

Developing a Competency Framework for the Nutrition in Emergencies Sector

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: There is a recognised need to strengthen capacity in the nutrition in emergencies sector and the need for greater clarity on the role of emergency nutritionists and the skills they require. This research seeks to identify the competencies required by staff working in emergency nutrition, with the aim of developing a competency framework to aid capacity development within the sector.

Methods: Existing competency frameworks were reviewed and interviews conducted to explore methods used in other humanitarian sectors in developing competency frameworks. Competencies were identified and compiled through interviews with field experts, feedback from national staff, academic course content, and job specifications. These competencies were then categorised and behavioural indicators developed for each.

Results: A wide range of competencies were identified as essential for nutritionists working in emergencies, covering specific technical skills and more general core competencies. On comparison with course curricula, job specifications, and interviews, it was found that many of the general core competencies are not covered in current recruitment, training or professional development processes. These same competencies were perceived by experts in field practice as frequently limiting the performance of personnel. Many of the core and technical competencies are not specific to emergency nutrition, but are common across development and emergencies.

Conclusion: The NIE competency framework could prove to be a valuable tool in creating standards within the sector and promoting effective capacity strengthening and professionalization. It could also help to build a range of competencies amongst national and international staff needed for emergency preparedness, response and recovery activities in emergency prone and high burden countries. Continued research, however, is needed to further develop the framework, optimise methods for assessment, develop approaches to integrate it within the sector, and measure its impact on performance.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past six years, the humanitarian system has undergone a series of major reforms in an attempt to address inadequacies that have hindered effective response [1]. Climate change, on-going conflict, and global economic recession are all contributing to the increasing frequency of humanitarian emergencies worldwide [2]. The need to strengthen the system to manage and respond to these crises remains a priority. A key aspect of the humanitarian reform process has involved developing capacity [1]. The 2005 humanitarian response review noted: *“there are simply not enough people with the right experience available quickly”*. In response there has been increased investment in training and professional development for existing and future cadres of humanitarian staff.

As part of this process, a number of international organizations have debated the value of professionalising the humanitarian sector[3]. It has been argued that a recognised set of standards for humanitarian staff would improve performance and promote quality and accountability[3]. The result has been the development of a number of competency frameworks, which are increasingly being used to measure ability and to structure training. The concept of competencies emerged during the early 1980s as a response to the need for improved performance in the business sector. Competencies are defined as the behaviours and technical attributes that individuals must have, or acquire, to perform effectively in a particular role. [4, 5] The benefits of adopting competency-based training and development in the humanitarian sector were described by People in Aid: *“competency frameworks provide a potentially powerful way of better ensuring that recruitment choices and the development of people fits the roles they will fill. The hope is that by making clear the ways people are expected to behave and in which they will be held to account for their behaviours, individual performance will improve, followed by increased team and organisational effectiveness.”*[6].

To date, members of the Consortium of British Humanitarian Agencies (CBHA) have agreed a core humanitarian competency framework [7], and several ‘technical’ frameworks have also been produced [8-10]. The core competencies are considered to be the foundation set of skills for effective national and international humanitarian staff, with the technical competency frameworks providing benchmarks for ability and performance in specialist areas.

As yet, no technical competency framework exists for the skills required for emergency nutrition preparedness, response, and recovery; a sector within the humanitarian system that is experiencing serious gaps in capacity, having faced a notable lack of skilled staff for many years [11]. Despite efforts to invest in the development of the NIE profession, there are still insufficient numbers of trained nutritionists, particularly from the countries where malnutrition persists and emergencies are common [1, 11]. Emergencies put affected populations at a much higher risk of malnutrition and disease [12]. It is estimated that 20% of acute malnutrition globally is the result of an emergency situation[13]. In order to prevent malnutrition in these contexts, and to treat cases that do arise, a cadre of nutritionists are needed at both national and international level who can respond quickly and effectively to emergencies.

In collaboration with organizations in Africa, Asia and the Middle East, we recently established the Nutrition in Emergencies Regional Training Initiative (NIERTI), which is intended to provide sustainable, high quality training in NIE. The development of the NIERTI highlighted the need for a more detailed examination of the role of emergency nutritionists and the skills required. The competencies required of a nutritionist working in emergencies differ between agencies and the content of training varies significantly. In an attempt to address this, we developed a draft technical competency framework for NIE, with input from key stakeholders in the sector. In this paper we document the process of developing the framework and discuss some of the potential opportunities and challenges to its implementation as a tool to strengthen NIE capacity.

