Speaking with one voice

UNN-REACH IN MYANMAR, 2015 – 2018

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Sometimes the most invaluable skills of a nutritionist have nothing to do with the fortification of rice or access to clean water. In 2015, humanitarian gridlock had set in among the principle nutrition donors stationed in Yangon, the traditional capital of Myanmar. In principle, FAO, UNICEF, WFP and WHO wanted the same thing, along with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and donors: to reach the most vulnerable populations and coordinate with other sectors like agriculture, education, sanitation and health to maximize the impact of nutrition interventions.

Each organization had their own ideas about how to move forward. While WFP and FAO prioritized ‘Zero Hunger’, UNICEF and the SUN Movement had another agenda. To compound the problem, the data available to the staff working in 2015 was outdated, drawn mostly from the UNICEF 2009/10 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) and a Multiple Micronutrient Survey from 2005. For example, a low exclusive breastfeeding rate of 20 percent in some states and regions that was triggered by aggressive formula marketing begged the question of what figures to trust and what practices had changed since the last survey.

Establishing an accurate baseline was stalled by fractured conversations with government ministries who weren't necessarily focused on nutrition. Which UN group was the lead? What interventions should be funded? How would everyone work together?

Frustration mounted, along with the growing need for a plan of action in one of the world's least developed countries, where one out of four people lives in poverty. In 2015, floods and landslides decimated more than 500,000 hectares of rice and more than 250,000 livestock, further exacerbating the food supply chain. In a country where 35 percent of children under 5 showed signs of stunting and 8 percent of under5s were acutely malnourished, this kind of additional disruption had dire consequences.
On top of this, the government moved its offices to Nay Pyi Taw for security reasons, a new city almost 400 kilometers away from Yangon, the city where the United Nations and businesses were based. Intermittent Wi-Fi and unreliable electricity made even virtual meetings difficult.

At this stage, an international facilitator, appointed by UNN-REACH, arrived from neighboring Bangladesh, which gave her a sense of the regional issues as well as mediation practice. Mary Manandhar’s method was neutrality. She gained the trust not only of other United Nations agencies and donors, but also the government. While Ms. Manandhar excelled at this, the point is the position itself; the necessity of having someone in that role.

With the guidance of UNN-REACH, the SUN Government Focal Point and the Minister of Health and Sports convened for national nutrition stocktaking in August 2015, an exercise that would later involve three additional ministries and other stakeholders. This was a first in Myanmar— an ambitious analysis that included a policy review, mapping and the Multi-sectoral Nutrition Overview, delineating the country’s nutrition situation by sectors such as education, women’s empowerment, water and sanitation and healthcare.

Finally, the interested parties could visualize the interrelated factors with a unique mapping tool developed by UNN-REACH. Out of 24 pressing issues, salt iodization, deworming and hygiene education were prioritized for action.
Stunting prevalence is highest in Chin, however, Shan and Ayeyawaddy have the highest absolute numbers of stunted children.

Stunting prevalence among <5 year olds

- <20%: 20-29.9%
- 20-29.9%: 30-39.9%
- 30-39.9%: >40%

Absolute number of stunted children

- <50,000: <50,000
- 50,000 - 100,000: 50,000 – 100,000
- 100,000 - 200,000: 100,000 – 200,000
- >200,000: >200,000

Sources: 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census (Volume 4-F); Myanmar DHS 2015-16
FIGURE 9
Excerpt from the Nutrition Stakeholder and Action Mapping in Myanmar (2016) conducted through UNN-REACH

While nutrition interventions are undertaken in all states/regions, notably low coverage is observed for the majority of them.

On average, about 3 interventions are implemented at scale.

However, the coverage of interventions reaching 75% of beneficiaries varies across states/regions.

This number is a country-defined level based on the results of the stakeholder mapping to highlight disparities in action coverage.
This led to the next phase, drafting a five-year Multi-sectoral National Plan of Action for Nutrition (MS-NPAN), slated to begin in 2018. “If we had not been there, this would not have happened,” said Sansan Myint, the national UNN-REACH Facilitator. Dr. Myint brought in a fourth ministry, Agriculture, to work with the original three: Health and Sports, Education and Social Welfare. The plan centers on the first critical 1000 days of life, from conception to a child’s second birthday, including the nutrition needs of the mother.

Dr. Myint observed that past plans have been shelved or not assessed after implementation. With UNN-REACH’s analytical support, there is now a baseline against which results can be measured. Dr. Myint plans to keep the MS-NPAN front and center for ministries, humanitarian partners and donors.

Institutional change is slow even under optimal circumstances. In only four years since UNN-REACH started, changes in Myanmar can be seen at the process level: the creation of an enabling environment for achievement of common nutrition targets. UNN-REACH continues to bring new actors into the nutrition arena and increase UN joint programming. “Thanks to the work carried out by REACH in Myanmar, a lot of things have changed. The UN agencies are working together along with government ministries and other partners with the same goal, to improve the status of the most vulnerable. All together for the first time, thanks to the coordination of UNN-REACH,” says Dr. Myint.

The role of the UNN-REACH facilitator can be compared to water pipes under a city, buried under asphalt. They are both crucial elements that sustain vital operations; yet are invisible to the onlooker. This kind of facilitation only works if she stays in the background, keeps dialogue open, gains trust, aligns resources and priorities and keeps the wheels turning. What UNN-REACH was able to do in Myanmar since 2015 had a lot to do with data and science, and even more to do with community-building.