The Masiphumelele Nourished Child Programme (NCP): Providing Inspiration for Addressing Child Nutrition at Community Level

Liezel Engelbrecht[1]

1. Introduction

This report explores key components we believe have contributed to the successful growth and implementation of a programme that aims to improve nutrition of children and health of communities in an under-resourced setting.

The Masiphumelele Nourished Child Programme (NCP) have trained community ambassadors who have successfully applied their knowledge to initiate collaborations and build relationships with the local authorities, schools, senior groups, community kitchens and ECDs, among others. Successful outcomes of these relationships allow them to offer support in these settings through knowledge sharing activities such as providing talks, designing nutrition-focussed lesson plans, and skills transfer. An excellent example is the initiation of a breastfeeding support group with consent and support of the clinic manager to provide information and support to breastfeeding mothers. They also work closely with ECDs and the primary schools to promote healthier lunch boxes and hygiene training. As part of an auxiliary programme, they have also established over 115 home gardens in the community.

We believe the approach followed for training and supporting the NCP Ambassadors could provide inspiration for those with similar goals aiming to initiate similar initiatives.

2. Background

Following the recommendations gained from The Nourished Child (NC) study[2], Stellenbosch University (SU), the Southern Africa Food Lab (SAFL) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) partnered with the Masiphumelele Creative Hub (MCH), to establish an initiative to train community members as local ambassadors to help improve food systems and nutrition in the community. Under the leadership of MCH founder Yandiswa Mazwana-Gcali, six community members between the ages of 19 and 35 were selected as Nourished Child Program (NCP) Ambassadors. They participated in training from May to July 2022.

This goal was to create a capacity building training programme to equip Ambassadors with adequate knowledge, resources and skills to create their own action plan for improving health and nutrition outcomes in the community.

Following the successful implementation of the first NCP Ambassador training, the second NCP training took place between 19 August to 16 September 2023 with the support of a successful grant application. This time, a total of 20 participants were recruited, and 12 participants completed the training. This comprised three Ambassadors from the first cohort who joined for refresher training, six newly appointed Ambassadors (affiliated to MCH), and representatives of community organisations and forums working in Masiphumelele to deepen the network of those actively engaging nutrition questions.

---

[1] Liezel Engelbrecht is a registered dietitian with a Master's degree in public health nutrition. She worked alongside the Nourished Child research group and was involved with the Ambassador training programme.

[2] The Nourished Child research project (ETH1920-0514) was a collaborative project between Stellenbosch University (SU), City, University of London, and University of Cape Town (UCT). It aimed to define and communicate what a systems approach for improving the quality of diets among children under five years and women of childbearing age to address the double burden of malnutrition would look like in urban setting.

All 12 of the participants who completed the training provided that they found the training valuable or extremely valuable for improving the work they want to do to improve the health of children and people in their community, also indicating that they will be able to apply the knowledge in other settings such as among family and friends.

Says Mazwana-Gcali: "The training is very important to be able to deliver food literacy to the people. If you don't have the knowledge yourself, you can't transfer it to the people. Now we know what to teach and how to respond to questions."

3. Key learnings

Reflecting on the past two training cohorts, we believe a number of principles and activities played a key role in the success of the NCP training.

- **A capacity building approach**

The definition of a capacity building programme as one that aims to "develop and strengthen skills, instincts, abilities, processes and resources that communities need to survive, adapt and thrive in a fast-changing world".[3]

A range of skills, including effective communication, storytelling and advocacy, as well as the ability to transfer relevant knowledge about nutrition and health were identified as important capacity building skills. 'Soft skills' such as confidence, active listening, and empathy were also identified as necessary to foster trust and understanding within the community.

- **Co-creation rather than passive participation**

A participatory approach to community development interventions requires a commitment to an approach where community ownership is the end goal. It also results in interventions that is inherently more context specific and relevant in its approach. With the NCP training, this was one of the overarching goals.

There are, however, different levels of participation according to Pretty et al. (1995)[4] (Table 1), of which 'Self-mobilisation' is the utmost level. We believe this programme followed a 'functional participation' approach, ultimately encouraging self-mobilisation. We consider this an important factor in the ownership which was demonstrated throughout and following the training. We express caution against approaches that are more unilateral and inhibit the development of agency among participants.

