



# UN nutrition lobbying starts to pay off in Liberia



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To address the country's triple burden of malnutrition, action is needed at all levels. Just over one-third of children under five years old are stunted (35.5 percent, Comprehensive Food Security and Nutrition Survey [CFSNS], 2018), the vast majority of them are anaemic (69 percent, US Agency for International Development [USAID], 2018) and over half of adult women (52.5 percent) are overweight or obese (Global Nutrition Report [GNR], 2018).

Legislatures have an important role to play in nutrition and Liberians are banking on them for their health, well-being and prospects for a better future. The message was loud and clear to those of the 54th National Legislature that attended a nutrition sensitization workshop in May. After a compelling briefing from the SUN Government Focal Point, the UNN-REACH Facilitator as well as representatives from FAO, UNICEF, WFP and WHO just weeks earlier, the House Speaker, Hon. Bhofal Chambers, stood before his peers to pass along these important messages and put nutrition on their radar.

The event was testament to the mounting momentum of the SUN Movement in the country since the official nomination of the SUN Government Focal Point and launch of UNN-REACH, an intensive UNN service funded by the Government of Ireland. It was also timely in that the government was in the final stages of developing its budget for the fiscal year. Held in Monrovia, the workshop was jointly organized by Liberia's SUN Movement and UNN-REACH with a view to helping lawmakers make more informed decisions that can halt malnutrition, promote a 'healthier and happier population' and support wider sustainable development.

The event attracted over 60 participants, including high-level government officials such as the House Speaker and the Deputy Minister of Gender, Child and Social Protection, Hon. Mamina Carr. The proceedings were opened by Hon. Carr, providing an opportunity to highlight the relationship between gender and

nutrition. A total of six ministries participated, namely: Agriculture; Commerce and Industry; Education; Finance and Development Planning; Gender, Child and Social Protection; and Health. The UNN-REACH Facilitator’s presence has been instrumental to reaching out to multiple ministries in recent months and setting the wheels of a multi-sectoral nutrition approach into motion. The event was also attended by UN leadership, donors, the SUN Civil Society Alliance Coordinator and other partners, who joined forces to reiterate the importance of active parliamentary engagement, the wide range of causes contributing to malnutrition in the country and thus the need to leverage sector-specific actions.

The Deputy Minister of Finance and Development Planning, Hon. Tannah G. Brunson, affirmed government commitment to improving the delivery of health services, and indicated that overall, “there is an ongoing effort to increase support toward the sectors and clearly improve the coverage of nutrition activities across the country.” The challenge is how to do so within real-world budgetary constraints. During the event, the House Speaker formally pledged his support to reduce malnutrition and others pressed for the expansion of nutrition support to adolescents.



*Lawmakers Sensitization Workshop  
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WFP/Kabeh F. Enders*

Positive signals also came from the United Nations, with participation going beyond those agencies that traditionally engage in the nutrition arena following UNN efforts to expand its circle. UNDP Resident Representative, Dr. Pa-Lamin

Beyai, highlighted the stunting disparities between geographic areas, noting that stunting levels are as high as 41 percent in Grand Bassa county (CFSNS, 2018). He also noted that “what drives malnutrition is everything from governance, poverty, education, water and sanitation, to the health system, agriculture, infrastructure, technology, and women’s empowerment and issues of political will and good governance,” urging lawmakers to pursue a systems approach. The engagement of new actors in nutrition is just one type of behaviour change. According to Ms. Kate Brady, Chargé d’Affaires of the Embassy of Ireland in Liberia, attitude shifts are crucial in view of nutrition’s multi-sectorality with the potential to reap nutrition gains by making sector-specific action more ‘nutrition smart’. This particularly applies to nutrition sensitive actions that are delivered through the agriculture, education and gender sectors, among others.

At the end of the workshop, parliamentarians had a better understanding of Liberia’s nutrition situation and the various factors that affect the nutrition enabling environment, including laws and regulations over which they have direct influence. They also learned that their ability to speak about nutrition, both in the capital and their respective constituencies, can help raise awareness. Inspired by what they heard at the workshop, participating members of the House of Representatives unanimously agreed to become nutrition champions and will work with the House Speaker to identify a lead and co-lead champion to guide these efforts. The lawmakers also agreed to discuss the public health law, currently under deliberation in the House, to sharpen its nutrition lens.

On the nutrition investment front, they agreed to submit a proposal to the Ministry of Finance and Development Planning for seed money as the national budget is being finalized. Efforts are also underway to explore the possibility of setting-up a multi-sectoral nutrition pooled fund. In both cases, the hope is that these measures will help to secure more resources for nutrition, including domestic funds which are likely to attract additional external investment. Stay tuned for more nutrition actions from Liberia!