

Where next for the SCN? A Personal View

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There has been an explosion in activity addressing child undernutrition with new institutions and the reform of others. The situation is encouraging as the volume of resources and activity at country level has expanded. This month sees the 35th birthday of the SCN, and its future is being debated as never before, despite all of the current positive signs for international nutrition. This paper draws on the SCN history to suggest that its structure with its neutral, normative and consensus seeking role is needed more than ever before.

Introduction

This month the UN System's Standing Committee on Nutrition (SCN) celebrates its 35th birthday. Its mandate was established in April 1977 by the UN's Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). At the time of its 30th birthday, this author wrote a history of the SCN¹, and concluded on an optimistic note for its future, after the [Brussels meeting](#) in November 2009. It was observed that as international nutrition was receiving unprecedented interest, then, logically, the future of the SCN would be bright. International attention has accelerated since then, but now, the fortunes of the SCN are at a low moment. This short paper addresses this paradox: why the SCN is not making more progress, changes in the external environment and what is its role in the new nutrition architecture.

Changes in Institutions

Since the end of 2009, there have been high levels of activity within the international nutrition landscape.

First, the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement was initiated in September 2010 to encourage increased political commitment for accelerated reductions in levels of child undernutrition, with 27 governments now committed to scale up nutrition. The UN Secretary-General has appointed a high-level, multi-stakeholder Lead Group to provide overall strategic leadership and to create the enabling environment at national level: this includes identification of a Government focal point and of a donor convenor, setting up of a platform which can engage multiple stakeholders, updating of national policies and strategies, and establishment of a common results framework. While the strength of these

¹ Richard Longhurst, Global Leadership for Nutrition: The UN's Standing Committee on Nutrition (SCN) and its Contributions, [IDS Discussion Paper No 390](#), Brighton, Sussex, July 2010.

platforms and other arrangements varies, what has been achieved is extraordinary. There is now a small SUN Secretariat, based in Geneva.

Second, there is UN REACH, which builds on the work of the Ending Child Hunger and Under nutrition Initiative (ECHUI), and currently focuses on 15 countries. REACH is a consortium of five UN agencies (FAO, IFAD, WHO, UNICEF and WFP²) and is also committed to reducing child undernutrition by supporting countries to intensify action through government led, multi-stakeholder partnerships involving the UN, civil society and the private sector. REACH promotes interventions in priority areas relating to food security, health and care. The inter agency team with country facilitators works with country partners to assist UN country teams and partners to create operational synergies and apply successful practices. It is a significant and integral part of the SUN movement.

There have also been several other changes involving existing institutions. The food price shock of 2008 led, among other things, to the UN's Secretary-General setting up a High Level Task Force (HLTF) on Global Food Security, against the backdrop of concerns about recurring crises and the likely impact on the MDGs. In October 2009, the FAO Committee on World Food Security (CFS) started reform to enhance its work as an international and intergovernmental body dealing with food security and nutrition, and to be a central component of the evolving Global Partnership for Agriculture, Food Security and Nutrition. Two features of the CFS reform involved drawing in a wide range of organisations and setting up its own High Level Panel of Experts to advise on food security and nutrition. The World Health Assembly has also, in May 2010, adopted resolutions on child nutrition, urging member governments to increase political commitment.

With so many partnerships, high level groups and related activity, political commitment is at an all time high for nutrition at national and international level. There are better pooled resources for nutrition at the country level. But it is hard to sort out at this early stage who is doing what and whether all of these institutions – new and evolving – are all working well together, and what the overlaps might be.

The Role of the SCN in this rapidly evolving landscape

The SCN has an impressive history of achievements over its 35 years, given its always slender resources. It has been the great survivor by acting as nursery or laboratory to what are some of the most important issues in nurturing nutrition into a central development issue, including the role of micronutrients, importance of the life cycle approach to nutrition, role of nutrition in HIV/AIDS prevention and care, the right to nutrition approach, and the food/health/care approach. It developed global statistical estimates of the size of nutritional problems, and published many quality publications and supported valuable technical working groups. However, as a UN coordinating mechanism, it has found coordination across agency mandates difficult, although it goes some way through coherence, cohesion and convening.

