The UNSCN 2016-2020
Capturing the learnings from its final years
Rome, December 2020

Overview

The complexity and magnitude of malnutrition in the world is daunting and far too great for any one United Nations agency or organization to tackle and solve alone. Since its conception in 1977 the United Nations System Standing Committee on Nutrition (UNSCN) has served as a collaborating and harmonizing platform to advance the UN’s interagency work in nutrition.

This report aims to capture the final years of UNSCN ahead of its merger with the UN Network for Scaling up Nutrition (UNN) to form UN Nutrition in 2021. It strives to share lessons learned, trials overcome and harmonizing actions that have contributed to the positive UN system level momentum to tackle malnutrition at the global level to inform the work of UN Nutrition. It was informed by a review of core UNSCN publications as well as the valuable insights gained during key informant interviews with members of the UNSCN family. This included past and present members, secretariat staff and collaborators 1.

The report places special focus on UNSCN’s work from 2016 to 2020. In 2016 UNSCN returned to its original Rome based home, hosted by FAO. With a new secretariat, new strategic plan and a new look UNSCN was revitalized to fulfil its mandate and vision. The period is marked by good harmonization between its members, the introduction of new UN members to the nutrition table and the creation of a range of new knowledge products which have helped to create firm linkages between nutrition-related issues to expand the global nutrition agenda. This has not been without its challenges. The global architecture of nutrition is complex and ever expanding, requiring levering different mandates to harness synergistic collaboration, secure commitments and strengthen evidence-based action. UNSCN’s strength lie in its members. Their support and contribution to its vision is essential. With the dedication of its members, supported by a small secretariat, the implementation of UNSCN’s 2016-2020 strategic plan comes to a close with greater harmonization between actors and awareness of the impact, determinants and action needed to tackle malnutrition in all its forms. Though it also comes at a time where new and growing threats such as COVID-19, rising inequality and climate change threaten the progress to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and uphold the right to food to end malnutrition in all its forms by 2030.

The establishment of UN Nutrition is a commitment to continue and expand and ensure UN collaboration at the global and country level. With 2021 set to be a milestone year for advancing the nutrition agenda UN Nutrition represents an unprecedented opportunity for the UN to harness the momentum to strengthen good governance for nutrition and speak with one, united voice.

The History of UNSCN

Throughout the UN’s 75 years of existence, addressing hunger has been a key priority enacted through its food and health mandated agencies. UNSCN was first established as a harmonizing platform for nutrition in 1977 through a UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) resolution. The creation of UNSCN occurred in the aftermath of the food crisis of the mid-1970’s and its formation followed a

1 Twelve key informant interviews with representatives from WHO, FAO, UNICEF, IFAD, WFP, CFS, UNSCN and UNSCN’s research partners
request of the 1974 World Food Conference to create a focal point for nutrition within the UN system. This move recognized that although many agencies, departments and platforms have contributions to make, the complexity and magnitude of malnutrition in the world is far too great for any one UN agency or organization to tackle and solve in isolation. UNSCN has therefore served as a harmonizing platform for nutrition concepts, policies, strategies, and programs across UN agencies to ensure the direction, scale, coherence and impact of the UN System response to global nutrition problems.

In response to the evolving nature of malnutrition and UN reforms UNSCN has itself undergone various stages – from the ACC Subcommittee on Nutrition, to the Standing Committee on Nutrition (SCN), and now UNSCN. ‘Born in adversity, shaped by controversy’ the intricacies and stages of UNSCN’s evolution through its first 33 years have been comprehensively captured in Richard Longhurst’s 2010 publication “Global Leadership for Nutrition: The UN’s Standing Committee on Nutrition (SCN) and its Contributions”. For the majority of this period UNSCN took the form of a tripartite entity, made up of UN agencies, Civil Society Organizations (CSO) and bilateral partners. The highlight of its workplan was its various working groups that gathered in an annual forum which brought together all stakeholders in nutrition to discuss, debate and strategize for nutrition action. Interviewees look back fondly on these annual gatherings, recalling the energy that emanated from the group of nutrition advocates, representing different stakeholder, brought together and given an equal voice. Though such an inclusive forum for debate also caused difficulties in translating discussions into harmonized and feasible action plans.

