Revising plans for COVID-19 response

UNN-REACH WORK IN LESOTHO AND SIERRA LEONE
Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted many nutrition programmes and activities, forcing United Nations agencies and other organizations to re-visit priorities and make adjustments for the ‘new normal’. Countries such as Lesotho and Sierra Leone benefit from the presence of a UNN-REACH facilitator to help guide this process.

The UN Network Secretariat interviewed Maseqobela Williams, UNN-REACH facilitator in Lesotho and Marian Bangura, UNN-REACH facilitator in Sierra Leone, on how they have responded to the challenge of COVID-19 in their respective countries and their plans for a subsequent recovery.

---

65 UNN-REACH is a country support mechanism for improving nutrition governance, which works in close collaboration with nutrition coordination structures and SUN networks, including the UN Network.
Part 1: Changing plans in Lesotho

But simply, “COVID-19 has meant that stakeholders have not been able to go about ‘business as usual’, says Maseqobela, who has served as the in-country facilitator since 2017.

“The country was quite slow to become affected [by COVID-19] so we were able to take precautions early and to close our borders to control the spread of infection. We were also able to look at existing food security and malnutrition problems that were already there and to get ourselves prepared,” she explains. Lesotho’s lockdown measures led to both the public and private sectors closing down all services, with severe repercussions on food and nutrition security. At the community level, food access and availability have been particularly affected. According to the Lesotho Vulnerability Assessment Committee report (2020), the country is facing increased socio-economic hardship with a projected rise in its food insecure population from 380,000 to 582,000 by March 2021.

One of the first actions of the UN Network (UNN) was to contact all the members agencies and government stakeholders to discuss what they could do quickly. A National Integrated Response Plan for COVID-19 had been prepared at the beginning of March, but nutrition was not clearly prioritized. Rather, the focus was on agriculture and food production. “This was a real gap in the plan,” says Maseqobela. As a result, the current UNN-REACH response has focused on bridging the gap by highlighting sector-specific actions (e.g. health, water, education and social development) as they relate to nutrition.
UNN analytics help re-align workplans

To respond to the new situation, the UNN-REACH workplan was adjusted to align with both the national COVID-19 response and the ‘Nutrition during Emergencies’ axis of the Food and Nutrition Strategy and Costed Plan of Action (2019–2023). UNN-REACH was compelled to re-programme its remaining funds (USD 50,000) in order to respond to the pandemic.

UNN analytics were useful in guiding planning and prioritization activities. For example, the Multi-sectoral Nutrition Overview66 (2018) and the Lesotho Nutrition Stakeholder and Action Mapping67 (2019) were used as a basis for identifying districts that needed immediate attention, even before the onset of COVID-19, and have provided insights on the type of interventions that may have immediate impact. UNN analytics have also informed a strategic approach for the pursuit of joint programming by United Nations agencies (the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations [FAO], the United Nations Children’s Fund [UNICEF] and the World Food Programme [WFP]), leveraging their respective areas of competence and mandates.

67 To learn more, visit https://bit.ly/3IUTVSY
The Maximum Intervention Programme (MIP)

Stakeholders realized that, “we had to strategically attend to those districts that were already affected by malnutrition,” confirms Maseqobela. “We chose four target districts with the highest prevalence of stunting among children under five: Mokhotlong; Thaba-Tseka; Butha-Buthe; and Mohale’s Hoek.68 This was an emergency – we wanted to look at diversifying diets in hard-to-reach areas and among the most vulnerable populations by introducing community-based promotion on productivity of more nutritious foods.” Drawing upon the findings of UNN analytics, Mohale’s Hoek district was replaced by Quthing (which had a lower stunting prevalence), as there were already a large number of ongoing interventions in Mohale’s Hoek.

The programme recognizes cross-sectoral linkages by tapping into the National Information System for Social Assistance, which was made available by the Ministry of Social Development. This enabled eligible households (ultra-poor and poor) with children under the age of five, to be identified and later verified by district/village records.

Food baskets are distributed to these districts. Furthermore, the UNN-REACH Facilitator and other stakeholders realized that nutrition could be put centre-stage through two adaptations: (1) the promotion of simple vegetable production; and (2) awareness-raising on recommended infant and young child feeding (IYCF) practices by distributing printed Information Education Communication (IEC) materials from all relevant United Nations agencies.
Focus on diversifying diets

FAO already had a plan for vegetable seed distribution in the four target districts, but this had not yet been implemented. UNN-REACH collectively agreed to utilize FAO’s experience in seed procurement, and to produce a training manual in English and Lesotho in order to guide beneficiaries in growing practices and explain the importance of consuming vegetables for a healthy diet. In total, 500 households with children under two in each district will receive ten seed varieties including infographics on vegetable production.

