UNN PROGRAMMING/ PARTNERSHIPS

Unconventional coordination structures in Nigeria yield a stronger collective

Tale 16
As the most populous country in Africa, with an economy that overtook South Africa’s in 2019 to become the largest on the continent, Nigeria’s breadth can be seen alternately as a challenge or an opportunity. Levels of child stunting (44 percent), child wasting (11 percent) and anaemia (50 percent) among women of reproductive age well-exceed public health thresholds, giving stakeholders a sense of urgency to make progress on these fronts.72

One structure for coordinating nutrition support among United Nations agencies, non-profits and donors is the Development Partners Network (DPN), which was formed in 2011 when the country joined the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement. Over the past nine years, the DPN has been able to align priorities, interface with government, and more recently, engage the United Nations Resident Coordinator (UNRC), Edward Kallon.

The Network is co-chaired by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the United Kingdom’s former Department for International Development (DFID) and includes the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the World Food Programme (WFP) as members. In 2018–19, the nutrition agenda was sometimes tabled at United Nations Country Team (UNCT) meetings within the context of broader development, providing an opportunity to reinforce its links to other sectors.73

“10 out of 10”

The long-standing functionality of this Network shows that coordinated UN action on nutrition is possible without a stand-alone UN Network (UNN). In the UNN annual report for 2019, which reviews nutrition coordination structures and UN collective action, Nigeria scored the highest possible rating, 10 out of 10, on an index that assesses a country according to metrics such as: 'UNN strategy/agenda in place', 'UNN workplan developed' or 'nutrition joint programming'. This article explores the underlying reasons for their success as well as probing further on how this level of integration translates into action on nutrition indicators such as stunting, wasting and anaemia.

As Nigeria’s UNRC since 2016, Kallon oversees all United Nations operations in the country, aligning the mission and liaising with government. “The subject of nutrition is dear to my heart,” he says. “I worked with WFP for over twenty years, and during that period, I witnessed the devastating effect of malnutrition in many country situations and I’ve seen people suffering.”

As part of the UNICEF team, nutrition specialist Simeon Namana has participated in co-chairing the DPN. Senior Programme Officer for nutrition at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Victor Ajieroh, comes to the network from a third perspective – that of a privately-run not-for-profit organization.
Success factors

The three stakeholders interviewed identified some common elements that help the network to function, with meetings that serve as a predictable forum for making decisions as a group. Victor from the Gates Foundation characterized the meetings with a series of questions, answering all in the affirmative. “Are we reaching consensus on priorities? Are we apprised of what everyone is doing? Have we formed a common front to support government and address officials? What are concerns that we all share? How do we support the national nutrition council and make it operationalize? How can we strengthen government capacity?”

A prime factor in the network’s high score is the leadership. “We have the platforms that support multi-sectoral, multi-stakeholder, multi-actor engagement. A rallying point was joining SUN in 2011, and DFID has done a great job bringing folks together,” he adds.
Simeon pointed out the benefit of a shared agenda. “Having this group automatically rules out the possibility of any kind of competition. It ensures the donors and UN speak the same language and that they approach the government [as a unit]. It’s a platform that lets us know what funding goes where, and how that funding can be more targeted to geographic location.”

One joint programme focuses on maternal health and nutrition (UNFPA and WFP) in Jere and Konduga. Another programme targets the critical first 1,000 days of a child’s life, from conception to 23 months of age. WFP provided cash transfers to pregnant and lactating women or other caregivers of children 6–23 months, based on their enrolment in the UNICEF-supported ante/post-natal care and immunization service. Furthermore, programmes that implement nutrition-sensitive agriculture are currently active in six states (Adamawa, Borno, Cross-River, Federal Capital Territory, Kaduna and Yobe) but on a limited scale.

For the crucial factor of budgeting, DPN advocates for Federal and State governments to include nutrition when allocating resources from annual as well as COVID-19 funding. From May 2019 to April 2020, the DPN gave financial support to the National Committee on Food and Nutrition and their state counterparts. In addition, the DPN collaborated with the Governor’s Forum, a non-partisan platform to push nutrition scorecards as well as share peer learnings among states.

74 Ibid.
Aligning with government

The ultimate goal of the DPN is to work more efficiently with national government as a united front. Simeon cited a recent example. “When the election took place [in February 2019] and the government was in transition, we drafted a policy note that represented all our interests to point out the priorities we have for nutrition.”

The two-page Policy Note highlighted current figures for quick reference, urging government action. In 2019, 321,300 children under the age of five died because of malnutrition. Almost one-third of children under five (13.1 million) are stunted and 7 percent suffer from wasting. Micronutrient deficiencies, such as anaemia, impact a sizable proportion of reproductive-age women and a whopping 71 percent of children.75

The Policy Note recommended the following four steps. With the assistance of the UNRC’s office, here are the outcomes so far.