While Longhurst’s paper ends in 2010 with an optimistic view towards the future, 2010 in fact marked the beginning of a tumultuous time for UNSCN. UNSCN continued to face criticism that its annual forum and structure served only as a “talking shop” without leading to actionable outcomes and that its scope was too broad to serve its UN focused mandate. Tensions were amplified by the 2008 publication of the Lancet series on maternal and child undernutrition. This pivotal series brought worldwide attention to nutrition as a neglected aspect of maternal, newborn and child health. Declaring the international nutrition system was broken, the series identified a set of proven interventions focused on the first 1000 days, from conception to child’s second birthday, which required urgent and sustained scaling up in high burden countries. It also concluded with the need for new governance arrangements to support such efforts and enhanced private sector engagement.

The Lancet series was a critical piece to put the spotlight on nutrition and advance action to tackle the historic burden of undernutrition. At the time, this focus on maternal and childhood undernutrition aligned well to the global development direction set by the Millennium Development Goals (MDG’s) while also providing a clear path for governments, investors and multiple stakeholders to contribute to more effective nutrition action. However, this streamlined focus on child undernutrition compounded divergent views between members of the UNSCN steering committee. At the time the steering committee (SC) was made up of four UN agencies- FAO, UNICEF, WFP and WHO. Representatives of these agencies were divided in their views for the progression of UNSCN and addressing malnutrition. Half pushed to direct full attention to deliver on these high impact interventions while the other half maintained the need for a more holistic approach to malnutrition in all its forms and its multisector drivers. Private sector engagement in nutrition was also one key contentious point in the discussions.

3 The Lancet, 2008. “Maternal and child undernutrition is the underlying cause of 3.5 million deaths and 35% of disease burden in children younger than 5 years”. Vol 371;9608, 177-274
Figure 1. The history of nutrition within the UN system
Discussions started on a UNSCN reform, focusing primarily on the scope of its membership ranging from a UN only committee to a comprehensive multistakeholder platform, such as the Committee on World Food Security. The “UN focused” proposition prevailed, with a request from the SC that the UNSCN acts as the “connective tissue” between key global nutrition actors for greater global policy coherence. The idea was that the UNSCN should provide a mechanism to share information and lessons learned to promote an adaptive global nutrition system that responds to the complex and evolving drivers of malnutrition based on principles of continual improvement.

The space for multistakeholder engagement in nutrition, however, was strongly called for in light of the 2008 Lancet series demand for a new global governance mechanism to scale up action on nutrition. A World Bank led global action plan (GAP) was proposed, which gradually morphed into the Scaling up Nutrition (SUN) movement. SUN placed governments and their focal points at the center of the movement, not only relying on formal collaboration between UN agencies to support country efforts, but also CSOs, donors, and the private sector. The UNSCN secretariat fully supported the initial conceptualization of SUN, and the collaborating platform of UNSCN provided a space for interagency discussions to inform its creation. Despite this close relationship, in a complex nutrition landscape the two entities where commonly pitched against each other. This was particularly evident when the UN Network for SUN was formed in 2013 to support the UN’s contribution to the SUN movement, steered by the very same members who sat on UNSCN’s SC. Many questioned the continued need for UNSCN.

In 2014 the first attempt to form UN Nutrition by merging UNSCN and UN Network for SUN took place. Private sector engagement had been a long-standing item on UNSCN’s agenda, with no consensus on a united approach to this. UNSCN’s members visions remained divergent, and consensus could not be reached on the proposed merger.

The period from 2010 to 2015 was difficult for UNSCN. Past members withdrew, continued members held back funding and UNSCN’s role was unsteady and often unsupported. The UNSCN secretariat was running on very limited resources which limited ability to deliver output. Despite of that, UNSCN was able to preserve and achieve significant accomplishments which set the stage for its future. This included gaining crucial seats on the UN Interagency Taskforce on the Prevention and Control of non-communicable diseases (UNIATF) and a seat on the Committee of World Food Security (CFS) advisory Group with the support of several member states. The UNSCN Secretariat and supportive members relied on their resourcefulness, commitment and the networks they had built to keep the UNSCN vision alive. In 2012, the SC decided that the position of Executive Secretary could be taken up by the nutrition heads of the member agencies on a rotational basis. WHO served as the host of UNSCN during this time and was the first and only agency to take up the huge challenge of combining the UNSCN Executive Secretary role with that of Nutrition Director.