METHODS

Review of existing literature on humanitarian competencies

A review of the literature relating to humanitarian competency frameworks was undertaken using the PubMed and Web of Knowledge electronic databases. A search was also conducted in the resources section of the OneResponse website [14]. The subject of competencies in the humanitarian sector is relatively new, and so the information available is limited and many documents are not within the public domain, consequently requests for information and existing frameworks were sent to agencies within the Global Nutrition Cluster (GNC).

Interviews were conducted with senior staff from two sectors that have implemented a competency-based approach for training and assessment (Humanitarian Logistics and Child Protection in Emergencies (CPIE)). Interviewees were purposefully chosen for their involvement in the development and regular use of the frameworks. Additional frameworks were collated from humanitarian organisations and reviewed. The structure for the NIE framework was then chosen based on the merits and uses of the existing frameworks. This process was also used to ascertain how the NIE competency framework could be used as part of recruitment, assessment and training.

Construction of the competency framework

The key features of a competency framework were identified from the review of existing frameworks (see table 2), and using these as a guide, the NIE competencies identified were categorised as either technical or core. Competencies that already feature in the existing core humanitarian frameworks were removed to avoid replication. The competencies were then assigned to a technical domain and, where necessary, re-formulated into a behavioural indicator. Expressing competencies in the form of behavioural indicators facilitates the use of a framework as a tool for assessing ability and performance. This was done using Bloom's Taxonomy of learning behaviour as a guide (see table 1). Each behavioural indicator was then allocated to one of three levels, corresponding to progressive seniority within the sector (see table 3). This allocation was done using NIE job specifications for posts requiring varying levels of professional experience.

Table 1: Blooms Taxonomy Categories and Action Verbs [15]

Category or 'level'	Key words (verbs which describe the activity to be measured at each level)
Knowledge Recall or recognize information	arrange, define, describe, label, list, memorize, recognize, relate, reproduce, select, state
Comprehension Understand meaning, interpret, extrapolate, translate	explain, identify, give example(s), reword, critique, classify, summarize, illustrate, review, demonstrate, translate, review, report, discuss, theorize, paraphrase, example
Application Use or apply knowledge in actual situations. Put theory into practice	use, apply, operate, write, manage, execute, solve, produce, implement, construct, modify, prepare, conduct, perform, react, respond, role-play, practice, change, select
Analysis Break down ideas into simpler parts and find evidence to support generalisations	analyse, identify, catalogue, compare, quantify, measure, test, examine, experiment, relate, graph, diagram, plot, extrapolate, value, divide,
Synthesis Compile component ideas, propose alternative solutions, creative thinking	develop, adapt, build, combine, create, design, plan, organize, explain, revise, formulate, propose, establish, assemble, integrate, re-arrange, modify
Evaluation Assess effectiveness of whole concepts. Make and defend judgements based on evidence	review, justify, assess, present a case for, defend, report on, investigate, direct, appraise, argue, project-manage

Identification of nutrition in emergencies competencies

The identification of NIE competencies was designed to be as comprehensive as possible, and consisted of three stages. First, existing competency frameworks, course curricula and emergency nutrition job specifications were reviewed and relevant competencies extracted. Frameworks, courses and job specifications were only included if they featured an aspect of emergency nutrition.

Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a convenience sample of 'field experts' working for member organisations of the GNC. The sample consisted of 3 independent consultants, 3 employees from UN agencies, 3 employees from international NGOs. The interview questions were designed to explore which competencies were viewed as essential for an emergency nutritionist and also those that interviewees perceived to be commonly limiting in the field. Where necessary, questions were open-ended to encourage interviewees to expand on the issue. Interviews were conducted by telephone due to the geographical spread of participants and lasted approximately 45 minutes.

Third, participants from the NIERTI courses held in Uganda, Thailand and Lebanon in 2010 and 2011 were contacted to identify which skills they felt were essential for their roles in emergency nutrition.

RESULTS

Existing humanitarian competency frameworks

Six humanitarian competency frameworks were identified and reviewed (see table 2).

