step prior to escalation. However, the unique complexities of the situation (multiple, very large donations, context where manufacturers were already providing BMS to hospitals upon request, etc.) may have warranted expert consultation. Adding to the uncertainty was a lack of information for GTWG members on what efforts had already been made prior to escalation to apply existing knowledge and guidance, and therefore what the stumbling block was. When asked what worked well, many identified the responsiveness and willingness to help of IFE-CG members. Care must be taken that this does not become a reason for escalation to GTWGs, thereby substituting rather than supporting existing technical-support mechanisms.

“The problem wasn’t really particular. It’s a common thing that happens.” – IFE-CG SC member

2. [Preparing a request for escalation to a GTWG](#)

2.1 Compiling, structuring and sharing available information (as much as possible) as part of the escalation request will enable GTWGs to provide an informed response that is tailored to a country’s technical needs.

Providing as much background information as possible (including on the context, processes to date and details of the issue) allows GTWG members to frame the request and provide a more helpful response. (For example, information that some of the donated BMS was expired and incorrectly labelled, and that hospitals typically received free BMS directly from manufacturers, would likely have elicited different/more tailored suggestions.) It is understood that those asking the question may not be aware of what the pertinent information is that should be shared and that all relevant information may not be available up front; it will therefore almost always be necessary to ask some follow-up questions; however, these can be reduced in number by providing as much background information as possible up front. The process of grouping the GTWG’s follow-up questions by the GNC-HD was appreciated by the country team.

2.2 When sharing a request for technical advice with GTWG members, it is important to clearly define the gap/question and specify what type of response is requested and how it will be used.

IFE-CG members responded to the request that was presented to them; however, during follow-up discussions held for the purposes of this case study, many questioned the ultimate usefulness of the responses provided (i.e., provision of examples of what had been done with BMS donations in the past with little-to-no context/key considerations provided in response to “a very open question.”). Confusion also existed as to how responses would be used and what was expected of IFE-CG members or the group’s facilitator. In hindsight, both GTWG members and the country NCC agree it would have been more helpful to suggest potential ways in which the BMS could be used with the pros, cons, key considerations and country examples (where available) for each option clearly outlined for nutrition cluster members’ consideration. GTWG members can be asked to provide feedback on whether the requested type of response is feasible (it may not be possible to provide a singular, consensus-driven recommendation if a matter is very urgent or there is significant controversy around an issue), as different types of requests will require different levels of effort and time.

“The point of asking a question is that you don’t really know what to do.” – IFE-CG member

I wasn't sure what we needed to do – support the helpdesk? Facilitate consensus? Make a synthesis? It was a bit confusing – IFE-CG facilitator

“I just shot off an email to contribute, but wasn't thinking that would become the position for a government discussion!” – IFE-CG member

2.3 There was a lack of clarity on GTAM's role in flagging the need for institutions to advocate to prevent donations at their source. The country team had expressed a need for regional/global advocacy to take place. As this request was not considered 'technical', it was not considered to be the 'role' of GTAM to explicitly communicate it to the IFE-CG. As a result, although some IFE-CG members do report having taken some independent action, advocacy efforts were not coordinated or fed back to the country team. Country needs that are not explicitly escalated or referred elsewhere by the GTAM-CT risk falling through the cracks. Although the decision of whether and how to take a request for global advocacy forward and how best to approach this sits with the GTWG in question, it is important that such requests have a place to land.

3. [Provision of technical advice by GTWGs](#)

3.1 It is preferable for the response that is shared with the country team to be formulated by the GTWG. In this instance, the GTAM-CT member who had escalated the request had the technical capacity to screen and summarise the responses provided by IFE-CG members. However, with GTAM covering multiple thematic areas, this will not always be the case. Furthermore, it is expected (by the NCC) that the suggestions would have carried more weight and authority if the IFE-CG was identifiable as the source. In order to standardise the process, improve acceptance of advice at country level and remove the risk of misinterpretation or gatekeeping of advice coming from an expert group through an intermediary, it is preferable that responses to escalated requests are formulated at GTWG level (even if they are not a formal position). Where it is more appropriate for GTWG inputs to feed back into a response formulated by the GTAM-CT, for quality control and learning purposes it remains important for the GTWG to be aware of the response provided (e.g. recommendations/consolidated documents shared.)