Distribution of the enhanced food basket was delayed due to harsh winter conditions and observance of COVID-19 mitigation measures. Ultimately, the MIP was launched in November 2020 and will be followed by planting demonstrations.
Promoting breastfeeding awareness and COVID-19 guidance

The other strand in the new programme is to promote increased demand and access to nutritious foods through consumer knowledge and awareness, including optimal feeding practices for young children. This is being pursued through joint partnerships with the government and other stakeholders.

“We realized that this was an opportunity to increase awareness of nutrition and COVID-19, and to draw on the respective areas of competence among UN agencies. WFP was already distributing food baskets – why not add more to the package, such as IYCF and COVID-19 guidance, with a focus on continued breastfeeding,” says Maseqobela.

Consequently, UNN-REACH funding has been used to develop IEC materials based on advocacy messages and social and behaviour change communications (SBCC) from different United Nations agencies, including: UNICEF’s IYCF global guidelines on breastfeeding, FAO guidelines on vegetable production and WFP’s food basket and nutrition messages. The guidance has been made available in both English and Lesotho. There is also a need to be strategic in ensuring the messages are catered to differing levels of literacy.

The plans foresee sharing IYCF guidance through nutrition clubs at village level, with support from district nutrition officers and with COVID-19 mitigation measures in place. Furthermore, UNICEF will support end-user monitoring of eligible households to guide corrective action.
FIGURE 5.
Excerpt from the Lesotho handbook

My name is ‘Maloney Mamohau, I stay at Lithabaneng in Maseru. I am a breastfeeding mother. Corona virus has not restricted me from consulting with the clinic and practising good hygiene at all times. During this time of corona virus, I frequently wash my hands with soap and running water for at least twenty seconds, even before and after breast feeding my child.

I also make sure to continue with my child’s immunisation schedule so that she stays healthy during this period.

I plant enough vegetables for the family and avoid going out to the market where people are crowded.

If I do not feel well, I follow hygienic measures towards my infant and also express milk and safely offer the breast milk to my infant.
Strengthening a multi-partner and multi-sectoral response for nutrition

In Lesotho, the UNN-REACH Facilitator is fortunate to be based in the Office of the Prime Minister, where she provides technical support to the Food and Nutrition Coordination Office (FNCO). This has given her a vantage point for strengthening multi-stakeholder engagement through regular meetings with government and incremental capacity-building of the FNCO team. Since the country went into lockdown, Maseqobela has been consulting via phone and virtual meetings with both government and UN colleagues.

Maseqobela acknowledges that, “We are very lucky in having a collective culture, nurtured by the UNN and chair – and exercises such as REACH and UNN mapping tools have helped inform nutrition strategy and key UN documents such as the UNDAP [United Nations Development Assistance Plan].”

COVID-19 has also proved a catalyst for broadening the network of United Nations agencies and other partners involved in nutrition in Lesotho, including plans to work closely with the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) on a food production initiative, and to further strengthen water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), both within the Ministry of Health and the country’s school feeding programme.
Before COVID-19 and now: What has changed for UNN-REACH?

It is not that we are necessarily doing anything new,” claims Maseqobela. “Strategically, we decided to continue with our plan [2020–2021 UNN-REACH workplan] but to conduct it in a more robust manner, with a wider involvement of stakeholders”.

UNN-REACH has created a sound enabling environment for nutrition, particularly at the national level. In the wake of COVID-19, even more attention is now being focused on the facilitation of actions at the district and community levels. “We are striving to strengthen the Maximum Intervention Programme approach to mitigate the effects of COVID-19 – and we are doing things in a more collective manner,” affirms Maseqobela.
Part 2: Impact of COVID-19 on health and nutrition programming in Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone registered its first case of COVID-19 on 30 March 2020, two months after the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a global pandemic. Initially, many nutrition programmes were suspended due to measures instituted by the government to stop the spread of the virus. According to Marian Bangura, the UNN-REACH Facilitator, most United Nations agencies and development partners have diverted some of their project funds to the COVID-19 response, such as the provision of infection prevention control materials (e.g. personal protection equipment and soap), related food assistance and the promotion of relevant public health messages.