Table 2: Competency Frameworks in Related Sectors

Framework Name	Author , date	Core or Technical
Child Protection in Emergencies (CPIE)	Save the Children, 2010	Core and Technical
Humanitarian Logistics	Fritz Institute and Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport, 2009	Core and Technical
Livelihoods	DFID, 2011	Core and Technical
Consortium of British Humanitarian Agencies	CBHA & People in Aid, 2010	Core
Enhanced Learning and Research for Humanitarian Assistance	Walker and Russ, 2010	Core
United Nations	UN Department of Management, 2010	Core

Interviews were then conducted with key informants from the Humanitarian Logistics and CPIE clusters.

From these interviews, and the review of the frameworks, three key features were identified. (i) Competencies were categorised as either core or technical, with a number of frameworks focusing exclusively on core competencies and others on both core and technical. (ii) All the frameworks reviewed organise the competencies into domains. Within these domains, most frameworks then outline specific behaviours or examples of how to successfully demonstrate skills relating to each domain. The Humanitarian Logistics framework includes key learning points within each domain to ensure complete coverage of required skills. Most of the frameworks have been further developed to take into account progressive levels of learning, with each level featuring a set of behavioural indicators.

Structure for the NIE framework

This review of the existing competency frameworks and their key features led to the proposed structure for the NIE framework shown in Table 3. The categorisation of competencies and assigned behavioural indicators with progressive additive levels provides clarity regarding the skills required and gives a clear vision of career progression. This structure is based closely on the CPIE framework.

Table 3: Proposed structure for NIE Competency Framework

Competency Domain	Level 1 Behaviour	Level 2 Behaviour	Level 3 Behaviour
Descriptive name of competency domain	Required for field level workers	Required for team coordinators/ supervisors	Required for country and international level technical staff

The CPIE framework includes core humanitarian competencies which are based on those previously identified by CBHA. We recognise that these core competencies are essential for all humanitarian workers, and so the NIE framework is designed to be used in conjunction with these.

Extraction and compilation of competencies

Seven courses that either focus on NIE or include relevant components were identified and included for review. Courses ranged from Masters’ degree level, to short, non-accredited training.

A total of 56 NIE job specifications were identified with roles ranging from graduate entry level to those requiring over ten years’ experience. Job titles included nutrition advisers, coordinators, programme managers and chiefs of health and nutrition. The hiring organizations consisted of international humanitarian NGOs and UN agencies with 36 and 20 job specifications respectively.

Full interviews were conducted with eight NIE experts; a further two responded to selected questions by email. All the interviewees work in international emergency nutrition and have between eight and 23 years’ experience working across Africa, Asia, Europe and America.

Feedback from 25 training course participants in Thailand, Lebanon and Uganda was collected. Participants were staff working for governmental departments in health and nutrition, and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The participants were asked to list the skills they used for their roles in emergency nutrition and specifically those for which they felt they required more training.

Once collected, the competencies from each method were assigned to a domain (for example, preparation of F-100, a therapeutic treatment for acute malnutrition would be assigned to ‘management of acute malnutrition’). These competency domains are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Competency domains identified from course curricula, job specifications, and key informant interviews (listed alphabetically)

Competency domain	Course curricula	Job specifications	Field experts and NIE course participants
Ability to live/work in changing & insecure environment	○	●	○
Advocacy	●	●	●

Analytical skills	●	●	○
Behavioural change communication	○	●	●
Capacity development	○	●	○
Emergency preparedness	●	●	●
Financial management	○	●	○
Food assistance	●	●	○
Food security and livelihoods	●	●	●
Health and Disease assessment	●	●	●
HR / Recruitment	○	●	●
Humanitarian system	●	●	●
Infant Feeding in Emergencies (IFE)	●	●	●
Interpersonal and communication	○	●	●
Keeping knowledge current	●	●	●
Leadership	○	●	●
Logistics	○	●	○
Management of malnutrition	●	●	●
Measuring malnutrition; data collection	●	●	●
Measuring malnutrition; Rapid assessments	●	●	●
Micronutrient deficiencies	●	●	●
Monitoring and evaluation	●	●	●
Needs assessment	○	●	○
Partner management & coordination	○	●	○
Policy Development	○	●	○
Prevention of malnutrition	○	●	●
Programme set up	○	●	●
Reporting	○	●	●
Sector integration	○	○	●
Surveillance / early warning	●	●	●
Technical writing	○	●	○

Filled circles indicate the inclusion of the competency domain

As shown in table 3, some domains which are identified as essential within job specifications and by key informants do not feature in the training course curricula. In general, the technical nutritional competencies are covered, with the main disparity in the more general competencies such as leadership, communication and policy development.