Table 1: Typology of Participation (Pretty et al., 1995)

Passive Participation	People participate by being told what is going to happen or has already happened. It is a unilateral announcement by an administration or project management without any listening to people's responses.
Participation in information giving	The information being shared belongs only to external professionals. People participate by answering questions posed by extractive researchers using questionnaire surveys or such similar approaches. People do not have the opportunity to influence proceedings, as the findings of the research are neither shared nor checked for accuracy.

[3] United Nations (2021). *Capacity-building*. [online] United Nations. Available at: https://www.un.org/en/academic-impact/capacity-building.

[4] www.fao.org. (n.d.). *Module II: Introducing Participatory Approaches, Methods and Tools*. [online] Available at: https://www.fao.org/3/ad424e/ad424e03.htm.
Pretty, J. (1995). Participatory learning for sustainable agriculture. World Development, 23 (8), 1247– 1263

Participation by consultation	People participate by being consulted, and external agents listen to views. These external agents define both problems and solutions, and may modify these in the light of people's responses. Such a consultative process does not concede any share in decision making, and professionals are under no obligation to take on board people's views.
Participation for material benefits	People participate by providing resources such as labour, in return for food, cash or other material incentives. Much on farm research falls in this category, as farmers provide the fields but are not involved in experimentation or the process of learning. It is very common to see this called participation yet people have no stake in prolonging activities when incentives end.
Functional participation	People participate by forming groups to meet predetermined objectives related to the project, which can involve the development or promotion of externally initiated social organisation. Such involvement tends not to be at early stages of project cycles or planning, but rather after major decisions have already been made. These institutions tend to be dependent on external initiators and facilitators, but may become self-dependent.
Interactive participation	People participate in joint analysis, which leads to action plans and the formation of new local institutions or the strengthening of existing ones. It tends to involve interdisciplinary methodologies that seek multiple objectives and make use of systematic and structured learning processes. These groups take control/ownership over local decisions, and so people have a stake in maintaining structures or practices.
Self-mobilisation	People participate by taking initiatives independent of external institutions to change systems. Such self-initiated mobilisation and collective action may or may not challenge existing inequitable distributions of wealth and power.

- **A relevant curriculum**

In line with the previous point, the curriculum for the training programme was developed in close consultation with all the involved partners. This built on the first training and the careful evaluation conducted with the participants[5]. Below is a brief overview of the topics and content covered in the training sessions. The sessions were conducted using expert facilitators and guest speakers over a six full-day sessions in a four-week period.

- Understanding the local food systems: This was seen as the foundational session. The training provided insights into the availability and sources of food in the community, addressing issues like food access and reflecting on what shapes the food eaten, and what other systems are involved in these choices. This was supported with a photographic exhibition developed as part of the NC study. The intended outcomes were for participants to reflect on reasons why people consume certain food; to understand, visualise and discuss the actors who influence food; and to reflect on challenges and enablers for this.
- Storytelling and advocacy: This session aimed to equip participants with the skills to effectively communicate their needs and experiences. The function and role of advocacy were discussed, and practical examples were given of how to use storytelling to advocate for positive change in the community.
- First 1000 Days nutrition for mothers and babies: Focusing on the critical window of the first 1000 days from conception to a child's second birthday[6], this training emphasised the importance of adequate nutrition during pregnancy and infancy. It highlighted the long-term impact on a child's health and development.

[5] The second training was similar to the first training, with the exception of two additional topics (on confidence and monitoring and evaluation) in the 2023 cohort based on consultation and needs identification by the NGO.