Unfortunately, preventative measures such as restrictions on movement, physical distancing and a ‘no touch’ policy have affected access, utilization and delivery of life-saving health and nutrition services in the country. For example, there has been a large decline in the number of pregnant women accessing antenatal services and reductions in immunizations for infants aged 0–11 months. Moreover, 63 percent of households are now food insecure (up from 48 percent in the previous quarter), and nine out of sixteen districts have a higher prevalence of children with severe acute malnutrition (SAM) than before the onset of COVID-19.

---


The COVID-19 pandemic in Sierra Leone has triggered the creation of a Food Assistance and Nutrition (FAN) pillar. According to the UNN-REACH Facilitator, this is the first of its kind in all the emergencies that the country has faced over the years, including the rebel war, the Ebola outbreak and the mudslide that claimed thousands of lives. The pillar consists of two clusters: (1) the Nutrition Cluster, chaired by the Directorate of Food and Nutrition within the Ministry of Health and Sanitation and co-chaired by UNICEF; and (2) the Food Security Cluster, chaired by the Ministry of Agriculture and co-chaired by WFP.

The FAN pillar, strongly supported by the Vice President, collaborated with other nutrition and food security partners to contribute to the COVID-19 National Emergency Plan. The plan provides technical oversight and coordinates all food assistance and nutrition support. A coordinated approach between actors is ensured via sharing roles and responsibilities, weekly cluster meetings and reporting, and implementation tracking to avoid duplication and overlap.

Through the coordinated efforts of the different working groups, the pillar has produced a context-specific Standard Operating Procedure for Nutrition Response to COVID-19 as well as defined a food package for vulnerable households and individuals to be distributed to treatment centres and quarantine homes nationwide. As the infection spread to the districts, the national-level coordination structure was decentralized. Each district established its own mechanism for coordinating COVID-19 response activities, headed by the district coordinator.

71 Both UNN-REACH and SUN are housed in the Vice President’s office.
One of the areas identified for urgent attention was the provision of communication materials for COVID-19 guidance. “We held a partners’ meeting under the Nutrition Cluster to brainstorm on activities that the cluster should embark on for the COVID-19 response. Everyone agreed that the development of communications - for raising awareness on nutrition issues - was a top priority,” says Marian.

A new workplan for UNN-REACH (2020-2021) was being developed at the same time so a decision was made to allocate funds to support the response, with a focus on disseminating nutrition information. UNN-REACH and Sierra Leone’s Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Secretariat provided technical assistance, especially during the review of existing communications and adapting global guidelines to the local context. Collaborative efforts in developing the new materials resulted in new knowledge management products that are ‘owned’ by all nutrition technical staff from government, United Nations agencies and other partners.

Financial support (USD 10,000) was provided to produce nutrition messages through various media, including three video clips on breastfeeding by COVID-19 infected mothers and advice to pregnant and lactating women on the use of health facilities to access life-saving services. In addition, two radio messages were devised on healthy eating to boost immunity, especially during lockdown. Other materials include guidance notes on *Maternal, Infant and Young Child Nutrition in the Context of COVID-19* for health workers in Sierra Leone, and *Questions and Answers on IYCF in the context of COVID-19*, all of which have been distributed through the Directorate of Food and Nutrition. Training has been organized for different stakeholders, such as chiefs, religious leaders and COVID-19 information dissemination officers in each district.
Next steps: Designing a UN Joint Programme for nutrition

Even before the pandemic, there had been discussion on the need for a UN Joint Programme to reduce stunting among children under two years old, as progress towards global nutrition targets in the country has been very slow. “The pandemic just threw more light on this need as it opens up opportunities not only for integration and synergies for better programming, but can also encourage donors if a much better impact could be realized in reducing the malnutrition burden,” says Marian.

So far, the technical staff from five United Nations agencies (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO), supported by UNN-REACH, have drafted a concept note to be finalized during a UN joint retreat before the end of 2020. This will also be informed by a UN Nutrition Inventory, undertaken with support from the UNN Secretariat, in order to identify gaps in UN nutrition actions to inform programme design. The technical team is planning to pilot the stunting reduction programme model in at least two districts before scaling up. The first step will be to carry out a baseline assessment.

COVID-19 has affected planned UNN-REACH activities in both Lesotho and Sierra Leone. The facilitators have worked with stakeholders, including the UNN, to adjust plans to the context – with positive outlooks for nutrition advocacy and new joint UN programming efforts in both countries.