



UNN PEOPLE

Building a holistic approach in Costa Rica



HOW THE UNRC TACKLES UN REFORM,
NUTRITION GOVERNANCE AND
THE ENTRENCHED PATRIARCHY

Table 2

On the day I spoke to Alice Shackelford, the United Nations Resident Coordinator of Costa Rica,³ the arrival of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights was imminent, along with unseasonal rain. In the face of the mounting pressure of the day, Alice was fully present and sincere, with a refreshing level of honesty about the issues. As the interview progressed, this kind of focused attention was evident in her approach to a spectrum of issues she handles as Resident Coordinator — including the gender bias she overcomes daily.



Alice Shackelford, United Nations Resident Coordinator of Costa Rica, visits programming site in the north, 2018

UN Resident Coordinator's Office, Costa Rica

Worldwide, 55 percent of United Nations Resident Coordinators (UNRCs) are women and 45 percent are men. Gender parity has been reached and exceeded.⁴ Even so, the acceptance of a woman wielding power continues to be a complex issue, one that Alice negotiates with the same courage and hope she brings to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Meeting these by 2030 is a challenge for Costa Rica, and one of the common denominators of the seventeen goals is nutrition. Costa Rica faces a triple burden of malnutrition — micronutrient deficiencies; overweight and obesity; and stunting — with the current prevalence of overweight among under5s at 8.1 percent, overshadowing stunted under5s, at 5.6 percent. Anaemia impacts almost 25 percent of pregnant women, while nearly one-third of adults are obese (31.5 percent).⁵

³ Alice Shackelford has since taken up duties as the United Nations Resident Coordinator in Honduras.

⁴ United Nations. *Gender Parity Strategy webpage*. Available at <https://reform.un.org/content/gender-parity-strategy>.

⁵ SUN Movement Secretariat. 2019. *Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement Progress Report 2019: Costa Rica country profile*. Geneva. Available at https://scalingupnutrition.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/SUN_Report_EN_2019_Country_Costa_Rica.pdf.

Growing inequalities are impacting social, economic and environmental development of the country and require structural changes and reforms. At the same time, climate change is another factor that will impede the country's ability to meet the SDGs. Along with El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama, Costa Rica is part of the 'dry corridor';⁶ where ecosystems are characterized by drought, excessive rain and severe flooding – negatively impacting agricultural production.

Many of Alice's observations touched on the idea that UNN is a helpful platform for cultivating the collective spirit of various agencies and translating it into action in support of country priorities. While progress is being made on many fronts, Costa Rica is still not expected to meet the 2030 global targets for anaemia in women of reproductive age, low birth weight, adult obesity (neither among men or women) and health conditions such as diabetes, which can be triggered by poor dietary practices.⁷ My conversation with Alice offers some insights as to why this might be as well as her hopes for the country.

Question 1: What are the three most pressing issues Costa Rica faces currently?

Costa Rica is a country with a complex bureaucracy. It has more than 300 public institutions which make governing complicated in terms of decision-making and authority. Second, the political and social polarization in the region means there is a strong presence of evangelical and populist groups in politics, creating a strong divide when it comes to some specific human rights

⁶ FAO. 2015. *Disaster Risk Programme to strengthen resilience in the Dry Corridor in Central America*. Available at <https://www.preventionweb.net/publications/view/46281>.

⁷ Development Initiatives Poverty Research Ltd. 2019. *Global Nutrition Report; Costa Rica country profile*. Available at <https://globalnutritionreport.org/resources/nutrition-profiles/latin-america-and-caribbean/central-america/costa-rica/>.

issues, such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people and women's sexual and reproductive rights. Finally, the issue of economic growth, or low productivity. [They have] huge fiscal problems where the majority of the GDP goes just to pay the interest of public debt and there is high fiscal evasion. This directly impacts the 2030 Agenda and the capacity to make critical changes and investments.

Question 2: Describe your role in coordinating the Nutrition agenda.

The 2030 Agenda makes a strong argument for the need to coordinate amongst agencies, and the United Nations Development System reform has helped this even more. This is now a clear directive and an excellent tool for UNRCs to further enhance. At the same time, facilitating joint in-depth analysis of the country and alignment with SDGs is another critical entry point where the engaged agencies can see the value to connect the dots. In Costa Rica, we have established a working group on nutrition [as part of the UN Network] with a joint workplan to be able to support government more strategically.

The visits of the Assistant Secretary-General (ASG) for SUN and the Global Coordinator of the UN Network were extremely useful to further incentivize a holistic approach. My role has been to build upon these incentives. In this way, I was able to coordinate better with government and advocate for a re-strengthened focus on the nutrition agenda – and the SUN [Movement] in particular. Now the national SUN is much stronger and better placed to drive public policy and strategic interventions with inclusion of various ministries as well as non-governmental actors.

