



## UNN PROGRAMMING/ PARTNERSHIPS

# Setting up a UN Network in Honduras



CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES  
IN THE COVID-19 ERA

Tale 14

## Introduction

Honduras joined the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement in 2019 as the 61<sup>st</sup> member, making it the fourth Central American country to join SUN. The move was one of the latest signs of the Government’s commitment to nutrition, with an agenda that has included updating its National Food and Nutrition Security Policy and Strategy (PyENSAN2030),<sup>60</sup> together with an associated Action Plan (2019–2023).

“It’s been a bold move from the Government to join SUN,” confirms David Nataren, Programme and Policy Officer with the World Food Programme (WFP<sup>61</sup>). “Part of the motivation is to share knowledge – to find out what other countries with similar conditions are doing, how they are working to prioritize their food security and nutrition [FSN] plan, even when facing tough spending decisions. In Honduras, we have a scarcity of resources and a lot of competing priorities.”

A high percentage of the country’s population live in poverty (64 percent): of which 40 percent live in extreme poverty. Over two thirds of the extremely poor live in rural areas.<sup>62</sup> Estimates indicate that twenty-three percent of children under five years old are stunted nationally. With that said, the prevalence of stunting increases to nearly 50 percent in the ‘Dry Corridor’, an area populated by smallholder farmers that is particularly susceptible to irregular and long-lasting droughts, which have worsened due to climate change.<sup>63</sup>

60 Gobierno de la República de Honduras, Secretaría de Coordinación General de Gobierno & UTSAN. 2018. *Política Nacional de Seguridad Alimentaria y Nutricional de Largo Plazo y Estrategia Nacional de Seguridad Alimentaria y Nutricional: PyENSAN 2030*. Tegucigalpa. Available at <https://bit.ly/3oH55wX>.

61 WFP is chairing the UN Network in Honduras.

62 Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas. 2017. *Encuesta Permanente de Hogares de Propósitos Múltiples en Honduras*.

63 Development Initiatives Poverty Research Ltd. 2019. *Global Nutrition Report: Honduras country profile*. Available at <https://globalnutritionreport.org/resources/nutrition-profiles/latin-america-and-caribbean/central-america/honduras/#profile>.



FAO-supported storage system for irrigation water in the Dry Corridor to increase the resilience of households and communities  
FAO

## UNRC call for a multi-dimensional approach

Increased efforts to ensure a multidimensional approach to nutrition are being supported under the leadership of the newly-appointed United Nations Resident Coordinator (UNRC), Alice Shackelford, and the Resident Coordinator Office. “This is critical in a country such as Honduras, where structural nutrition issues are coupled with over 60 percent poverty, 75 percent informality [in the job market] and a lack of social security measures and protection mechanisms,” says Alice.

She also considers strengthening the nexus between humanitarian and development interventions as being crucial. “The 2030 agenda and the response to COVID-19 provides a very strong opportunity to look at an integrated approach to sustainable development and humanitarian response.”

Furthermore, she underscored the “need to keep a medium/long-term approach and integrate these efforts in the strategy for eradication of extreme poverty and reduction of inequality, critical to the 2030 Agenda and leaving no one behind. And this directly links to capacity of the population to actively engage

and strengthen democracy and [the] rule of law. The UN has to be up to the task and be able to work as a system and not any more as individual agencies and mandates,” she adds passionately.

## Network membership

The UN Network (UNN) is one of the SUN networks in Honduras, along with the Civil Society Network and the Academic Network.

David confirms that it has been easier in the early stages to bring on board the agencies that have more obvious synergies, such as WFP, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO/WHO), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and that the organizations are already working together on joint proposals. The UNN has also had exploratory discussions with the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to see how each agency fits with the Food and Nutrition Security Plan, cognizant that this is definitely the way forward and not the work of just one agency.

They were invited to join the Network at the United Nations Country Team meeting in September 2019, which was attended by eight agencies. UN stakeholders describe the multi-sectoral approach to nutrition as being in its early stages in Honduras. It is a particular priority for the UNN to make sure the World Bank is included in the network. “We need WB’s technical expertise and investment if we’re to have a holistic approach as advocated by the SUN Movement,” says David.

