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A close-up photograph of a young boy with dark skin and short hair, wearing a white button-down shirt. He is looking slightly to the right of the camera with a neutral expression. The background is blurred, showing other people in a crowd. The image has a blue tint.

# 1. Background

## 1.1. INTRODUCTION

Today, countries around the world are grappling with nutrition issues of some sort. This makes nutrition a uniting force, crucial for the good health and well-being of people and for helping nations prosper. The nutrition challenges being faced in the twenty-first century are more complex and intertwined than ever before, putting conventional paradigms to the test. Sometimes, these nutrition challenges are overlapping, within countries and communities, even within the same individual. The magnitude of malnutrition is large, and the consequences can be severe (e.g. irreversible cognitive deficits, mental retardation, increased risk of child and maternal mortality) if unabated during critical stages of the lifecycle. Approximately, 2 billion people are deficient in essential micronutrients, while 149 million children are stunted.<sup>2</sup> Overweight and obesity are on the rise, affecting 40 million children under the age of five, 207 million adolescents and as many as 2 billion adults. In addition, recent estimates indicate that approximately 820 million people still suffer from hunger, signalling a regression from the levels recorded in 2010.<sup>3</sup>

Population growth, rising income levels, climate change, urbanization and conflict are exerting pressures on the world's demand for food. Diet is among the top risk factors of the world's global disease burden. As a result, the world cannot afford to maintain business as usual. Urgent action must be taken to scale up nutrition actions across sectors to enable a world free of malnutrition by 2030, one that will further drive sustainable development. This is no simple task. Strong partnerships and effective coordination have a critical role to play, underscoring the need for country-focused collaboration platforms such as the UN [nutrition] Network.

2. FAO. 2019. *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World: Building Climate Resilience for Food Security and Nutrition* Rome. Available at <http://www.fao.org/3/i9553en/i9553en.pdf>.

3. *Ibid.*

## 1.2. HISTORY

Prior to the establishment of the UN Network (herein UNN), the partnership for Renewed Efforts Against Child Hunger and undernutrition (REACH) was founded in 2008 by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the World Food Programme (WFP) and the World Health Organization (WHO) as a mechanism for providing a country-centred, multi-sectoral approach to strengthen national capacities for nutrition governance and accelerate nutrition scale-up for increased impact.<sup>4</sup> The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) later joined the partnership, as an observer, in parallel with the fund's increased engagement in nutrition. In many ways, REACH served as the precursor to the UNN and a testing ground for its increasingly popular suite of analytical tools.

As the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement gained momentum, further changes took place in the nutrition community, including within the UN. The principals of the above United Nations agencies formally endorsed the establishment of the UNN in 2013, as one of the four main networks of the SUN Movement. REACH played a catalytic role in setting up UNNs at the country level, where its facilitators were present on the ground. The advent of the UNN enabled new tools to be developed, including those that help expand membership to other United Nations entities at the country level. In 2015, the institutional links between the UNN and REACH were formalized, giving the Rome-based REACH Secretariat jurisdiction to dually serve as the UNN Secretariat. A few years later (2018), the UNN underwent a strategic visioning exercise, whereby the functions of the REACH partnership were absorbed by the UNN's Multi-sectoral Technical Assistance Facility, giving rise to the new nomenclature, UNN-REACH, to reinforce this branding.

4. Adapted from the UN Network for SUN Strategy (2016–2020).

Today, the UNN functions as a unique platform for operationalizing collective action for nutrition at the country level, thereby supporting dialogue and action across sectors and stakeholders. This is increasingly relevant in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and UN reform, which reinforce the values of partnership and integrated action. Over the years, the activities of the Network have extended beyond its founding agencies, rallying UN entities that have not traditionally been involved in nutrition, but whose work supports positive nutrition outcomes. The UNN also serves as a platform for raising awareness about the United Nations Decade of Action for Nutrition (2016–2025). In 2019, the Network operated in 60 of the 61 SUN member countries<sup>5</sup> and also rendered its services to countries outside the SUN Movement (e.g. Bolivia and Egypt) in response to demand. The activities of country UN Networks are supported by the UNN Secretariat, hosted by WFP headquarters.