[6] The first 1000 days of life is a period or rapid growth and development. Nutritional deficiencies in this time can lead to irreversible cognitive and physical impairments which can have lifelong consequences such as short stature (stunting), reduced cognitive ability and increased susceptibility to disease. Optimal nutrition in this period can lay the foundations for optimal health.
UNICEF (2017). *First 1000 Days: The critical Window to ensure that children survive and thrive*. [online] Available at: https://www.unicef.org/southafrica/media/551/file/ZAF-First-1000-days-brief-2017.pdf

- The importance of breastfeeding: This session elaborated on the various benefits of breastfeeding, including optimal nutrition, immune support, and bonding. It also addressed common challenges and discussed strategies to support mothers to following recommendations for optimal breastfeeding[7].
- Complementary feeding guidelines: Building on the previous session, this training covered the introduction of solid foods to a baby's diet, emphasising the importance of providing a diverse and nutritionally balanced diet during this crucial phase where children are particularly vulnerable to stunting[8].
- Nutrition for adults, adolescents and the elderly: This session broadened the scope to cover nutrition for all age groups, addressing age-specific dietary needs, and the role of nutrition in disease prevention and management. It emphasises the importance of a balanced diet for overall health.
- The role of Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres in a community, and practical ways to support such centres: This training aimed to provide an overview of the role of ECD centres in a community and the different stakeholders relevant to ECD centres, including the children, teachers and parents. The session also discussed practical ways in which ECD centres can be supported, e.g., through creating nutrition focussed lessons plans, supporting parents and teachers to planning lunch boxes and school meals, supporting hygiene with practical applications of how to make a tippy tap, and helping parents find important information in the Road-to-Health booklet[9].
- Stakeholder identification and collaboration: Through an expert-guided Net-Map[10] session, participants learned how to identify key stakeholders in the community, such as traders, local health services, schools, and NGOs. The aim was for the participants to realise the importance of collaboration and pooling resources and expertise to support community health initiatives.
- Professional conduct and confidence: This session aimed to instil professionalism and confidence in participants, ensuring they are equipped to take on leadership roles in community nutrition education and advocacy settings. It also looked at the importance of empathy and self-care.
- Hygiene and food safety for ECD centres and food vendors: Involving local environmental health authorities, participants gained knowledge about safe food handling practices to prevent foodborne illnesses and understand the importance of maintaining hygiene, especially in food preparation areas.
- Goal setting: This topic was addressed throughout the sessions, with the intent of guiding participants to define key issues they want to address in the community related to nutrition. Training in goal setting supported them to identify shared, achievable objectives.

---

[7] The World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF recommend that "children initiate breastfeeding within the first hour of birth and be exclusively breastfed for the first 6 months of life, meaning no other foods or liquids are provided, including water. Infants should be breastfed on demand, i.e., that is as often as the child wants, day and night. No bottles, teats or pacifiers should be used. From the age of 6 months, children should begin eating safe and adequate complementary foods while continuing to breastfeed for up to two years of age or beyond."
World Health Organization (2021). Breastfeeding. [online] World Health Organization. Available at: https://www.who.int/health-topics/breastfeeding#tab=tab_2.

[8] Stunting is a manifestation of chronic or recurrent malnutrition and refers to low height for age. This can be the result of poor maternal health and nutrition during pregnancy, food insecurity, frequent illness and/or suboptimal feeding in early life, e.g., as a result of inappropriate breastfeeding and complementary feeding practices.
World Health Organization (2022). Malnutrition. [online] www.who.int. Available at: https://www.who.int/health-topics/malnutrition#tab=tab_1.

9 The Road-to-Health booklet is printed by the Department of Health and is issued to caregivers for all new births. It's meant to be a resource for caregivers and healthcare workers that provides a record of the child's growth, immunisations and other health interventions such as adequate infant and young child feeding practices.
Side By Side. (2018). Road To Health Book - Side By Side. [online] Available at: https://sidebyside.co.za/resources/road-to-health-book/.

[10] Net-Map is a tool developed by the International for Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) and refers to a social network analysis process by which groups can understand and visualise power relationships between different actors and how these influence outcomes.
Net-Map Toolbox. (2007). How Net-Map works. [online] Available at: https://netmap.wordpress.com/about/
MSP Guide. (2022). NetMapping. [online] Available at: https://mspguide.org/2022/03/18/netmapping/

- Monitoring and evaluation activities: This session provided a brief overview of the relevance and practicalities of tracking and assessing the impact of their activities The aim was to create awareness of how tracking their activities can help them remain effective, adaptable, and aligned with the community's evolving needs, and also support fundraising and community engagement activities where they can share successes.