² 4 UN Agencies (FAO, UNICEF, WFP, and WHO) signed a Memorandum of Understanding on REACH

In the last 2-3 years, the SCN constituent agencies and secretariat have also been busy: among other things the secretariat supported the SUN Movement, was an active member of the CFS Advisory Board and worked on other emerging issues. But it does not have a clear set of outcomes for the way ahead. One reason for this position was that the principle actors in the SCN constituent agencies have been actively engaged in the reform of the other fora. Funds would probably have been available if the SCN had concluded its reform and set out a clear programme, although donors have always rightly not provided resources to support UN agency coordination as, although it is not costless process to implement, resources and actions should come from within the agencies themselves. Coordination within the SCN was also weakened by its separation from high level UN management in 2002 and a direct reporting function lost when the Administrative Committee on Coordination of the UN (ACC) was abolished. This also weakened accountability. Up to the mid 2000s there were active bilateral donor and civil society interest groups, with a process in place to include business partners. To some extent these actors are now incorporated in the SUN Movement, CFS and others, although the inclusion of the private sector still needs to be firmed up.

Also, in this greater operational environment there are still issues within the four UN agencies that require time to address, issues that are in the SCN's DNA. Some of the four agencies are more operational than others; there are degrees of operationality in all. Three (WHO, FAO, WFP) are specialized agencies but although technical agreements draw on the same research sources and operational experience, the application of technical advice can vary. As long ago as the mid 1950s, FAO and WHO as specialized agencies had been unable to provide the type and range of advice that the more operational agency of UNICEF had required - hence the establishment of the Protein Advisory Group (PAG) (see Longhurst, 2010, pages 13-14). There will always be these in-built divisions between specialized and development agencies, and in the end an SCN-type structure is needed to thrash them out... but it takes time!

So what is the basis for future SCN activity, if any?

Current SCN activity has contracted to the principal UN agencies that support it: FAO, WFP, WHO and UNICEF. Its resources support a small technical and administrative secretariat with an acting Executive Secretary, being the current Director of WHO's Department of Nutrition and Human Development. There is also (within the SUN Movement) a Network of UN system agencies, which SUN says will "build on, not supplant the normative, specialized, evaluative and operational functions of the UN system... and will be coordinated by the SCN Executive Committee and facilitated by the SCN Secretariat".

The future of the SCN can be judged in part by its past strengths; it has worked to support the timeframes that have been needed to bring about nutritional improvement. These have often taken a 5-10 year period to nurture. In the context of current activities, there must be some concerns that donor supported activities may be shorter than this time frame, especially in this age of austerity. In addition the post 2015 MDG landscape may look quite different with less emphasis on health, education and by implication, nutrition.

The key factor is the need for a neutral meeting ground, to seek consensus, to search for what are often protracted agreements, and to harmonize concepts and methodologies. It is right to assert that the world's undernourished cannot wait any longer for agencies and governments to act. But it is also right to recognize that there are still long-term issues to address in sustaining today's action. None of the current structures provide such a consensus seeking structure except the SCN. Nurseries and laboratories will still be needed to test ideas and opinion away from the hubbub and rush of operational activity. Whether by design or not the constituent agencies through the SCN have acted together as a very cost effective UN specialized structure for nutrition, highly respected for its publications, dissemination of independent information and convening power. The need for a 7th Edition of the Report on the World Nutrition Situation will be even more pressing in 2-3 years time, for which preparation should start soon. Who will do that from a slightly detached position?

There will also likely to be independent evaluations to host, tricky technical issues to be addressed on the basis of the best independent evidence, requiring measured consideration, and continuing its successful newsletters: the SCN will not be doing all of these of course, but can, like many UN structures, take on project funds to meet current challenges and then contract afterwards. It does however, need to try and encourage additional UN agencies to take a more active role, and a plausible view is that some may find this a more suitable structure (and level of commitment) to address their interests than through any of the other platforms just starting up.

Therefore this is an argument to keep an SCN-lite in place during this current firestorm of operational nutrition activity, not to lose its institutional memory and yes, it can be said, to retain its UN brand image, which it was found, during research for the SCN History, was very highly valued among developing country government advisers and nutritionists in particular. There is a strong case for keeping the structure in place albeit at a low level of resources that will grow as needs demand. The role of Technical Secretary could be held on a part time rotating basis by an agency staff member, putting these individuals under considerable additional pressure it is true, but this would mirror the format of some other UN coordinating structures.

Summing Up

This is not an argument for the SCN to sit still or work under cover. It must adapt to the new realities of the SUN Movement, the REACH activities and the reform of some sister UN committee structures. It must be flexible enough to meet the needs of these reforming structures, which may look to the UN agencies that make up SCN, hopefully expanded from the traditional four, for a catalytic function, common position and strong normative and lesson sharing function.