1. Improve and strengthen coordination, leadership and accountability for nutrition

On 28 July 2020, a meeting was held virtually with participation from the Federal Ministry of Water Resources, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (FMARD), the Ministry of Information and the National Primary Health Care Development Agency, among others. In the meeting, government ministries, departments and agencies (MDAs), who did not have budget lines for nutrition in the past, reported now having dedicated budget lines.

2. Ensure predictable and sustained funding

As of September 2020, most of the states that have adopted the National Food and Nutrition policy have budget lines for nutrition across various sectors. However, fund releases remain a major constraint.

3. Develop a common results framework to track implementation progress

The Nigeria Governors Forum convened multiple government actors to develop nutrition scorecards that will track government commitments and investment in nutrition as well as peer learning among states.

4. Strengthen relevant sectoral systems for improved nutrition service delivery

The cost of the National Multi-sectoral Plan of Action for Food and Nutrition (2018–2025) is currently being reviewed, with a focus on nutrition components across line ministries to ensure realistic planning, costing and spending by states.

Overall, the impact of the Policy Note has allowed the government to make decisions based on an agreed agenda defined by a multitude of stakeholders.
Nutrition in the Humanitarian-Development Nexus

The North East region experiences regular conflict which has killed over 37,000 people. "We still have over 10.6 million living in that region. 1.6 million people have started returning to ‘safe areas,’” Kallon reflected. To address this, the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) articulates nutrition as a collective outcome of the Humanitarian-Development Nexus (HDN), an important step forward. Currently, FAO and WFP are jointly implementing a nutrition-sensitive agriculture project in the North East to protect nutritional status and build resilience. Additional work is underway to align humanitarian assistance with the government’s health package provided through primary care, a concept that aims to facilitate coordination among the diverse stakeholders.

The Resident Coordinator explains, “For me, the Humanitarian-Development Nexus is about helping affected people to transform their lives from being dependent to being self-sustaining and resilient. It is about finding the opportunities to make people’s lives better while mitigating threats, building on the strengths of the individuals, their communities and their governments, and helping them to deal with any weaknesses that encumber their abilities to be self-sustaining.”

In the longer term, a food-systems approach will be crucial for improving food security, nutrition and the environment concurrently. Kallon also pointed out that “Emergency water supply systems are also being replaced by longer-term arrangements that can be managed by beneficiary communities.”

Promoting peace in the conflict-affected north also ranks high on the HDN agenda. “My approach has been very consistent on this: that we sequence our strategy and look for islands of peace and begin to create hope for people. This has a replicating effect,” says Kallon.
Challenges ahead

While all three interviewees agreed on the strengths of the coordinating body, all three, in their respective interviews, expressed concern that the DPN could be doing much more. They were frustrated with the speed of implementation of nutrition interventions and pointed out that the translation of policy to action was something that was still in its early stages.

The UNRC’s office pointed out that one of the main challenges has been the adoption and implementation of nutrition policies at sub-national level. For example, stunting and wasting co-exist in the same geographic areas, in the same communities, and sometimes, within the same child. In addition to supporting the government to coordinate their approach, there is a need to avoid duplication and promote implementation convergence across geographical areas. Furthermore, these issues persist due to inadequate technical capacity at all levels of government to implement a package of nutrition interventions aimed at reducing stunting and wasting.
Victor was direct in his assessment. “I see progress in discussions and efforts at prioritization. But if you compare this with the slow reduction of malnutrition, it is not keeping up. The conversations are sincere, but the pacing is not up to the challenges in Nigeria.”

"Moving from intention to action at government level [is our main goal],” commented Simeon. “[On a more positive note], four states have released money from their budgets for nutrition.” The four – Bauchi, Gombe, Jigawa and Yobe – have released a total of USD 454,000. This is the result of sustained advocacy as well as oversight over the State Committees on Food and Nutrition for timely planning and follow-up.
Moving forward

While Nigeria scored 10 out of 10 on the UNN’s functionality index, nutrition integration among government bodies stands to be improved. The UNRC’s office would like to see better coordination among: the Ministry of Budget and National Planning (MoBNP), which oversees implementation of the Food and Nutrition Policy and state-level food and nutrition committees; the National Council on Nutrition (NCN), headed by the Vice President; the Ministry of Health (MoH) and the SUN Focal Point for the Nigeria chapter of the global SUN Movement.

Kallon sees himself as being integral to this process. “My role as the RC is to ensure that the process is streamlined – to make sure nutrition remains a focus. As you know, the underlying causes of malnutrition are multifaceted and not one single agency can address it on its own. My position as the representative of the Secretary-General allows me the enviable privilege to convene a wide array of stakeholders around contentious issues.”

Nutrition holds much potential, not only because it is crucial for the health and well-being of Nigerians, but because it is central to so many of these other issues. Getting nutrition right has a number of knock-on benefits. Colleagues in-country are eager to see joint dialogue and collective commitments translated into concrete gains and are actively working towards making that a reality every day.