Wider nutrition initiatives were also underway. The Second International Conference on Nutrition (ICN2) and the resulting Rome Declaration on Nutrition led by FAO and WHO established the global agenda to address malnutrition in all its forms. This brought together the WHO Global Nutrition Targets to address maternal child undernutrition and the WHO Global Action Plan for the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases (NCDs) targets to address diet-related NCD risk factors, overweight and obesity. Past and present members and secretariat staff of UNSCN worked behind the scenes to push this agenda, and champion the role of UNSCN in policy cohesion to complement

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5 UNSCN, 2017. Global Governance for Nutrition and the role of UNSCN.
progression of the ICN2 outcomes. UNSCN was able to quickly begin delivery on these outcomes with publications on the interlinkages between nutrition, trade and investments.

The ICN2 had two crucial outcomes. Firstly, it set the UN’s course in tackling malnutrition, proposing a Decade of Action on Nutrition (Nutrition Decade) which provided broad targets for agencies to align behind and established UNSCN’s role in harmonizing UN level policy to progress this. In 2016 this was further enhanced by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG’s) which recognized ending ‘malnutrition in all its forms’ as a key target for all nations and the global development agenda. Secondly, the ICN2 emphasized the need for better governance for nutrition that encourages effective multi-sector collaboration. Recommendation 7 of the resulting framework for action specially calls for reform to strengthen nutrition governance within the UN system. To meet this recommendation, and combat past criticisms, UNSCN underwent a restructure which disbanded its tripartite structure to be a UN only platform for nutrition collaboration.

Two additional important developments took place soon after ICN2. A new constituent member joined the UNSCN’s SC, the International Fund for Agriculture Develop (IFAD). Their presence created a fifth pillar in the SC, providing additional key insights for decision making and bringing balance to discussions. They also provided a vital stream of funding to fuel UNSCN’s work. Concurrently, FAO offered to host UNSCN, bringing it back to its original home at the heart of the Rome-Based Agencies (RBA)- the hub of the UN’s work in food-related issues. By 2015 IFADs vice president, Michel Mordasini, was elected Chair of UNSCN possibly triggered by IFAD’s internal decision to mainstream and scale up nutrition in their operations. His role, and commitment to UNSCN shines through as the catalyst in UNSCN’s reinvigoration.

We are entering a special time in history, as we witness an unprecedented rise in high-level political commitment and financing for nutrition. It is a trend largely attributed to a greater appreciation for the central role that nutrition plays in human development and in sustainable development more broadly.

- Michel Mordasini (Chair of UNSCN 2015-2017), 2017 within his editorial for UNSCN Nutrition 42 ‘Spotlight on the Nutrition Decade’

A New Home and a New Plan (2016-2020)

UNSCN’s return to Rome and commencement of the new coordinator, Stineke Oenema, marked a new energy for nutrition. Timing was crucial. The SDGs and Nutrition Decade increased the pressure to pay attention to nutrition at all levels of the UN system, the whole UN system is being held to account and UNSCN provided a platform, and ally to deliver. FAO greatly advanced its own role as a power player in nutrition, while also giving UNSCN the space and freedom to best serve its members. With an extensive background which spanned experience with UN agencies nutrition work and serving as a representative of the Committee on World Food Security’s (CFS) Civil Society Mechanism, the new coordinator came with a sound foundation in harnessing cohesion in diverse groups and navigating the difficult path in upholding scientific integrity while achieving political support and commitments. Oenema focused on building relationships and advancing the vision of the new strategic plan (SP)\(^7\). SC members were unified in their belief regarding the strong role the UN must play in nutrition, one which could only be achieved in collaboration.

\(^7\) UNSCN, 2016. [Strategic Plan 2016-2020](#)
The SP was the result of careful planning and negotiation which established full ownership and endorsement by SC members. UNSCN’s mandate, as defined in the 1977 Resolution of ECOSOC, remained totally valid, fully pertinent and relevant, supplemented by a forward-looking vision which has been serving as the tagline for UNSCN’s work ‘a world free from all forms of malnutrition is attainable in this generation’. A holistic set of functions were agreed for the SP to foster cohesive and effective action, box 1.

**Box 1. Functions of UNSCN as defined in the Strategic Plan (2016-2020)**

- To provide global strategic guidance and advocacy in nutrition to ensure engagement and investment at the highest level and to ensure progress towards nutrition security for all;
- To enhance dialogue and linkages, fostering joint nutrition action, partnerships and mutual accountability between UN agencies;
- To harmonize concepts, including methodologies and guidelines, policies and strategies in response to the nutritional needs of countries;
- To facilitate knowledge exchange of practices, tools and needs, enhancing coherence of the global nutrition public goods agenda and identifying emerging issues;
- To communicate on global trends, progress and results and to enhance global advocacy through networks and platforms;
- To engage in and facilitate dialogue with stakeholders across health, food security, water and sanitation and social protection constituencies for strengthening nutrition action and mainstreaming nutrition into development policies.