To avoid duplication, any competencies which are already included within the CPIE core competency framework were extracted so the framework contains only technical competencies. That is not to suggest that these core areas should be ignored, indeed the NIE framework should be used alongside the existing core competency framework, ensuring all essential competencies are considered.

The next step was to develop behavioural indicators for each competency within the technical domains using blooms taxonomy action verbs. The full competency framework including behavioural indicators is shown in table 5.

Table 5: NIE Technical Competency Framework

Competency area	Level 1 Behaviours	Level 2 Behaviours	Level 3 Behaviours
Humanitarian system & standards	Demonstrates awareness of relevant Sphere or organisation specific standards and indicators	Implements programmes in line with humanitarian standards Able to describe responsibilities of different organisations within the humanitarian response	Designs programme strategies that are coherent with humanitarian standards
Co-ordination	Identifies relevant local stakeholders for inclusion in nutrition programme activities Assists in compiling nutrition activity inputs for proposals Attends and actively participates in all relevant meetings Effectively communicates with relevant stakeholders	Manages the implementation of programmes, drawing upon lessons learned Works with staff to design programmes with long term transition in mind Disseminates information to all relevant stakeholders on a timely basis Develops good relations with other nutrition actors and other sectors	Initiates contacts and effectively communicates with all relevant local, national, and global stakeholders, Ensures integration, coordination, and harmonisation of tools with stakeholders Works effectively with stakeholders on development of strategies and proposals
Measuring Malnutrition: Rapid Assessments	Demonstrates ability to participate in rapid assessments of the nutritional situation	Organises assessment teams and ensures adherence to guidelines Conducts rapid assessments in line with guidelines and protocols	Plans, organises, and leads nutritional assessments Provides technical support to teams where needed
Measuring Malnutrition:	Collects good quality data (anthropometric and non-	Assesses all available information to select appropriate survey design for	Develops context specific strategies for measuring

Competency area	Level 1 Behaviours	Level 2 Behaviours	Level 3 Behaviours
Surveys	<p>anthropometric)</p> <p>Uses both quantitative and qualitative methods</p> <p>Conducts data entry using statistical packages</p> <p>Correctly understands and uses growth charts</p> <p>Obtains secondary data and identifies gaps</p>	<p>context</p> <p>Trains teams to use quantitative and qualitative methods and triangulates data</p> <p>Supervises surveys and ensures data quality</p> <p>Conducts full situation and causal analyses</p> <p>Uses appropriate conceptual frameworks for analysis</p> <p>Conducts data analysis using statistical packages</p> <p>Demonstrates understanding of different survey designs and when to use them</p>	<p>malnutrition</p> <p>Provides technical leadership and support to the survey teams</p> <p>Co-ordinates and manages nutrition survey activities</p> <p>Collates, analyses, interprets and disseminates nutrition information</p>
Health and Disease Assessment: The Link with Nutrition	<p>Demonstrates awareness of nutrition/disease interactions</p> <p>Implements appropriate measures to reduce risk of communicable diseases transmission</p>	<p>Ensures nutrition/disease relationship is considered in all nutrition programmes</p> <p>Initiates and conducts health assessments where appropriate</p>	<p>Actively engages with health sector</p> <p>Designs appropriate interventions accounting for disease status of target population (e.g. HIV/AIDS, Malaria)</p>
Food Security and Livelihoods Assessment	<p>Demonstrates ability to participate in food security assessments</p> <p>Demonstrates understanding of the role of food security in preventative interventions</p>	<p>Demonstrates understanding of livelihoods and household economy analysis methods</p> <p>Correctly uses livelihoods framework in causal analysis</p> <p>Ensures good communication links with food security staff</p> <p>Demonstrates familiarity with Integrated Phase Classification</p>	<p>Initiates food security and livelihoods assessments where appropriate</p> <p>Actively integrates nutrition and food security sector activities</p>
Surveillance and Early Warning	<p>Correctly collects and records the different types of data required for the surveillance system</p>	<p>Conducts appropriate trend analysis</p> <p>Understands the importance of non-anthropometric data</p> <p>Sources both primary and secondary data</p>	<p>Designs, implements, and follows up surveillance and early warning programmes</p> <p>Provides guidance on use of indicators for monitoring</p>