## Nutrition data gaps

A top priority for United Nations agencies is to collect key data in order to put nutrition within the framework of public policies, with all actors working across different sectors. The lack of capacity in data management was highlighted during Gerda Verburg’s [United Nations Assistant Secretary-General and Coordinator of the SUN Movement] visit last year.

“We need to have a faster and easier reading of the nutrition situation in the country, using evidence that has been built jointly at the country level,” confirms David. “At the moment the Government has to turn to the UN for a specific study – there will be more efficiencies if we work together to build capacity. When we have the numbers, it will also enable us to talk to the private sector about investing in good nutrition.”



According to Jose Ramirez Arita, Early Childhood Development Officer with UNICEF Honduras, COVID-19 has shown the government that it is possible to handle information virtually. “I believe that the Network should support the government in information management. Our country still does not have a digital online system that can show the number of children affected by malnutrition, [such as] anaemia, etc. This information is only known from surveys, which are not very frequent.”

Family, Health Promotion and Life Course Advisor with PAHO, Evelyne Ancion Degraff, agrees that the lack of nutrition data is a major concern in Honduras. In 2019, PAHO coordinated a workshop in which UNICEF and WFP participated, in order to build national capacity for the implementation of a National Nutrition Surveillance System. “Participants included the SUN Movement Country Representative and the UN Network, and nineteen health districts were also represented. Since then, national health authorities have expressed their commitment to developing the surveillance system.”

The UNN is now working with the government and academia to build a Food Security and Nutrition Observatory with standardized databases and systems that increase accessibility to up-to-date information. To this end, FAO and WFP are working with the government’s Technical Unit for Food Security and Nutrition (known as UTSAN) to strengthen the Food and Nutrition Security Monitoring and Evaluation Information System (SISESAN). The COVID-19 crisis has added impetus to this work.

## COVID-19 exposes new vulnerabilities

The current pandemic has further revealed data gaps related to food and nutrition vulnerabilities in the country, particularly the high informality in the job market. When the Government announced a lockdown on 10<sup>th</sup> March, millions of people in urban areas were not included in any census or eligible for social protection. The International Labour Organization (ILO) mobilized to conduct a rapid assessment, estimating that 72 percent of the working poor in Honduras are employed in the informal sector and were now in need of help due to being unable to work. According to the study, around 200,000 households in the ten largest cities of the country have lost their income due to the pandemic, placing the vulnerable at high risk of malnutrition.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>64</sup> ILO & WFP. *Forthcoming. Microeconomic and Livelihood Recovery Study.*

The government has distributed food rations to 800,000 vulnerable families (around 3.2 million people) in response to the crisis, yet many more are in need. Programme targeting has been based on information from before the crisis and thus food and cash is being distributed to individuals who were already vulnerable. Much of the nutrition programming prior to COVID-19 was focused on the 'Dry Corridor', but for the first time in seven years, there have been rains and food shortages are not expected in this region. Moreover, urban areas have been more affected by COVID-19 than rural populations, as smallholder farmers can produce their own food. At the beginning of the lockdown, about 78 percent of the markets nationwide reportedly experienced some sort of food shortage and prices of food increased in general.



*UN personnel supporting the delivery of food and hygiene supplies for people in need during the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020*  
 UNHCR Honduras

COVID-19 has once again highlighted the lack of data in Honduras that the new public observatory seeks to address. “The pandemic is going to create a multi-polar crisis for food security and nutrition in the country. We need to keep a check on what’s happening in the Dry Corridor as we expect the recovery may only be in the short-term, while at the same time, dealing with the huge rise in numbers [of vulnerable families] in urban areas,” confirms David.

## *New opportunities to work together*

**T**he UNRC affirms that “only together can we address the crisis produced by the pandemic and the UN at country level is committed very much in this regard both through the humanitarian response and the response to the socio-economic impact.”