In a crowded nutrition landscape, the SP clearly defined UNSCN’s added value. Specifically, UNSCN is:

- universal in scope, not limited to specific groups or categories of countries,
- advocates a human-right based approach to nutrition,
- concentrates on the UN system,
- works on all forms of malnutrition,
- promotes intersectoral analysis and action,
- focuses on global issues that relate to local realities and needs.

With this, the plan established the clear roles and responsibilities of UNSCN. Although the UNSCN’s membership was now restricted to the UN family, the SP meant its purpose, functions and strategy gained clarity to enhance members ownership and overcome past perceptions of trying to be everything to everyone. Its cohesiveness with the Nutrition Decade and achievement of the SDGs also provided UNSCN with the additional legitimacy to pursue its four strategic objectives.

**The revitalization of UNSCN**

Redefined as an UN-only committee, and with the SP in hand, the “new UNSCN” was able to hit the ground running. Interviewees describe their joy at seeing UNSCN thrive under its new host, its dedicated Chair and its forward-looking SP. UNSCN member agencies were more engaged and supportive to establishing a unified UN voice and joint authority in nutrition.

Under the leadership and support of its members, its secretariat could contribute to the key achievements of UNSCN between 2016 and 2020. These successes are detailed below against its four
strategic objectives. The interweaving and cross benefits mean many of its workstreams serve more than one objective, though for the sake of avoiding repetition achievements are reported only once.

Strategic Objective 1: Maximise UN policy coherence and advocacy on nutrition

The first step Oenema undertook as coordinator was to strengthen bridges between SC members and with other key partners such as the UN Network for SUN secretariat. Next was to begin building new bridges by reaching out to new potential members.

As one interviewee remarked, ‘the energy came back into the room’ during SC meetings. Members’ discussions focused on strategizing a way forward and establishing cohesive narratives. In the final two years much discussion space was taken up by progressing the merger of UNSCN and UN Network for SUN. Though unlike in 2014 this process has been fruitful and despite the points of contention this process triggered, and the global COVID-19 pandemic restricting members ability to meet face-to-face, all involved interviewees agree that member harmonization is at a high point in 2020.

The new coordinator was particularly capable of widening UNSCN membership base. The main energy source of the “old” tripartite UNSCN came from its broader membership and multi-stakeholder nature. Oenema was able expand the limits of the “UN only” UNSCN by opening it up beyond the core group of agencies, which brough important energy back. Members’ meetings were enriched with the introduction of UN Environment Programme (UNEP), UN Women, OCHA and UNIDO as well as a selection of non-UN organizations as observers. This expansion represents the growing number of UN agencies considering nutrition in their policies and programming. Each new member brought a new viewpoint to strategize and advance collaborative action under the Nutrition Decade, contributing to the discussions and UN multisector action on nutrition.

The new coordinator also focused attention towards tightening the connection between Geneva, New York and Rome which in effect brought together the UN’s health, food/agriculture and political hubs to ensure the UN was speaking with one voice on nutrition. In the political realm, the UNSCN secretariat quickly worked to reestablish the committee’s accountability to member states through strengthening the foundational link with ECOSOC via formal annual reporting. This connection also supported its positioning in the UN’s political hub, New York. Through contributions to High Level Political Forums on Sustainable Development UNSCN has worked to embed this political understanding of nutrition as a connecting force between the SDGs as well as commitment to harnessing nutrition as a catalyst for their achievement. Within the UNs health work, UNSCN has benefited from the ongoing support of WHO’s representatives - each with their own unique, and deeply embedded relationship with UNSCN. Tangible outcomes of this work include the UNSCN’s numerous invitations to contribute to global fora, their widened membership base and strategic publications such as ‘Water and Nutrition’ which link together the UN’s Decades of Action for Water and Nutrition.

