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Enhancing food systems dialogues in Central Asia and Caucasus



A recent sub-regional symposia - Symposium on sustainable food systems and nutrition governance for healthy diets in Central Asia and Caucasus – was held from 24-26 April 2019 in Astana, Kazakhstan. During the event, several countries acknowledged the need to shift to more sustainable production patterns, including a shift away from monotonous cropping patterns to more diverse ones in order to support the availability of diverse diets. Central to the debates was also the role of schools and the importance of healthy school environments that curb the current rising trend of childhood obesity. In this context marketing aimed at children, including digital marketing, was mentioned as a serious threat to nutritional health of adolescents. Participants called for region wide learning and data collection, as well as the establishment of regional food based dietary guidelines. Additional details are available in the [Joint Statement - Central Asia and Caucasus Food Systems and Nutrition Governance](#).

The UNSCN contributed with presentations covering topics that ranged from global governance for nutrition to the return on investment of nutrition interventions. Since several of the countries represented are in the process of renewing their United Nations Development Assistance

Framework (UNDAF), the UNSCN Secretariat also organized a special session about ways that nutrition can serve as a unifier and amplifier of the overall UNDAF outcomes, building from the [UNSCN Guidance Note](#) (2017). The UNDAF is the strategic programme framework that describes the collective response of the UN System to national development priorities.

This event stemmed from the [FAO International Symposium on Sustainable Food Systems for Healthy Diets and Improved Nutrition](#) (December 2016) that explored policies and programme options for shaping the food systems in ways that deliver foods for a healthy diet, focusing on concrete country experiences and challenges. It has since been followed-up by several regional symposia, such as the Sustainable Food Systems for Healthy Diets in Europe and Central Asia (December 2017, Hungary) which inspired this sub-regional symposia.

Photo credit: @FAO/Sergey Kozmin

How close is Sierra Leone to implementing nutrition action at scale?

Malnutrition continues to hound Sierra Leone, where there has been virtually no improvement in wasting or stunting levels in recent years (Global Nutrition Report, 2018). Parliamentarians and other actors are cognisant that the stakes are high and that if unabated, malnutrition will impede wider development, including the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Yet, less than half of Sierra Leone's core nutrition actions (10 out of 25) are implemented in all provinces according to the results of a [Nutrition Stakeholder and Action Mapping](#), supported by UNN-REACH. Even where geographic coverage is high or somewhat high, beneficiary coverage – the number of people who receive a given service – may be low or even unknown due to prevailing data gaps, particularly for some of the nutrition-sensitive actions such as promoting 'eat what you grow practices' (not selling everything) in the northern and eastern provinces and training on post-harvest management of crops in the northern province.

The mapping engaged eight sectors and five different SUN networks (UN, civil society, donor, parliamentarian and scientific) with a total of 149 stakeholders and 22 actions mapped. This, in turn, provided fertile ground for participatory dialogue about how to plan and where to scale up nutrition actions. A specific analysis was conducted on the delivery mechanisms employed by the government and partners. It was found that on average, more than 40 percent of the actions mapped were delivered by Community Health Workers at district level. These findings will support the development of the National Plan on Community Health Workers. The exercise also identified bottlenecks, such as infrequent registration with district councils, which some felt hinder intervention coverage. Magnus S. Conteh from Marie Stopes International, found the “mapping is very useful to spot areas that need more attention and subsequently, spread out partners equally across districts and regions, avoiding duplications.” The UN Network Secretariat trained a local mapping team on its increasingly popular tool and provided back-stopping support for data analysis and visualization, leveraging experiences in other countries.



Mapping workshops, held at both the national and sub-national levels, provided a forum for actors to validate the results and decide on concrete next steps. They also provided an opportunity to reflect on lessons learned, including the timing of the exercise and need for further training. During the workshop in Freetown (12 March 2019), the Minister of State, Mrs. Frances Piagie Alghali, thanked stakeholders for their commitment to the exercise, particularly acknowledging the teamwork between the country's SUN Secretariat and the UN Network's intensive support arm – REACH. The workshops attracted representatives from the Vice President's Office, six ministries (Agriculture and Forestry; Health and Sanitation; Local Government and Rural Development; Primary and Secondary Education; Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs) the SUN Government Focal Point and other government officials from parliamentarians to members of multi-disciplinary district councils and SUN desk officers. They were also joined by members of civil society, the UN, private sector and donor community, who brought their ideas and views to the table.