Feedback questionnaires confirmed that the participants found the mix of sessions to be appropriate, relevant and useful for being able to conduct their activities.

- **Programme leadership**

The co-creation of the training programme facilitated a sense of ownership amongst the participating NGO. From the start, Mazwana-Gcali was committed to the programme and was central to shaping its direction in line with the needs of the community. She also identified leaders within the Ambassador group to help drive their activities, fostering among them, as co-leaders, a stronger sense of responsibility and accountability.

Says Mazwana-Gcali: "I see my role as supporting the Ambassadors with everything they need to do the work in the community – from arranging the resources and materials and venues they need, to supporting their personal wellbeing. I want to see them succeed and help them achieve their goals… My passion for young people makes me want to help them get the future they want."

- **Securing funding**

Funding was a critical component of programme's success. It not only covered the financial compensation for the Ambassadors time, but was also necessary for resources, materials and for funding the training. Funding also ensured that the programme could continue to recruit new ambassadors into the group and address evolving nutritional challenges and maintain its impact over time.

Mazwana-Gcali is currently in the process of trying to facilitate more sustainable funding for the Ambassadors, this time exploring whether organisations are willing to "adopt" an Ambassador for the long-term to reduce the time and resource burden of continuously applying for funding and grants.

A funding-related challenge for Mazwana-Gcali however remains a lack of a physical space consisting of training- and meeting rooms for all the work they want to do and that she believes will enhance the programmes' relevance even further. "We ideally want a space where we can meet, have trainings, invite stakeholders, make gardens and have food demonstrations for the community and a food lab for children, to teach them more about food," she explains. As they are currently renting a space at an ECD centre, arrangements are often difficult, and sometimes impossible, to make.

- **Building relationships**

A participatory approach encouraged the engagement of a diverse range of stakeholders, including local authorities, non-governmental organisations, academic partners, and other community members. Noteworthy were the relationships built with the local ward councillor, the clinic manager, the local environmental health officers, local ECD principals, the ECD forum and two prominent NGOs in the community with which no prior collaboration took place. This network-building enriched the programme by bringing together diverse expertise, resources, and support. The collective wisdom and shared trust that result from these partnerships helps them in achieving their goals.

Mazwana-Gcali says the Net-Map session and the emphasis on stakeholder engagement throughout the training were, for her, among the most valuable elements of the programme, saying that before she did not

fully grasp its importance. “Now that we have reached out to them, we recognize that we all have a shared goal of trying to create better citizens in Masiphumele. We just take different angles.”

- **Focussing on soft skills**

As mentioned earlier, the training did not focus solely on the dissemination of nutrition information; it also stressed the development of soft skills such as active listening, effective communication and counselling skills, professional conduct and the importance of self-care. “Even things like planning your day, being on time, dressing a certain way, and your tone of voice. All of that helps you communicate better with other people and gives you confidence,” says Mazwana-Gcali. She believes this has helped the Ambassadors to talk with authority and be more respected in settings where they work with elderly, at schools, at the clinic and at ECD centres. These were also training session that many participants highlighted as being the most meaningful to them.

4. How this can potentially be scaled.

Below we have tried to capture key steps that can serve as inspiration for other similar interventions to achieve success.