“We have to do better for those who need to be helped with good advice.”
– IFE-CG member, describing the type of responses provided by members to the GNC-HD

3.2 The provision of technical advice in written form (preferably from a recognised source) is most helpful at field level. Formal communications can be revisited and shared with others, such as ministry of health personnel. Although en-net was considered by the country team, it was not chosen due to its format.

4. [Closing a request](#)

4.1 It is important that a process is in place to close requests that have been started. Frustration was noted among some IFE-CG members that, once the decision had been taken at country level, there was a lack of clarity on the reasoning behind the decision or its outcomes (for learning purposes), the type and source of the various donations of BMS (for those wishing to take forward advocacy with their agencies), and no opportunity to provide feedback on the decision. (NB: Such feedback should only be provided if requested by the country). Although IFE-CG members welcomed the clear acknowledgment by the GNC-HD that the needed input had been received and the question was considered closed from their end, some discussion did continue on the IFE-CG email chain after that time, without formal closure or a mechanism (within the GTWG) to address identified needs.

“I guess in the end I wondered what the role of the IFE-CG is in a situation like this, where a decision is made at country level that goes against all sorts of guidance.” – IFE-CG member

“The conversations may be excellent but they don’t translate into sustained actions.”

– IFE-CG SC member

Conclusion and recommendations

The potential added value of the GTAM was highlighted during the development of this case study; the NCC on the ground expressed their appreciation for being able to send a question to a general service portal covering all thematic areas and for having received timely technical support, while the GTAM-CT member handling the request valued being able to access technical expertise for a question about which they were uncertain. During discussions, several IFE-CG members voiced longstanding frustration at the perceived disconnect with ongoing and emerging challenges experienced during emergencies; through close collaboration with the GTAM, the potential exists to link GTWGs more closely with the latest realities and issues emerging on the ground.

The lessons captured in this document are largely applicable to other GTAM GTWGs, in addition to the IFE-CG; as several GTWGs are still in their formative stages this is a particularly timely moment to define ways of working. The following next steps are recommended:

1. [Screening of the request](#)

1.1 Clarify with partners what we mean by “when country, regional and headquarters capacities have been exhausted” and map out, in practical terms, what (light and agile) processes need to be in place to support this. During the conceptualisation of GTAM, the guiding principle to “maximise existing technical resources at country, regional and global levels” was agreed with the GNC collective in response to concerns that the mechanism could otherwise bypass existing structures. For accountability purposes, it is therefore important that processes and decisions are documented. It is, however, equally important that these processes remain light and agile to ensure country teams receive the technical support they need in a timely manner. It is recommended for GTAM-CT service portals to check with requesters which avenues for technical advice have been pursued and limitations encountered prior to considering escalation. The GTAM-CT also has a potential role to play in clarifying where (and specifically to whom) field staff can send their requests for technical support, and to facilitate a response where this has been lacking; e.g., through including regional advisers in the information flow.

1.2 Define clear criteria and a process for escalation to GTWGs. Although, in this instance, the level of support requested from the IFE-CG Coordinator was minimal, there was overall consensus that an appropriately managed process would have required more time and effort. In order to ensure that accountable agencies are meeting their responsibilities and to avoid unnecessary diversion of time and attention away from GTWG priorities, it is therefore recommended that requests are rapidly screened to ensure they meet set criteria. Both the *screening and escalation process* and the *escalation criteria* themselves need to be defined and should clearly delineate the roles and responsibilities of GTAM-CT members, and GTWG Focal Points in particular, when escalation is being considered. It is recommended to indicate which escalation criteria have been met on the escalation form (see below) and to clearly mark formal escalation requests as such to trigger the start of a systematic process. (NB: prior to formal escalation, a ‘sense check’ may be carried out by the GTAM-CT with the GTWG leads if escalation is being considered.) (Examples of criteria include where a true gap in evidence or guidance exists and where the particularities of the situation require expertise to apply existing guidance.)

2. [Preparing a request for escalation to a GTWG](#)

2.1 Develop tools and ways of working to ensure GTWGs are provided with the information they need to provide an informed and helpful response (in a timely manner and without over-burdening country teams).