Competency area	Level 1 Behaviours	Level 2 Behaviours	Level 3 Behaviours
Design and Implementation of Nutrition Programmes	<p>Effectively implements nutrition programmes under guidance of programme manager</p> <p>Demonstrates awareness of programme objectives</p> <p>Demonstrates awareness of both preventative and curative interventions</p>	<p>Contributes to development of project proposals</p> <p>Manages nutrition programmes in line with humanitarian standards and documents any deviations</p> <p>Uses all relevant data/information to design programmes</p> <p>Adapts programmes to local contexts</p> <p>Monitors programme performance</p> <p>Assesses local capacity and ensures programmes integrated into existing health systems where appropriate</p> <p>Ensures projects are implemented in accordance with set timeframes</p>	<p>Develops new project proposals building on lessons learned from previous programme experiences</p> <p>Oversees design and implementation of nutrition programmes ensuring all are in line with humanitarian standards, and documents any deviations</p> <p>Analyses nutrition programmes on an on-going basis and proposes and implements improvements</p> <p>Designs programmes with awareness of long term transitions</p> <p>Ensures other programmes and sectors are considered when designing the programme</p>
General Food Distribution and Cash/Voucher Programmes	<p>Demonstrates ability to participate in general food distributions (GFD)and/or cash/voucher distributions</p> <p>Demonstrates awareness of potential challenges and necessary precautions</p>	<p>Plans and manages GFD or cash/voucher distributions</p> <p>Calculates nutritional content of rations and suggests suitable alterations where necessary</p> <p>Conducts market analysis</p>	<p>Demonstrates awareness of different food assistance strategies and reasons for choosing them</p> <p>Designs appropriate food assistance programmes</p>
Blanket Supplementary Feeding	<p>Demonstrates ability to participate in blanket SFP (BSFP)</p>	<p>Plans and manages BSFP</p>	<p>Designs appropriate programmes and strategies to prevent malnutrition</p>
Management of Moderate and Severe Acute Malnutrition	<p>Demonstrates ability to participate in active screening for targeted groups</p> <p>Applies standard assessment tools</p> <p>Executes monitoring activities for CMAM</p> <p>Adheres to protocols for</p>	<p>Maintains and supports CMAM programme activities (TSFP/OTP/SC)</p> <p>Integrates CMAM into existing health systems where appropriate</p> <p>Provides leadership on CMAM approaches</p> <p>Provides technical assistance</p>	<p>Assesses suitability for integration of CMAM programmes into health systems where appropriate</p> <p>Develops implementation strategy and effectively manages the implementation of CMAM programmes</p> <p>Designs and Implements</p>

Competency area	Level 1 Behaviours	Level 2 Behaviours	Level 3 Behaviours
	<p>in/outpatient treatment</p> <p>Delivers appropriate nutrition messages to carers/mothers at OTP/TSFP sites</p>	<p>and support to all levels</p> <p>Ensures all staff adhere to protocols</p> <p>Maintains and shares programme monitoring database</p>	<p>CMAM monitoring tools</p> <p>Provides technical assistance to programme managers and government departments</p> <p>Facilitates the development and scheduling of outreach activities</p> <p>Conducts regular field visits</p>
Micronutrient deficiencies	<p>Correctly identifies micronutrient deficiencies from clinical signs</p> <p>Appropriately treats deficiencies or refers to appropriate health staff</p> <p>Demonstrates awareness of possible interventions for preventing micronutrient malnutrition including supplementation, fortification, and diet diversification</p>	<p>Builds micronutrient deficiency assessments into surveys when appropriate</p> <p>Proposes suitable interventions to prevent deficiencies</p> <p>Conducts nutritional analysis of food assistance to determine whether all micronutrient needs are met</p>	<p>Designs interventions to treat and prevent micronutrient deficiencies</p> <p>Provides technical support to staff when necessary</p>
Infant and Young Child Feeding in Emergencies (IYCF-E)	<p>Demonstrates understanding of Operational Guidance on IYCF-E.</p> <p>Provides support for breastfeeding</p> <p>Takes appropriate measures to minimise risks of artificial feeding</p>	<p>Provides technical guidance to teams</p> <p>Ensures all staff adhere to criteria set out in the Operational Guidance on IYCF-E.</p>	<p>Ensures all actions of staff are contributing to supporting breastfeeding and minimising risks of artificial feeding</p> <p>Ensures logisticians are aware that they should adhere to the guidelines on distribution and use of breastmilk substitutes and other milk products.</p>
Behavioural Change Communication (BCC)	<p>Performs BCC sessions with beneficiaries</p>	<p>Oversees behavioural change communication activities</p>	<p>Designs and implements behavioural change communication programmes</p>
Emergency Preparedness	<p>Conducts activities outlined in emergency preparedness plan</p> <p>Involves communities in preparedness activities</p> <p>Demonstrates understanding of objectives of emergency preparedness</p>	<p>Identifies potential disasters for inclusion in preparedness plan</p> <p>Assesses populations to identify at risk groups</p> <p>Uses disaster risk reduction framework to identify potential impact of disasters</p>	<p>Designs, develops and oversees implementation of emergency preparedness plan</p> <p>Facilitates links between emergency response, DRR, and development teams</p>