## 1.3. STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS AND OUTCOMES

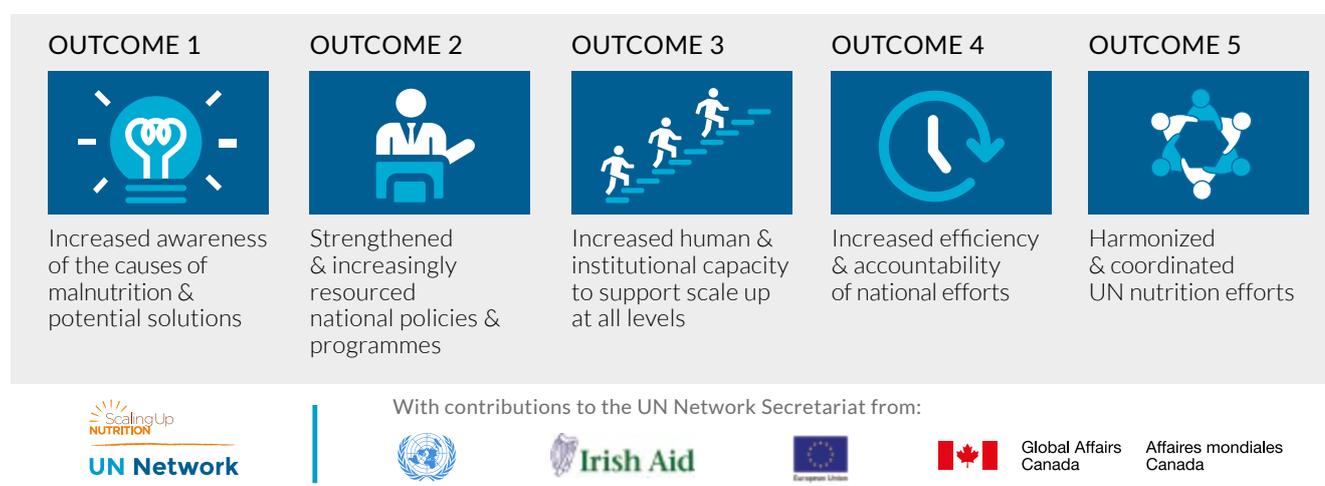
The UNN works towards the following vision, goal and strategic objective as outlined in Table 1. Essentially, the overarching premise is that the impact of UN nutrition support can be increased if the efforts of individual agencies are integrated and well-coordinated.

The UNN strategy (2016–2020) articulated a results framework that helps the constituent members develop common strategies to advance the national nutrition agenda. UNN is uniquely positioned to leverage UN expertise in nutrition as well as various related tools to foster harmonized and coordinated efforts in pursuit of achieving its five strategic outcomes.

**TABLE 1. Strategic directions of the UNN**

<b>VISION</b>	All UN agencies at all levels, recognize that nutrition is central to the Sustainable Development Agenda and collectively act in a coherent manner upon this, in terms of policies, actions, staffing and resources.
<b>GOAL</b>	To harness the potential of the whole UN System to synergize efforts that help governments address all forms of malnutrition, for all people by 2030.
<b>STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE</b>	To provide an entry point for all United Nations agencies to harmonize and coordinate nutrition efforts in support of national governments.

**FIGURE 2. The five strategic outcomes of the UNN (2016–2020)**



5. Honduras was the only country where the UN Network was not functional given that it had joined the SUN Movement after the UN Network reporting period for 2019.

## 1.4. CORE BUSINESS AREAS

The UNN plays an integral role in facilitating a multi-sectoral, multi-stakeholder approach to nutrition, helping actors transcend ‘siloed’ approaches in tackling malnutrition. To that end, the Network brings together all United Nations agencies with an interest in nutrition to consolidate know-how, better utilize resources, help UN entities speak with one voice and position the United Nations as an invaluable service provider and partner in this area. **This helps the United Nations agencies and entities shine in the SUN Movement.**

UNN support clusters around four main areas, namely: (1) *advisory services* to help UN colleagues set up and strengthen the functionality of country UNNs in order to work towards national nutrition targets and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); (2) *translating policy to action*; (3) a *multi-sectoral technical assistance (TA) facility* to promote and support holistic action; and (4) *knowledge management* to share guidance and experiences and thus impart learning, including through South-South collaboration, as a means to accelerate scale-up. While many of these services are catered to UN colleagues, such as advising on UNN membership, leadership and joint programming, others support a wider nutrition sphere of action, such as nutrition advocacy which may be pursued with Government and

other SUN networks. Stakeholders may draw upon UNN analytics, a core component of its multi-sectoral TA facility, to frame, catalyse and inform data-driven, collective nutrition action.