Thanks to this diverse following, multi-sectoral nutrition is now standing on two feet. The workshops created a buzz and were even covered in local [newspapers](#), [TV](#) and radio broadcasts. Participants were enthusiastic, noting that mapping was especially useful for strengthening M&E as well as partnerships in nutrition. The findings are also providing valuable inputs to improve nutrition planning processes and coordination for nutrition gains. As Laurent Michaels from the Irish Aid stated, "from a human rights perspective, it also raises an important question related to accountability: who are the duty bearers?" Stakeholders have decided to replicate the exercise on an annual basis, starting in 2019. Similar mapping workshops were/will be held in Lesotho (March) and Niger (May) while the mapping exercise in Chad is in the final stages of completion. Madagascar and Sudan have recently

launched the exercise and other countries are also planning to do so in the coming months. Stay tuned to learn more, including how these mappings are influencing stakeholder behaviour.

Photo credit @ UN Network Secretariat/Sarah Cruz

The power of nutrition champions in Sierra Leone

Ever wonder about what it actually means to be a nutrition champion? The UN Network Secretariat teamed up with the Emergency Nutrition Network (ENN) to produce a [podcast](#) that explores the tactics that UNN-REACH Facilitator, Philip Kanu, has used to engage parliamentarians and to position nutrition as critical for the nation's wellbeing and prosperity. He recounts how he spotted an opportunity and worked with others to transcend nutrition from a technical issue with a narrow following to a political priority for his country. Also interviewed, the UNICEF Country Representative, who is currently serving as the UN Network Chair, and a representative from Irish Aid shed further light on what makes Philip a nutrition champion and the need to couple soft skills with nutrition data. While the podcast highlights specific UNN-REACH experiences in Sierra Leone, many of the strategies that Philip employed are universal, making for broader learning across countries.

Climate and nutrition communities unite

The [fourth UN Environmental Assembly](#) (UNEA-4, March 2019, Nairobi) was the first time that the world's highest-level decision-making body on the environment tabled the topic of food systems and nutrition. Events were organized to raise awareness on the 2019 theme - *Innovative Solutions to Environmental Challenges and Sustainable Consumption and Production* -and UNSCN teamed up with UN Environment to host the [Sustainable Food Systems for Healthy People and a Healthy Planet](#). "Global diets are the tie that binds environmental sustainability and human health" explained Stineke Oenema in her opening remarks. "They can improve public health and nutritional outcomes while reducing greenhouse gas emissions".



Ms Oenema also called for a radical transformation of the global food system toward healthier diets, based on diverse production systems and characterised by more plant-based dietary patterns. Actions to shift dietary choices, including taxes and subsidies to make healthier and sustainable choices more affordable, were put forward as policies that governments could implement, examples of which are spelled out in the UNSCN publication [Sustainable Diets for Healthy People and a Healthy Planet](#) (2017). Other actionable entry points include the development of Food Based Dietary Guidelines that are rooted in science and include sustainability criteria. Such guidelines inform consumers about healthy diets and the need for sustainable production and consumption patterns. They would also sensitize policy makers about healthy diets and the need to design agricultural and investment policies in line with the needs for healthy and sustainable diets. Data regarding food consumption patterns could serve as baseline information to support the transition, a task in which the private sector could help. Considering that the Committee on World Food Security's Voluntary Guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition is expected to be adopted in October 2020, a Resolution on the theme could be a welcomed achievement for UNEA-5 in early 2021, providing a perfect example of policy coherence.

Several of the decisions taken at UNEA-4 are directly related to agriculture, food systems and nutrition. For example, the resolution on [biodiversity and land degradation](#) refers to the importance of conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity for food security and nutrition. Furthermore, the [Ministerial Declaration](#) of the assembly calls for the promotion of sustainable food systems, and the resolution of [curbing food loss and waste](#) requests UNEP to assist countries in their related efforts, in collaboration with FAO and in the framework of the One Planet (10YFP) Sustainable Food Systems (SFS) Programme.