Competency area	Level 1 Behaviours	Level 2 Behaviours	Level 3 Behaviours
	Uses early warning systems and projections	on nutritional status Identifies activities to mitigate risk and ensure nutrition response is timely and appropriate	
Logistics	Follows system for monitoring stock levels and reporting procurement needs	Develops procurement plans and liaises with logisticians	Develops strategic procurement plans well in advance and liaises with logisticians ensuring all details and timelines are understood
Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E)	Conducts data collection on key nutritional indicators Participates in analysis of data Conducts the M&E work plan Supports programme evaluations	Develops M&E framework / work plan in line with existing programmes Adapts M&E system to local context Ensures strong monitoring systems are in place, collecting key data on nutrition indicators Ensures all data is analysed, reviewed and responded to on an on-going basis	Designs and implements strong M&E systems Ensures effective supervisory mechanisms are in place Evaluates programmes on a regular basis and adapts them in line with findings
Advocacy and Communication	Communicates with relevant stakeholders to convey nutrition messages	Communicates effectively with government, media, and other organisations Demonstrates ability to independently structure and write relevant, clear and precise reports in different formats and for different audiences Provides inputs into policy development	Proactive in communicating nutrition agenda with all relevant stakeholders Oversees all communication ensuring appropriate messages are being conveyed Develops advocacy strategies to influence policy
Reporting	Reports properly and in a timely manner Writes in a clear and concise manner, providing all required information	Compiles and verifies nutrition reports Clearly presents data, using appropriate graphs and tables Submits good quality narrative and financial reports in a timely manner	Submits high quality reports, both narrative and financial, in a timely manner to internal and external parties. Takes responsibility for ensuring a regular reporting system is in place
Capacity	Identifies areas in need of	Assesses training needs of	Liaises with appropriate

Competency area	Level 1 Behaviours	Level 2 Behaviours	Level 3 Behaviours
Development and Training	strengthening Delivers basic training to teams of national staff	nutrition staff Designs, delivers, and supports staff training	authorities to develop capacity building plan for national staff Designs training materials and delivers and supports staff training for all parties including training of trainers Provides mentoring

Limiting competencies

In terms of gaps in skills, the main theme that emerged from the interviews was management and leadership, which was mentioned by the majority of respondents.

One interviewee stated:

“Management and leadership skills are not usually taught, yet once staff reach a certain level they are expected to possess these skills, which is often not the case.”

Other limiting competencies mentioned include: understanding and adhering to guidelines, report writing, training others, working well with different teams, strategy writing, co-ordination, adapting programmes to suit the specific context, communicating with media, funding applications, and knowing where to find resources. In addition, skills related to the integration of the Community Management of Acute Malnutrition (CMAM) in to health systems, prevention and treatment of malnutrition and social and behavioural change were noted as lacking among NIE personnel.

Applying the NIE competency framework

Across the sectors reviewed, competency frameworks are used as a basis for recruitment, development of training, and for professional development. From the interview with CPIE a more detailed overview of the processes involved in applying a competency framework emerged.