In its final years the UNSCN took up all opportunities to ‘connect the dots’- weaving the connections between multiple sectors, global development policy and the global nutrition agenda. UNSCN has strived to keep UN initiatives and normative guidance front and center in global discussions including both nutrition specific and nutrition sensitive events such as those focused on trade and climate. Consistency is key to raise the profile of nutrition and strengthen ownership of it amongst multisector actors. Key core messages were consistently repeated at any given opportunity to instill understanding and enhance momentum for the ‘Nutrition Decade’, ‘malnutrition in all its forms’, ‘multisector action’, and ‘sustainable healthy diets’. Repetition by the UN member agencies and secretariat has had a snowball effect, creating a joint language that external partners and wider audiences proliferated and has provided clarity to facilitate coherent action.
UNSCN’s work in policy coherence and advocacy has shone through in their support of platforms such as the CFS (box 2), providing a consistent advocacy for nutrition voice to the One Planet Network Sustainable Food System Program (SFSP) as well as the UN Inter Agency Task Force on NCDs (UNIATF) where UNSCN has facilitated the work of the Nutrition & NCD’s thematic work group, advocating for the inclusion of nutrition and strengthening of NCD prevention initiatives, with special focus on adopting human rights based approaches to malnutrition and enhancing nutrition investment work.

Box 2. Nourishing the Committee on World Food Security (CFS)

Established in 1974, the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) is the foremost international and intergovernmental platform for stakeholders to work together to ensure food security and nutrition for all. Though the ‘and nutrition’ did not always play a part in its vision. Recognizing the role nutrition plays in advancing development, and in response to the asks of the ICN2 and SDG’s, in 2015 the CFS established an open ended working group (OEWG) on Nutrition tasked of operationalizing a CFS working stream on nutrition. When the potential of nutrition workstream was announced many questioned the CFS’s capacity to take up more work and worried it would spread the secretariat too far. UNSCN had been an advocate for the mainstreaming of nutrition work within the CFS since gaining its seat on the CFS advisory group in 2010. It’s return to FAO in 2016 provided the perfect alignment to bring the two entities closer together and to ramp up this work. UNSCN was able to provide the capacity, technical support and UN coordination needed to ensure the nutrition workstream thrived. CFS’s work is unique in that it opens the door for both science and policy to form political decisions based on science. UNSCN delivery of special intersessional sessions were able to intricately weave the political importance and evidence based opportunities for action to show nutrition’s role throughout the food system to foster understanding and support amongst CFS members. Special events and strategic publications to support CFS’s annual plenary’s and by 2020 the CFS’s focus on nutrition is fully embedded in its core vision. As described by one CFS representative ‘nutrition is the thread that intertwines the food system together. While food helps people survive it is healthy diets that enable people to thrive’.

Sustainable food systems are now centre stage on the global agenda and the Voluntary Guidelines (VG’s) on Food System Transformation represents the CFS’s main contribution to the Nutrition Decade. The role of UNSCN has shone through, feeding into the VG’s development and negotiations for their finalization by establishing and communicating a joint, authoritative UN voice and rapidly providing unified solutions to overcome fragmentation. The task is now transferred to UN Nutrition to support the implementation of these VG’s at the country level to achieve sustainable food system transformation and deliver sustainable healthy diets for all.
Strategic Objective 2: Support consistent and accountable delivery by the UN System

To advance this objective the UNSCN Secretariat strengthened its collaboration with the UN Network for SUN who was tasked with mobilizing coordinated UN action at country level. This collaboration led to the publication of the joint Guidance Note for UN Humanitarian Coordinators: Integrated multi-sectoral nutrition actions to help bridge the humanitarian- development divide and enhance consideration of nutrition factors. UNSCN also developed the Guidance Note on Integration of Nutrition in the UN development Assistance Framework, later renamed as the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework. This Guidance note aimed to provide consistent advice to assist UN Country Teams to better integrate nutrition into their planning and programming and to reflect nutrition-related risks and opportunities within their cooperation agreements. UN Network for SUN, and the SUN Movement have been crucial partners in its dissemination.

Throughout the past five years the previous divisions between UNSCN and UN Network for SUN have been overcome – it is not a case of one replacing the other, but of working collaboratively to maximize impact and ensure constant dialogue between country and global levels, and delivering cohesive messages. Ahead of their final merger in 2021 the two secretariats have undertaken joint SC and members meetings, as well as have produced and disseminated joint communication materials. The new phase of the SUN movement - SUN 3.0 - offers even greater opportunities for joint action with an expansion of focus to all forms of malnutrition which aligns with the UN Nutrition vision.

As more actors enter the nutrition arena, ready to contribute with their capacities, resources, and unique areas of expertise, we need to channel this energy into consistent and coherent actions for the sustainable improvement of nutrition. UNSCN is prepared to meet this challenge and has intensified its collaborations with the UN Network for Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Secretariat to strengthen the link between global policy coherence, programming and action for impact at country level.