UNSCN continued to build on the synergies of the climate and nutrition agendas during [an event](#) at the [Climate and SDGs Synergy Conference](#) (April 2019, Denmark). This conference is part of a [series](#) of preparatory meetings for the SDGs under review and serves to inform the deliberations of the High Level Political Forum in July 2019, as well as the Climate Summit in September 2019. The theme also reverberated during the World Bank Spring Meeting (April 2019, USA) as Kristalina Georgieva, World Bank CEO and Interim President until 8 April 2019 reaffirmed that transforming food systems is paramount for the World Bank's goal to end poverty, ensure

and other development partners – drew upon the data and visual outputs generated through the UNN tools to understand the scope, magnitude and distribution of the country’s nutrition challenges. One of these tools, the [Multi-sectoral Nutrition Overview](#), was hailed as eye-opening to many working in the country and even appears as one of the suitcases loaded on the bus in the cover page. Similarly, the [Nutrition Governance Capacity Assessment](#) identified gaps and opportunities to bolster nutrition action, thereby informing the capacity development activities outlined in the plan (e.g. Cadre establishment for food and nutrition in the public service, establishment or strengthening of a National Food and Nutrition Advisory Team). Not only did these analytics help frame the strategy and planning workshop discussions, they also ensured that the document was tailored to the country context.

The strategy and its corresponding action plan were elaborated through an extensive consultative process, led by the country’s Food and Nutrition Coordinating Office with close support from UNN-REACH. Consultations unfolded at the national, district and community levels, followed by participatory formulation and costing workshops. This approach was pivotal to securing buy-in and giving roots to successive action. The final strategy and plan come with a price tag of approximately USD 239 million over its five-year period. Findings from the [Nutrition Stakeholder and Action Mapping](#), concluded in early April 2019, will help actors prioritize these actions, giving particular consideration to those with low coverage.

IFAD demonstrates progress on Nutrition Decade

IFAD's contribution to the UN Decade of Action on Nutrition is high on its corporate agenda, with "improving the nutritional level of the poorest populations in developing countries" as a principal objective. Given its dual nature as a UN specialized agency in smallholder agriculture and rural development, and an international financial institution that provides governments with the finance needed to make lasting and effective investments in nutrition, IFAD plays a unique role among development actors. Its work specifically targets the poor and most vulnerable households in rural areas, including women, children, youth – in particular adolescent girls – and indigenous peoples. By investing in nutrition-sensitive agriculture and food systems, IFAD aims to improve the dietary quality of its beneficiary rural populations.

As the first UN agency to [commit to the Nutrition Decade in 2017](#), IFAD is best placed to report on its achievements thus far. In 2018, 100% of the country strategic opportunities programmes (COSOPs) approved by the IFAD's Executive Board were nutrition sensitive. For projects (loans and grants), 13 of the 27 projects approved for financing were nutrition sensitive, equalling 48% of projects during the course of the year and surpassing the original target of 33% of projects. The approved projects will support 13 developing countries: Bangladesh, Benin, Burundi, Brazil, Central Africa Republic, Chad, Guinea, Haiti, Honduras, Mozambique, Myanmar, Niger, and Sierra Leone. IFAD also organized two regional capacity building workshops to strengthen the capacity of both design and implementation of nutrition sensitive programs, training 117 professionals representing various IFAD investments in both Latin America and the Caribbean and East and Southern Africa regions. This work contributes to the Nutrition Decade Action Areas 1, 3, 4 and 5.

In addition, technical assistance was provided to COSOP development, project design and implementation.

In October 2018, IFAD organized and hosted the third [International Conference on Adolescents Girls](#), encouraging actions beyond health interventions and promoting holistic approaches to prevent early marriages and pregnancies. In close cooperation with Save the Children Italy and with the support of the Government of Canada, the conference gave special attention to youth empowerment initiatives and indigenous peoples' empowerment to ensure that girls grow up and are educated in a healthy and safe environment.

In the IFAD Nutrition Action Plan (2019-2025), IFAD is committed to improving the nutrition of 12 million people by 2021 and increasing the target of projects that are nutrition sensitive to 50% by 2021. This significant target moves IFAD one step closer to realizing its commitment to the Nutrition Decade and reducing poverty through nutritious foods.

New Nutrition Decade resources are now available: [UN Decade of Action on Nutrition Work Programme](#), [Nutrition Decade – Overview](#), [Country Specific Commitments](#), [Action Networks](#).