COVID-19 has uncovered challenges as well as created opportunities for the UN to work together. The United Nations agencies are increasingly collaborating in areas such as research, data collection, advocacy and joint programming. “It has helped us to look for real synergies, not just talking – it has served as a bridge to move us to the other side and to make things happen,” says David.

Following the government’s declaration of a humanitarian emergency in the country, the Food Security and Nutrition Cluster was activated under WFP’s leadership and prepared an emergency response plan, working closely with other sectors including social protection and with support from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA). The initial focus has been on supporting immediate needs, such as increasing hospital capacity and feeding those facing hunger.

In close collaboration, WFP and UNICEF are providing technical support to the country’s Early Childhood Unit for a programme that distributes complementary foods to children under two years old in six departments of the country. “The idea is not to substitute household foods. Along with the cereal [Super Cereal Plus], the child continues to be fed with the food that the home community has”, says Arita from UNICEF. “It’s interesting because this intervention, which we plan to scale up, is the first to be led [by the] Ministry of Development and Social Inclusion [where the Early Childhood Unit is housed] rather than the Ministry of Health.”



United Nations agencies have also worked on a socio-economic response to the impact of COVID-19, supporting the government in specific recovery measures. For example, WFP in alliance with ILO has worked on a microeconomics study, using a livelihoods approach to identify vulnerable populations outside of the current social protection system. The study also explores how COVID-19 has affected the FSN of women differently than men. In addition, conversations with the World Bank have been held to advocate jointly for an expansion of social protection measures.



FAO and WFP are monitoring the FSN situation across the country to guide response activities. WFP is working on generating evidence on the impact of COVID-19 on food consumption habits with regard to processed food and sugar-sweetened beverages, bearing in mind the country's overweight and obesity challenges. The studies are part of efforts to address the lack of evidence and better inform policy and programming in the country. Similarly, FAO is carrying out rapid evaluations with the National Institute of Statistics on the impact of COVID-19 on FSN.

According to Wendy Carranza Rios, National Officer for Food and Nutrition Security Policy with FAO, attention to priority groups must be coordinated, effective and relevant to the needs of the population. “FAO has worked to strengthen the decentralized management of FSN in the territories, specifically in the process of training community volunteers, in the implementation of the Integrated Care for Children in the Community strategy and the promotion of adequate food.”

## Challenges and lessons learned

From the UNRC’s perspective, the challenges in Honduras are two-fold: “an external one, in terms of a weak institutional architecture (and efficiency) and internal one, in terms of limited incentives for agencies, funds and programmes to break their traditional institutional approach.” According to Evelyne at PAHO, there is still a need to define the UN coordination mechanisms and to elaborate a UNN plan. “While COVID-19 has been an opportunity for PAHO to work with UN agencies on issues, mostly related to the pandemic response and to sexual reproductive health, there is a need to reinforce collaboration on nutrition,” says Evelyne. Wendy from FAO added that there was a need in Honduras to establish a National Nutrition Authority to lead and coordinate advocacy, prevention and nutritional care to tackle malnutrition in all its forms.

## Next steps

David from WFP claims that, “nutrition is very young as a subject in this country – we have to keep pushing for funding for the whole FSN strategy and national plans.” COVID-19 has disrupted some of the momentum that UN actors were making in terms of engaging nutrition

champions. The Network was engaged in conversations with the Office of the First Lady, capitalizing on her interest in social policy. It was also just days away from presenting a study on the cost of the double burden in Honduras before lockdown occurred. Nevertheless, there is a growing awareness in Government of the need to involve all sectors in the fight against malnutrition and the cost of inaction on the economy, particularly during the post-COVID-19 era.

“The role of the UN is focused on strengthening the capacity of institutions to provide response and service provisions as well as strengthening internal UN mechanisms of coordination and joint programming,” summarizes Alice. “This will be part of the new United Nations Cooperation Framework for Sustainable Development (2022–2026), which is being worked upon right now.” The UNN has a key part to play in these next steps and can help country actors connect the dots to fortify the efforts underway.