- **Stineke Oenema** (UNSCN Coordinator 2016-2020), 2018 with the editorial of UNSCN Nutrition 43
  ‘Advancing equity, equality and non-discrimination in food systems: pathways to reform’

Strategic Objective 3: Explore new and emerging nutrition-related issues

The new UNSCN secretariat was quick out of the gates in 2016 with the rapid publication of discussion papers and their flagship journal ‘UNSCN Nutrition’ which form a vital and tangible product of their knowledge management work, figure 2. Interviewees note that with their forward-looking focus and coverage of new and emerging issues UNSCN’s publications have been almost prophetic in their ability to communicate a united UN systems level voice on topics often years before they reach mainstream consciousness. As one described it ‘they turn balloons of ideas into seeds for action’ creating an authoritative reference for both multi-sector actors within and beyond the UN system to progress action for nutrition. Though UNSCN’s mandate sits at the global level, the dissemination strategy of their publications keeps the intension to empower country level action for nutrition at its heart, ensuring publications are translated into six languages and hardcopies are sent to country level counterparts. In fact, many actors first encounter with UNSCN is through picking up a UNSCN publication which can be found on nutritionists, researchers and policy makers desks around the world. The UNSCN Nutrition journal (previously known as SCN News) is also noted for tackling complex and difficult issues while giving non-traditional experts a voice within its papers. This act truly creates a global overview to transform mindsets.

In harnessing the inputs of their wide membership base interviewees praised UNSCN for pushing the envelope and broadening nutrition perspectives within their publications. For example, 2021 is set to be the year of food system transformation to achieve sustainable healthy diets with action consistent
with the 2016 Investments for Healthy Food Systems\(^8\) and 2017 Sustainable Diets for Health People and a Healthy Planet\(^9\) papers. In 2017 UNSCN published ‘Schools as a System to Improve Nutrition’\(^10\) with school nutrition initiatives now recognized as powerful implementation tool to advance multiple SDGs and uphold the rights of the child. The publications content, coupled with UNSCN’s collaborating function, has also made UNSCN the perfect home for the interagency community of practice on school nutrition formed in 2019, with the recommendations from the report still entirely relevant in guiding the CoPs work.

The speed at which these publications are produced is unique within the UN system, and so too is their ability to tackle topics which are too controversial for agencies to address in isolation. A standout example is the Global Governance for Nutrition\(^1\) paper of 2017. The topic of nutrition governance was a hot topic in 2016 and a clear emerging issue for UNSCN to tackle. The discussions its creation stimulated between members tackled the criticisms of UNSCN’s governance functions faced since the 2008 Lancet publication and the forward-looking role of UNSCN. Although the final product toned down the sentiment that UNSCN could act as the global governance mechanism for nutrition, the resulting publication went a long way in bringing clarity to roles and responsibilities of the rapidly proliferating actors within the nutrition landscape, paving the foundation for improved governance and accountability. The paper also articulated the vital distinction between ‘global nutrition governance’ which tends to focus on actors with an explicit

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\(^8\) UNSCN, 2016. Investments for Healthy Food Systems
\(^9\) UNSCN, 2017. Sustainable Diets for Healthy People and a Healthy Planet
\(^10\) UNSCN, 2017. Schools as a System to Improve Nutrition.
specialization or mandate in nutrition, and ‘governance for nutrition’ which embraces policy areas and actors which are not explicitly nutrition oriented but affect the underlying causes of malnutrition and which can thus be leveraged for nutrition sensitivity. This message has been embodied in the work of UNSCN and its members, and remains vital for the work of UN Nutrition.

In 2020 a survey of UNSCN subscribers explored their experiences with UNSCN’s publications. For those who had read the publications the majority indicated they had changed their views on the subject and strengthened their knowledge with the publications serving as a reference to inform advocacy efforts and identify research topics.

Strategic Objective 4: Promote knowledge sharing across the UN System

UNSCN began 2016 with a new look. A new logo enhanced social media presence and a new website increased its visibility and strived to create a ‘one-stop shop’ for the UN’s work in nutrition. This was enhanced by the ‘Nutrition News’ newsletter which communicated global updates for member agencies and the UNSCN secretariat to a growing subscriber base which by 2020 sits at almost 4000. In its final years UNSCN also teamed up with UN Network for SUN to jointly deliver this newsletter, covering both global and country level updates and representing a united approach to the UN’s work in nutrition.

Lessons learned and challenges remaining

The successes detailed above have not come easily. The challenges UNSCN has faced have refined, and in some cases limited its work. Within interviewees responses the primary weakness of UNSCN was its lack of country level focus and connection. Though this weakness was by design, the merger with UN Network for SUN and establishment of UN Nutrition perfectly complements this to ensure constant dialogue and bring global and country level focus together.