In this manner, the UNN acts as a single reflection of the UN System for nutrition at the country, regional and global levels. It works to elevate nutrition on the humanitarian and development agendas by engaging UN leadership, such as UNRCs, Humanitarian Coordinators and Country Representatives of the respective agencies, in nutrition. The UNN also provides substantive support to SUN Government Focal Points and other nutrition authorities, helping them to engage multiple stakeholders across sectors to advance progress towards national nutrition targets. This capitalizes on the UNN’s unique reach to civil society, donors, the private sector, academia and researchers, youth and the media. While the focus of its work is on supporting country-level action, UNN also liaises with UN leadership and nutrition advisors at the regional level in addition to global actors. This helps to foster dialogue and coherence, increase access to UN resources and tools as well as to create feedback loops, particularly between global and country developments within the SUN community. Further efforts to better connect global and country engagement and promote common UN messaging are being pursued *vis-à-vis* the impending UNN/UNSCN merger, which will give rise to a new UN entity, called UN Nutrition.



## MULTI-SECTORAL TA FACILITY: CATALYSING SYSTEMIC CHANGE IN NUTRITION

Over the years, several countries have benefitted from UNN's multi-sectoral TA facility to enhance nutrition governance, including coordination processes. The facility supports government efforts to rally multiple stakeholders across sectors and achieve better results in nutrition. In particular, UNN-REACH facilitation and the analytical tools<sup>6</sup> are two celebrated components of the facility that have spurred transformational change in how nutrition is being addressed at the country level. They are increasingly acknowledged as an effective means for realizing well-coordinated, coherent and efficient actions, helping governments manage the crowded nutrition landscape, and thus optimize scarce resources. The following subsections provide further insight on these two services.



## UNN-REACH support

UNN-REACH has dedicated human resources, including on-the-ground coaches, known as facilitators, who can be drawn upon by government and UN entities to spark multi-sectoral/stakeholder dialogue and foster collective nutrition action, where funding is available.<sup>7</sup> The UNN-REACH approach is country-centred and context-specific, supporting nutrition governance processes and actions at national and sub-national levels. Essentially, it provides a boost to SUN activity in-country, complementing and helping to consolidate the efforts of individual members of the UNN. The facilitators work directly with SUN Government Focal Points, government-led nutrition coordination mechanisms and the United Nations agencies and receive support from the UNN Secretariat. They are praised for their neutrality, which in turn, enables them to build trust among diverse, sometimes competing, nutrition actors and to create a safe space where all contributions are valued and feed into the operationalization of the national nutrition plan. During the reporting period, UNN-REACH was operational in eight countries, namely: Burkina Faso; Chad; Lesotho; Liberia; Mali; Myanmar; Sierra Leone; and Zimbabwe.



UNN-REACH facilitators with members of the UNN Secretariat at the SUN Global Gathering (2019).

6. Many of tools were originally developed by UNN-REACH prior to the initiation of the SUN Movement.

7. See Annex D for current and former country coverage of UNN-REACH.

**BOX 1. Window for learning****UNN-REACH engagement spurs decrease in malnutrition levels in countries**

Notable progress is being made in terms of nutrition outcomes and investments in countries where UNN-REACH services have been deployed. A review of thirteen countries<sup>8</sup> with UNN-REACH engagements revealed decreases in the prevalence of stunting (nine countries), anaemia (eight countries) and undernourishment (seven countries).<sup>9,10</sup> A collection of case studies from these countries also revealed an increase in nutrition investment during the UNN-REACH engagement, such as in Bangladesh (+10 percent), Chad (+51 percent) and Nepal (+12 percent).