This could include:

- An *escalation form* (completed by the GTAM-CT in collaboration with the country team) which provides GTWGs with relevant information in a standardised and structured manner, such as urgency of request, process to date, escalation criteria met, the question and relevant background information.

The question should be clearly defined in the escalation form and accompanied by instructions which specify the type of response that is requested (e.g., suggestions, a GTWG position, etc.) and explain how and by whom the response will be used. It may be helpful to create an opportunity for GTWG chairs to give feedback on the formulation of the question before sharing with the wider GTWG. It is essential that verification is also done with the country team to check that its question has been understood correctly and that the planned response is in line with country technical support needs, including timeframes (e.g., it is unlikely that a formal GTWG position can be provided if a response is urgently needed.)

- A process for relaying questions and answers between GTWGs and country teams. (NB: The volume of questions at this stage is expected to be fairly low, as the GTAM-CT is likely to have already asked questions as part of the process of determining whether an issue requires escalation or not.)

2.2 Clarify the GTAM's role in flagging the need for advocacy on technical areas and each GTWG's desired role with regard to advocacy. Particularly where a need for advocacy has formed part of a country team's request to the GTAM-CT, a process needs to be outlined for communicating needs to GTWGs and/or other accountable bodies. Care should be taken not to disempower national bodies, but rather facilitate engagement with regional and global resources and strengthen national advocacy capacity.

3. [Provision of technical advice by GTWGs](#)

3.1 Outline the GTWG process for the provision of technical advice through GTAM. Although consensus exists that this should be an internally managed process facilitated by GTWG chairs, the details of the process still need to be elaborated. This includes a decision on *how* answers will be solicited from GTWG members and how many members need to be involved for different types of responses (e.g., suggestions vs. definitive recommendations). The formation of small working groups to provide rapid technical advice is a possible solution; it is recommended to look at the experiences and lessons learned by other technical-support mechanisms. There may, at times, need to be a mechanism for country and GTWGs to communicate directly to ensure that the reality on the ground is properly articulated and understood. (NB: a separate process needs to be defined for the development of consensus-driven guidance.)

"We need to be able to react, respond and improve a situation." – IFE-CG member

"It depends on what we want to be. The IFE-CG has a source of information which you can manage and process, or as a resource we can bring around the table in critical moments" – IFE-CG SC member

3.2 Ensure that technical advice is shared in a written form from a recognised source whenever possible.

Where en-net is deemed to be the most appropriate source of technical advice (e.g., because country experiences are being sought), it may therefore at times be necessary for responses to be compiled. This aligns

with a recent recommendation made as part of a review of en-net⁴ to explore the role of ENN and the GTAM in summarising difficult discussions on en-net and providing interim direction to programmers where needed.

4. Closing a request

4.1 Outline a process and tools for closing a request and taking forward key actions. This process should – by means of a closure template – capture 1) whether a country’s needs have been met; 2) the outcome of the support provided; 3) immediate action points (e.g., need for continued follow-up and support; 4) longer-term actions (e.g., development of a knowledge-management product that more formally presents the technical advice provided or country experiences shared). The process should ensure that both the country and the GTWG are updated, responsibilities for taking forward action points are agreed, and learning/advice shared with any national, regional or global entities who were unable to respond to the original query.

As part of defining this process, a decision needs to be taken by GTWGs on whether they will be in direct contact with country teams (e.g., as part of a wrap-up call), or only provide indirect support via the GTAM-CT. Service users must also be involved in this decision as they may be unwilling or unable to be involved in discussions and prefer to receive a consolidated recommendation (as was the case in this instance).

4.2 Identify ways in which GTAM can regularly update GTWGs on emerging technical issues. The same mechanism should capture means by which GTWGs can update the GTAM-CT on issues detected.

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⁴ Scott Logue, Michele Goergen, Isabelle Modigell, Andi Kendle, Tamsin Walters and Marie McGrath (2019). A review of technical discussion on en-net: Recurring questions and gaps experienced by programmers. Field Exchange 61, November 2019. p53. www.enonline.net/fex/61/technicaldiscussionennet