- **Perception is key**: Perception is vital to the impact of UNSCN’s work. While it has managed to overcome the negative perceptions of members it continues to suffer from being viewed as a sixth member of the SC which impacts progress towards each of its strategic objectives. This perception can prevent members from engaging in UNSCN to its full capacity at the risk of diminishing their own visibility and positioning as a nutrition leader. UNSCN is not a UN agency, or an implementing body. UNSCN worked to build on the mandate and strengths of its members, working according to the principle of subsidiarity to ensure maximum impact while avoiding duplication of efforts. Its potential to act as a unified voice and show strength in unity is not yet consistently utilized or called upon. While this is improving, and the COVID-19 pandemic has proven to be a catalyst for interagency collaboration, it rarely includes all UNSCN members, and many opportunities are still missed. Harmonization cannot be left to chance.

This perception of UNSCN as a sixth agency impacts wider audiences’ engagement with and perception of UNSCN also, including the uptake of its knowledge management products. New knowledge products published by the UNSCN are sometimes viewed as new nutrition resource amongst the many existing ones, as opposed the joint product of a collective of UN agencies. In a crowded nutrition landscape, and crowded UN acronym dialect, the new title of UN Nutrition should in itself improve perception to ensure it is widely recognized as a one-stop shop for all the UN’s work in nutrition.
• **Membership must be owned:** Past challenges have shown both the threat of members not owning their role in UNSCN and withdrawing support, as well as the great momentum that can be achieved when members are invested in their UNSCN membership. Interviews with SC representatives pointed to positive signs of ownership, with SC respondents consistently using ‘our’ and ‘we’ when discussing UNSCN. The process of establishing UN Nutrition has also brought to light discussions on membership requirements and investments, and the success of the merger is a sign of their continued commitment and joint vision.

Within UNSCN the ambitious merger process has dominated SC and wider member meetings since 2018, and this has taken away energy and inputs into other areas. The perpetual problem of time and resource shortages by SC member representatives limits their capacity to provide clear direction, leaving the secretariat to progress in the face of uncertainty and chasing support or faced with requests to halt work until consensus has been reached. Compounded by a small secretariat this creates substantial limits on the achievable work of UNSCN, despite a great need to advance nutrition.

The financial contribution of membership was noted as a key motivator of ownership - financial investment means invested time and commitment to achieving objectives. More intensive activities by the UN Nutrition secretariat to strengthen that sense of ownership were suggested. This included the mapping of annual workplans against that of UN Nutrition to identify where the added value of UN Nutrition lies, where the benefit of collaboration will be evident and how it will be exercised as well as moments where agencies can rally behind each other to amplify messages and celebrate successes.

UNSCN’s positioning within the UN system also restrict its ability to advance. UNSCN has no power in governance, it’s power and authority depend upon the ‘togetherness’ of its members. In settings such as the CFS FSVGs negotiations this shines through with members showing unity and trust in each other’s expertise to progress nutrition. However, in areas where 100% cohesiveness cannot be established UNSCN is restricted in its ability to progress. It’s ECOSOC enforced mandate does create further accountability to member states, and some space to progress autonomously. As such, it creates new opportunities for strengthening ties with the office of the UN Secretary General and enhancing the political authority of UN Nutrition.

• **Missed opportunities and outstanding agenda items:** The topic of private sector engagement has been on the UNSCN’s agenda for over 30 years. In 2006 UNSCN attempted to navigate these polarizing disagreements to achieve a UN system approach that balances the need for investment in nutrition with the prevention of conflicts of interest and maintenance of integrity and impartiality and scientific credibility with the publication of draft PS engagement proposal; though this failed to reach implementation stage. Another important step in the same direction was the development and dissemination of UNSCN News 39 – Nutrition and Business, how to engage – issued in 2011. Though the secretariat has worked to raise the topic over the past 5 years it remains unresolved and contentious. Private sector engagement remains more relevant than ever as the global agenda shifts to transform food systems under UN Nutrition, with the first priority being UN agencies confirming their individual policies to then plan a collective approach.

As well as the longstanding roles with the CFS, UNIATF and the SFSP which UN Nutrition will continue, the UNSCN secretariat’s work has also created momentum in a number of new
This includes the demand for continued work on school nutrition, creation of a CoP on digital nutrition, and strengthened work on nutrition investment cases.