Further analysis elucidated that nutrition-specific spending had increased substantially over the period of engagement in Nepal, where there was more than a two-fold increase (+238 percent).<sup>11</sup> With that said, a decrease in nutrition-specific spending was observed in countries, such as Bangladesh (-22 percent) and Chad (-41 percent), indicating a possible shift to nutrition-sensitive interventions, which were gaining more ground in these contexts for longer-term and sustainable impact.<sup>12</sup> While the numbers are telling, conclusions about the causal effect of UNN-REACH cannot be made in absence of a pre/post study with a formal comparison group. They are, nevertheless, important observational trends that match the growing appreciation of UNN-REACH.

8. These countries include: Bangladesh; Chad; Ethiopia; Ghana; Lao PDR; Mauritania; Mozambique; Myanmar; Nepal; Niger; Rwanda; Sierra Leone; and Uganda.
9. This analysis was performed using the latest data available for these indicators.
10. World Bank. 2019. *Data Bank: Health, Nutrition and Population Statistics*. Washington D.C. Available at <https://databank.worldbank.org/source/health-nutrition-and-population-statistics/preview/on>; UNICEF. 2019. *UNICEF Data: Monitoring the situation of children and women - Malnutrition*. New York. Available at <https://data.unicef.org/topic/nutrition/malnutrition/>.
11. Scaling Up Nutrition Movement. 2019. *SUN Nutrition Investment Snapshots*. Geneva. Available at <https://idb.scalingupnutrition.org/>.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Additional information about the coverage of UNN analytics is provided in Annex C.

**FIGURE 3. Use of the UNN analytics<sup>13</sup>**

UN Network

With contributions to the UN Network Secretariat from:

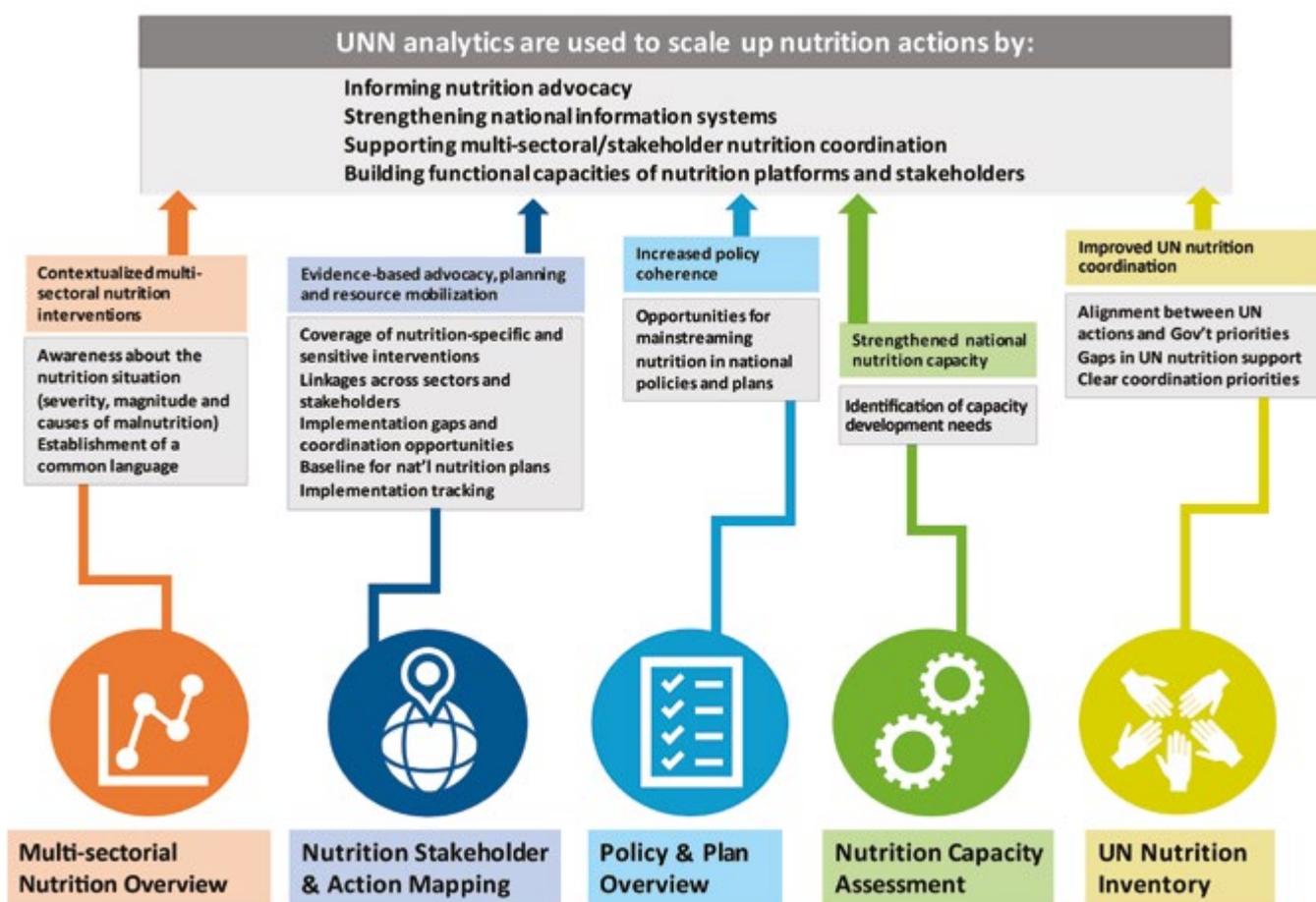
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## UNN’s action-oriented toolkit