Recruitment

The framework is used to create job profiles which define the key competencies required for a role and the necessary level of skill. Once a profile has been created it is used to form a job description and as a reference against which to assess candidate suitability. Recruitment assessment methods include scenario questions, observation, and role play in group assessments. This improves recruitment processes, ensuring that the selected individual has all the competencies essential for the role. Those with a lack of formal academic qualifications are not necessarily excluded in this process as the essence of a competency based approach is that individuals are assessed on skills and attributes that may have been gained through experience or personal development. An example is shown below:

Role: Nutrition coordinator

Competency:	Minimum required Level
Coordination	3
Communication	3
CMAM	3
Surveys/Data collection	3
Reporting	2
Humanitarian system	3
Capacity development	2
Leadership	2

(Note: This example is purely illustrative, there may be additional competencies required for the role of a nutrition coordinator in different contexts)

Training

The framework is also used as a reference from which training is developed with the indicators relating to learning objectives, thereby standardising training courses across the sector. Competency based training naturally leads on to competency based assessment methods. In studies on assessment methods from the medical sector, it has been shown that in addition to standard essay and exam questions, assessing technical and behavioural competencies through observation of simulation situations is a valid method. [16] This approach facilitates the assessment of a person's behaviours such as decision making capacity in addition to technical competencies.

Professional development

The framework is also a tool for professional development and continuous learning. As identified by a staff member from CPIE, having the competency framework available for reference allows individual staff to take responsibility for identifying areas for their own further development [17]. Staff can use the framework as a self-assessment tool, grading themselves for each competency and identifying areas which would benefit from further development. The competency areas in which they score lower, or areas which they would like to develop, can then be focused on with the behavioural indicators providing clear examples of what is required to attain each level.

DISCUSSION

In this paper we have proposed a structure for a NIE competency framework and described how it could be used to improve staff recruitment, assessment, and professional development. We have also extracted and synthesised competencies and developed behavioural indicators for each. This is an initial step to developing a comprehensive competency framework for emergency nutritionists, which will act as a valuable tool for strengthening capacity within the sector.

The benefits of a competency based approach have been increasingly studied and discussed, with the medical sector investing heavily in research in this area. The key benefits that have been recognised include the introduction of transparent standards and increased public accountability. The standardisation of training and provision of a clear framework also encourages learning and professional development [18]. In other humanitarian sectors it is

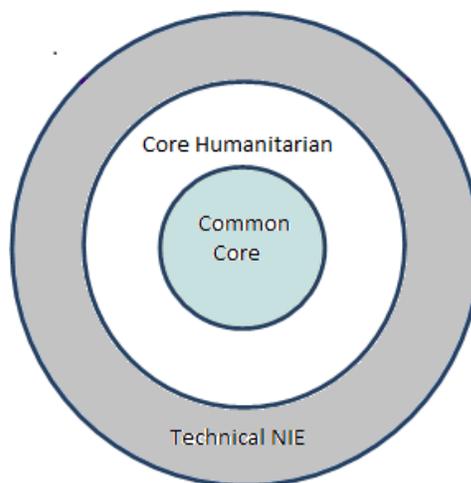
felt that the introduction of a competency based approach improves recruitment processes and is viewed as having been beneficial in developing capacity within the sector [17, 19]. A senior staff member within the logistics sector felt that having a competency framework from which to base the training and assessment for accredited qualifications has helped increase capacity of operational humanitarian logisticians and ensures that qualified logisticians are fully trained in all the essential competencies [19].

However, the approach is not without its criticisms and there are recognised limitations, including an increased administrative burden and possibility of a focus on achieving acceptable minimum standards rather than the best that's possible. Despite these limitations, competency-based learning is now dominant at most stages of medical training in high income countries [20].

Regardless of how comprehensive and well-constructed a framework is, its success is contingent on gaining wide spread acceptance and ensuring effective implementation. A key lesson learned within the medical sector is that there needs to be a clear implementation strategy from the outset [19]. Through this research, we have explored the three main ways in which the framework may be used; for recruitment, training, and professional development, based on the methods used within CPIE [8]. However, further work is required to explore the specific methods for implementation and challenges faced. For the NIE framework to be successful, it is important that we continue to learn from other humanitarian sectors that have engaged in this process.