Key opportunities have also been missed. While in UNSCN’s past they have been a central point for nutrition updates with the World Nutrition Situation report, this function has been stripped back and the opportunity to facilitate the Global Nutrition Report, which itself was born out of the World Nutrition Report was missed despite efforts of the UNSCN secretariat to facilitate the hosting.

- **Reach and impact of knowledge management products:** UNSCN’s UN level focus creates a conundrum in its communication activities. Its publications are formed by articulating a cohesive voice between agencies, though often opportunities to promote it as such are not fully utilized. This impacts on awareness and utilization of UNSCN as even with the UN system as many employees are not aware of the organization or how it can assist them. With limited communications budget and human resources its outreach to wider audiences it depends on this awareness and support by UN agencies. With UNSCN publications offering such forward looking insights and the importance of the messages they contain growing with time this represents a missed opportunity to maximize their impact. Interviewees also questioned whether publications in isolation are the most effective way to communicate a joint voice, with many calling for the reinstatement of annual gatherings which brings together UN Nutrition’s multistakeholder members as well as strengthened inputs and feedback loops with country level actors. These observations are consistent with UNSCN’s own survey into its publications which called for greater user engagement through feedback loops and webinars such as those conducted for the latest Nutrition in a Digital World publication.

**UN Nutrition. The future looks bright!**

As 2021 dawns and the era of UN Nutrition begins a great task is at hand. We are halfway through the Nutrition Decade with just nine years left to achieve the SDG’s. Each interviewee was asked their predictions for 2030 and each agreed that at the current pace of progress the goal to end malnutrition in all its forms will not be met. Though confident that significant reductions in the number of undernourished children will be made, levels of overweight and obesity are predicted to continue to soar as adequate resources and commitments have not yet been invested in actions to address drivers of malnutrition. These predictions match the latest progress indicators which show the world is off course to meet all of the nutrition related SDG targets- a finding compounded by the impacts of COVID-19, rising inequalities and intensifying climate change. Food systems remain largely unregulated with continual limitations in the availability and affordability of nutritious foods such as fruits and vegetables which contribute to sustainable healthy diets. Challenges in perception also prevail and while within the UN system and development sector recognition of malnutrition in all its forms has gained traction, in the wider community the dictionary definition of malnutrition, and often the perception of the UN’s work on malnutrition, remains limited to undernutrition- undermining the importance of tackling states of overnutrition for health and development.

Despite the challenges at hand, interviewees also showed a universal optimism. While the targets may not be met, the political awareness amongst UN actors and member state representatives across multiple sectors is higher than ever before, leading to strengthened commitment and implementation of proven nutrition actions. Growing evidence for the potential of double- and triple-duty actions (including environmental sustainability and planetary health) and momentum towards food system transformation provide mechanisms for change and at least to those interviewed, the path to achieve sustainable healthy diets for all is clear. But all nutrition governance papers end on this similar,
An optimistic note. A pattern likely linked to the fact they are written by those in the nutrition field who truly believe in the path for change and are biased in their commitment to see it through. As emphasized by UNSCN’s coordinator Stineke Oenema and many other nutrition advocates before her “Nutrition is too important to leave it to nutritionists alone”. To make the vision for a nutritious future a reality depends upon that same level of commitment by actors in agriculture, trade, education, industry and many more, as well as the political and financial investment to see it through.

The history of UNSCN has many lessons for global nutrition and in many ways its publications track the evolution of the global nutrition agenda and will remain relevant for years to come. This history must be kept both in the consciousness of its members, and physically within the foundational and archival documents of UN Nutrition. Similarly lessons from the history of UN Network for SUN, and the huge convening power of the SUN movement to energize and strategize countries’ nutrition responses create essential tools for UN Nutrition moving forward.

UN Nutrition’s new Terms of Reference and core areas of work reflect the accomplishments and lessons learned from the history of UNSCN and UN Network for SUN. Its creation is not the end of either secretariats work, but the merging of their visions, capacities and commitment to improved nutrition. Its creation is a monumental step forward in governance for nutrition, creating a unified UN system level coordinating mechanism and voice.

“2021 will be a monumental year for nutrition. The formation of UN Nutrition reflects United Nations agencies’ readiness to maximize the opportunities presented and work together to end all forms of malnutrition. As UN Nutrition we will speak with one, united voice on nutrition and harness the momentum of UNSCN and UNN to improve policy coherence and impact at both the global and country level.”

- Dr. Naoko Yamamoto, Chair of UN Nutrition

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