As part of its TA facility, the UNN manages a portfolio of analytical tools to enrich nutrition advocacy, bolster multi-stakeholder coordination, strengthen national capacity and nutrition governance, and ultimately, scale up multi-sectoral nutrition actions.<sup>14</sup> The tools draw upon the technical expertise of the United Nations agencies and foster a common nutrition language among diverse actors. Furthermore, these analytics go beyond a single United Nations agency or entity, engaging multiple stakeholders<sup>15</sup> to

provide a holistic picture of the nutrition landscape at the country level. Thanks to their catchy visuals, the outputs of these tools are amenable for both decision-makers (including high-ranking members of government such as executive powers) and technical practitioners. The toolkit is comprised of five elements, namely: (1) the Multi-sectoral Nutrition Overview (MNO); (2) the Nutrition Stakeholder and Action Mapping; (3) the Policy and Plan Overview (PPO); (4) the Nutrition Capacity Assessment; and (5) the UN Nutrition Inventory. Further information about the tools is outlined in Annex B.

**FIGURE 4. Overview of the UNN analytical tools**



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14. See Annex C for country coverage of the UNN analytical tools.

15. The UNN tools encompass different stakeholder groups, including SUN networks, except for the UN Nutrition Inventory, which is exclusively targeted to the United Nations.

## 1.5. ABOUT THIS REPORT

*The 2019 UN Network Annual Report highlights progress achieved in tackling all forms of malnutrition from May 2018 to April 2019.* This reporting period was established so as to coincide with that of the SUN Joint Annual Assessment, understanding that the ensuing results could feed into SUN reporting and thus help country UNNs prepare their contributions to such. The report highlights trends and good practices with regard to: (1) the functionality of country UNNs; (2) UNN analytics; and (3) collective UN efforts for nutrition capacity strengthening at the country level. These three domains also represent the main substantive sections of this report and are largely based on submissions received from the 2019 UNN reporting exercise. With that said, data from secondary sources were used to supplement information gathered through the 2019 UNN reporting instruments in order to provide further

context, where applicable. The report captures the engagement of the UNN Secretariat with country UNNs, which designed the survey metrics and later collated and analysed the data received.

The next section unpacks the methodology used in the 2019 reporting exercise. While the third section is based on the scores derived from the UNN functionality index+, the fourth section summarizes UNN analytical activity undertaken through the multi-sectoral TA facility during the reporting cycle. The fifth section on nutrition capacity strengthening encompasses all elements of UNN outcome 3 on “increased human and institutional capacity to support the scaling up of nutrition actions at all levels.” It also integrates new metrics to keep pace with the UNN’s latest vision, which were deemed important to enhancing nutrition capacity for increased impact on the ground. The final section further reflects on the main findings of the 2019 reporting exercise and provides insights about the next steps.