The competencies identified as essential for any individual working within NIE are diverse, encompassing common core competencies such as communication and teamwork, humanitarian competencies essential to all humanitarian workers, such as knowledge and application of humanitarian system and standards, and nutrition specific technical areas such as identification of micronutrient deficiencies. This leads to a layered approach to building a competency framework, a method also used by CPIE [7] and shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Diagram illustrating the layered approach to building competencies

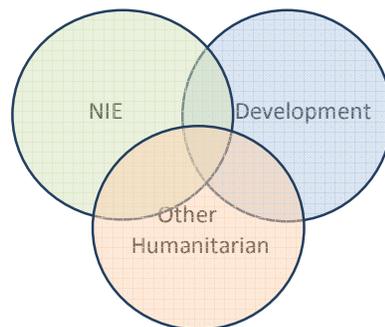


When comparing the competencies identified in table 4, we can see a clear difference between what was identified as essential from job specifications and interviews and what is currently being taught in the academic and training courses we reviewed that focussed on NIE. Whilst the majority of the technical skills are covered, the main difference lies in the more general competencies. This is further supported through the findings from the interviews, where many of the same competencies are regarded as limiting effectiveness in the field, with 7 experts interviewed commenting on the lack of leadership and management training in particular.

It may seem obvious that general core competencies are an important part of any role, yet this research has found that many are sorely neglected when it comes to training and were noted as limiting effectiveness in the field. So, our findings are that not only is there a lack of national and international nutritionists who can be deployed in response to emergencies, but those who are available may lack some of the essential competencies required to perform effectively. This was evident in a self-assessment of general nutrition capacity in the 20 countries with the highest global burden of undernutrition, where the main weaknesses were found to be in the areas of management and training [21]. This has led other sectors to begin incorporating elements of these core competencies into standard training. RedR, an international charity that provides training and recruitment services for the humanitarian sector are being increasingly requested to conduct training which incorporates leadership, people management, capacity building skills and conflict resolution[22].

It has been noted that there are many important commonalities between development and emergency nutrition, [11] and while developing the NIE framework it became apparent that many of the required competencies are not specific to emergency nutrition but overlap with disaster preparedness, recovery, and long-term development work. There is also strong overlap with other humanitarian sectors such as food security and logistics. For example data collection and surveys is a competency area required by both emergency and non-emergency nutritionists, however, in an emergency there are additional specific skills and behaviours required relating to data collection that differ from those required in a non-emergency situation.

Figure 2. The overlap of competencies between sectors



A similar overlap was also found by the developers of the CPIE, which led them to separate the competencies into three areas, core humanitarian, general child protection, and emergency-specific competencies [8]. This approach allows those who come from other professional backgrounds to identify the competencies they already possess that are included in the framework, thereby encouraging those in general nutrition or other sectors

such as food security or livelihoods to undertake emergency nutrition training and further build capacity.

Many situations fluctuate in and out of crisis so that 'development' nutritionists who are running existing programmes are required to respond to an emergency. As highlighted by O'Dempsey *"a lack of definition as to what constitutes a humanitarian emergency and the absence of rules of engagement of NGOs and donors further complicates the problem."*[23] This then begs the question of whether it is appropriate to develop a separate competency framework for NIE when the required skills are so clearly interlinked with development work. While there is an undoubted need to strengthen nutrition capacity in both development and emergency contexts, there is, nonetheless, a set of skills and knowledge that is unique to emergencies. In addition, the mechanisms by which staff are recruited, assessed, and supported usually differ between the development and emergency sectors.

Limitations

Although every effort has been made to identify all essential competencies, this list may not be exhaustive due to the various limitations of this research. Some relevant documents may be held by agencies and not in the public domain. Time and resource limitations mean that the competency list compiled in this study has not been reviewed by field experts or key stakeholder organisations such as the members of the IASC Global Nutrition Cluster. It is also noted that the competencies highlighted through expert interviews are likely to have been biased towards each individual's area of expertise and reflect international rather than national perspectives. Ideally a larger sample of field experts and national staff would have been included, with experts also included from government departments, training institutions, donor organisations, and other NGOs (national and international).

Some competency areas have gaps due to a lack of available information and this may or may not reflect the actual need for expertise in these areas of work. Areas like social and behavioural change and emergency preparedness are often neglected within job specifications and course content, and this is reflected in the framework.

Conclusion

The move to a competency based approach is a logical step to strengthen the NIE sector and build human resource capacity. However, the competency framework proposed here will require a formal review involving a wide range of stakeholders before it can be adopted. The competency approach has already been adopted by the logistics and CPIE sectors and is perceived to be beneficial, although formal evaluations are still required. It is therefore essential that indicators for monitoring and evaluating the use of competency frameworks are defined in order to build an evidence base on its use, not just within NIE, but within the humanitarian sector as a whole.

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