New era of SUN Movement is brewing in Peru

UN actors are coming together and waving the nutrition flag high in Peru. Joint nutrition advocacy and studies, including the systemization of experiences and lessons learned in anaemia reduction, are some of the fruits that this UN collaboration is bearing which, in turn, are fueling related advocacy and communications. These efforts are helping to keep nutrition on the political agenda in spite of changes in the government– most recently the Prime Minister and Cabinet as well as the President about one year ago. They are also helping to give way to a new era of the SUN Movement in the country– one that is tackling multiple forms of malnutrition from stunting to anaemia, overweight and obesity. This surge of energy is welcomed by the nutrition community following the retirement of the respected and adored nutrition champion from civil society, who many know as 'Milo', as well as staff turnover across many other stakeholders.

Members of UN leadership in the country, including the UN Resident Coordinator (UNRC) and the Representative and Country Director of WFP, acknowledge that effective UN nutrition support is not just a question of working collectively on nutrition, but also understanding the complementarity of the respective UN agencies' activities in this area– even those who are newer-comers to nutrition, such as UNFPA. The UNRC has recently taken initial steps to spearhead collective dialogue on nutrition among the UN family, leading the UN meeting that took place with the SUN Movement Coordinator, Gerda Verburg in early April. Multiple UN agencies stand ready to further align and coordinate UN nutrition support. Behind the scenes, the UN Network Secretariat shared insights from other countries as a source of inspiration, where UNRCs are increasingly active in nutrition (e.g. Burkina Faso, the Comoros, Liberia, Zimbabwe).



Ms. Verburg's visit provided an opportunity to cement these measures. During her trip, Ms. Verburg travelled to UN programming sites along with SUN Executive Committee members Ms. Lauren Landis, Director of the WFP Nutrition Division, and Fokko Wientjes from Royal DSM, where they saw iron-rich meals prepared for children under three years old as part of ongoing efforts to combat anaemia. She also attended the filming of an innovative WFP-Government TV show (*Cocina con Causa*), which promotes good eating practices, capitalizing on Peru's acclaimed food culture and local ingredients and chefs. UN colleagues now have a better understanding of how the UN Network platform empowers the United Nations to 'deliver as one', with potential to impart learnings to other areas of the UN portfolio for achieving the SDGs. Since her visit, UN agencies are starting to identify focal points to formalize the country's UN Network and reflect upon who will chair it in this new chapter of SUN history.

Photo credit @ WFP Pilar Celi

New Resources

- [UN Network Annual Report now available](#)
[2019 Global Food Policy Report](#)
- [UNICEF-WHO-WB Joint child malnutrition estimates - Levels and trends \(2019 edition\)](#)
- [SUN Movement Mid-term Review Report](#)

- ENN continues to feature articles on multi-sectoral nutrition programming, contributing to the growing knowledge base in this area. A recent article explores the [Experiences of the 'Nutrition at the Center' project, Bangladesh](#).
- [FAO Framework for the Urban Food Agenda](#)

Call for contributions: Submit your papers on [Sustainable Food Systems and Diets](#) (deadline 1 June) and one on [new technologies for food security and nutrition in the 21st century](#) (deadline 1 August).

Upcoming nutrition related events

- **20–21 May:** Second SUN Nutrition Hub, Geneva, Switzerland
- **20–28 May:** [72nd World Health Assembly](#), Geneva, Switzerland
- **21–24 May:** NPIN Global Gathering, Amsterdam, Netherlands
- **27–31 May:** [1st UN-Habitat Assembly](#), Nairobi, Kenya
- **28–29 May:** SUN Movement Network and Secretariat Retreat
- **30 May:** CFS Open Ended Working Group Meeting about the draft Voluntary Guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition, Rome, Italy
- **8–11 Jun:** [Nutrition 2019](#), Baltimore, USA
- **12–13 Jun:** [EAT Stockholm Food Forum](#), Stockholm, Sweden
- **17–20 Jun:** [2019 DHIS2 Annual Conference](#), Oslo, Norway
- **17–27 Jun:** [50th Sessions of the UNFCCC Subsidiary Bodies](#), Bonn, Germany
- **19–20 Jun:** [3rd International Conference on Diet and Nutrition](#), Berlin, Germany
- **21–22 Jun:** [21st edition of the Global Obesity Meeting](#), Brisbane, Australia
- **9–18 Jul:** [UN High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development \(HLPF 2019\)](#), UN HQ, New York
- **15–18 Jul:** [10th Biennial Childhood Obesity Conference](#), San Diego, USA