- Step 1: Identify an active and respected NGO in the community. For the NCP training, this was possible through relationships the NC-study researcher had as part of the original research project. If this approach is not relevant, you can explore other ways to identify an NGO already working in the space aligned with your project’s goals. For example, you can look for an organization with an established connection to ECD centres or similar community programs. Engage in initial discussions with the selected NGO to gauge their interest in collaborating on the project, to ensure a functional participatory approach from the start.
- Step 2: Align goals. Once you have identified the NGO, first investigate whether their mission and goals align with your desired outcomes. You can do this by meeting with the NGO to discuss your organisations / research project’s objectives, such as improving nutrition, food systems, reducing stunting, or addressing child malnutrition. Find out how this algins with the NGO’s goals, and/or explore the possibility of extending the NGO’s goals to align with your desired outcomes. This alignment is crucial for a successful partnership and a participatory approach.
- Step 3: Identifying ambassadors. The NGO should decide how they want to go about identifying potential ambassadors who will champion the cause of improving community health through nutrition. They may have processes or other programmes already from which they can recruit. If necessary, you can support their process for example through being available for consultation. Developing a clear strategy for incentivising the ambassadors is an important part of this process. Incentives may include funding, recognition, training opportunities, or other resources to motivate their active participation. For the NCP, collaboration with another funding partner allowed for the recruitment of youth for which they could then pay a small stipend for 6 months as incentive to partake in the initial training (first cohort). Their selection for the second cohort was different.
- Step 4: Identify a training partner / facilitator. Collaborate with the NGO to identify a training partner with expertise in the relevant field. This partner can help design and deliver training sessions. The training partner should also have the ability to engage experts, government representatives, and academic partners to co-facilitate select sessions, ensuring a comprehensive training programme that takes into consideration the needs of the community through consultation with the NGO. It can be very useful if there is already an established trust relationship between the training partner / facilitator and the NGO. For the NCP training, the facilitator was familiar with the NGO as part of previous research activities

- Step 5: Plan and conduct the training. Work closely with the selected training partner and the collaborating NGO to develop a detailed training curriculum. This can be similar to the one developed for the NC Ambassadors, though it would perhaps be necessary to adapt it to address the specific needs and objectives of the community. The training partner should then conduct the training sessions, ensuring they are engaging, interactive, and tailored to the needs of the participants. Throughout the training, Ambassadors, as part of the NGO, should be encouraged to think about goals as a collective
- Step 6: Invite stakeholders and introduce the initiative. One of the strengths of the NCP was that they gained the trust of community members and forged connections with those who share a common goal. One way this process can be initiated, or galvanised where relationships with other organisations and stakeholders already exist, is to have a formal launch of the initiative where the Ambassadors share their learning experience and goal. During this session they can invite open discussions about where they can serve and support, and extend their willingness to work with aligned initiatives.
- Step 7: Provide ongoing support and motivation. Once the program has started, continue to provide technical support to the Ambassadors/ participants, as well as to the programme leadership. This support may involve curating and/or relying on networks to sponsor resources (such as posters, pamphlets, colouring books), guidance, and mentorship to help them gain confidence to effectively implement what they've learned.
- Step 8: Document, celebrate and evaluate. For motivating future funding, documenting the training process and the work the Ambassadors do can be very useful. This information can of course also be used to celebrate achievements, and to assess the impact of the intervention to make any necessary adjustments to the training program and/or activities.
- Step 9: Building depth and sustainability. This is perhaps the trickiest part. Consider how the programme can be sustained through discussion with the NGO. Ideally, they will be able to apply for grants and other funding out of own steam to continue paying Ambassadors an acceptable stipend or salary for the work they are doing in the community. It is an unfortunate reality that often hard working community members who are contributing great value to the community, are expected to work as volunteers or to be satisfied with small stipends. This increases the risk of drop-out and limited reach of the programme. With the NCP, the trainer was funded by one of the academic partners to work with the NGO to successfully apply for a grant to sustain the programme for a year beyond the initial six months. This allowed for a repeat of the training to upskill a second cohort of Ambassadors, and a subsequent expansion of the programme's reach. Working collaboratively to create sustainable incentives and an exit plan for the researcher will be extremely useful. This may involve transitioning fundraising leadership and technical support to the community itself, or identifying long-term sources of support, for example from local government entities.

5. Conclusion

Through the NCP training, community members have become powerful advocates and ambassadors for positive change. According to Mazwana-Gcali, the training equipped them with the tools to impart food literacy in various settings, including at schools, in elderly groups, at the clinic and in ECD centres. They are also now more actively engaged with the local council and environmental health authorities, as well as other NGOs.

The learnings presented in this report aim to highlight the pivotal role of a participatory and co-creation approach in the success of such initiatives, and also recognises the ongoing challenges, specifically as it relates to funding.

A final word of advice from Mazwana-Gcali: “You shouldn’t just start a programme because someone tells you to. It should be something that you are living. You should have a passion to serve your community, start seeing the challenges they face, and then want to work towards making it better.”