Question 3: How have you worked with the diverse components of nutrition to bring resident and non-resident United Nations agencies (RAs and NRAs) to develop a common response to support the government?

It is not easy to engage NRAs on this specific issue. For example, WFP has never engaged with us on this. Another important element is reaching an agreement with government – after much resistance – to include the private sector in the coordination mechanism.

Only a truly multi-sectoral approach can support an effective and result-oriented nutrition agenda with a human rights-based approach. In this regard, the national pact Costa Rica signed on the 2030 Agenda with all sectors (three state powers, the electoral commission, civil society, faith-based organizations, municipalities, private sector, trade unions and others) creates a platform to position the nutrition agenda with [a] multiplying effect.

Four years ago, the SUN agenda was not receiving attention or dedication until the UN RCO [Resident Coordinator Office] started to re-engage with them to provide strong technical support as well as a political momentum. We found a great champion in the Ministry of Health to work with, which has helped the follow-up. This was further supported from the two visits from Gerda Verburg, [the Coordinator of the SUN Movement] and the visit of the Coordinator of the UN Network of the SUN, and follow-up by the same agencies. The SUN Secretariat is very active in engaging with Costa Rica, providing input, incentives and information.

Costa Rica has very high human development indicators and has positioned itself as a model in terms of social protection and environment development. This often means that it is not seen as country where issues of poverty and

nutrition are on the top of the agenda and the reduction in ODA has made it more challenging. However, the strategic use of data to identify the increased rates of obesity and overweight in adults as well as children, and even very small children has [made its urgency evident].

Question 4: How do you approach the role of the UN RC?

I am a strong believer that the UN has to be coordinated at country level. The comparative advantage of the UN in the 21st century, where there are so many actors, has to be a united one to support a multidimensional approach to development. I am also a strong believer in the reform, which puts forward the stronger role of the RC in this process. [My role is] facilitating, convening, enunciating the connections between agencies to encourage them to think beyond their usual turf. This applies to nutrition issues as well. The issue of coordination is key for the RC, linked to the national and regional level, and bringing in alliances with civil society. This naturally requires a strong leadership by the government.

Question 5: Can you give me an example of one of the ways you've put this approach into action?

When I arrived, Scaling Up Nutrition was quite dead. By reactivating that, appointing a focal person in the RC office, and engaging with key actors and stimulating UN agencies, we have strengthened the SUN Movement, with the government in the lead, focused on key challenges such as obesity and overweight. In the beginning, the government was closed to the idea of bringing in civil society, but now we've managed to emphasize the importance of bringing in these partners for a wider coordination.

For nutrition, we look at what the three main agencies – UNICEF, FAO and WHO – bring to the table, and make sure this happens in an articulated and coordinated manner. There was a need to bring the agencies around the table given that was not happening beforehand. We also have a civil society advisory group to strengthen alliances for key advocacy areas, and we hold a regular development partners meeting for this purpose. Naturally, we're working on engaging other agencies like [the United Nations Development Programme, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Organization for Migration], given the huge issue with refugees (asylum seekers) and migrants (regular and irregular).

Question 6: *How has the UN Network supported you?*

Most of all, the visits have been appreciated. In 2019, we had the visit of Purnima, [current Director of the UN Network]. [She was] liaising with donors and development partners. We need regular follow-up to help the team here to strengthen the relationships. Funding continues to be an issue given the upper middle-income level graduation of Costa Rica. They also give us technical support on administrative processes and reporting as well as incentives to enhance mapping interventions across the UN System and building innovative partnerships.

Question 7: *What challenges do you face building coalitions?*

There is still a fear within the UN that working together takes away the individual role and positioning of the agency. Resistance within the UN System is evident at national and international levels and requires strong stewardship and institutional change. A lot of agencies still do not receive enough incentives and directions from HQ to invest in inter-agency work.

Question 8: *What's the way forward?*

- Strengthening nutrition governance in a more articulated manner with a strong human rights-based approach around the most excluded groups and patterns of inequality.
- A clear leadership in government on the issue. Not just the Ministry of Health, but also other actors.
- Finally, to strengthen knowledge management and sharing within the government.

Next year we will call for a more inclusive meeting of SUN, including civil society and the private sector to support public policy on nutrition, and to give it stronger internal coherence. [We need to] work on local level in the municipalities and the communities in the valleys around San José; get out of the coast to the border areas where there are many challenges.

Question 9: *What is your experience being a female leader in the context of Central America?*

Thank you for asking. The UN has made a lot of effort to put women in positions of leadership, but the males now need to accept women in those positions. Male chauvinist and patriarchal attitudes are still present within the UN System. That is a reality that women in power still face. You are treated differently. You are commented on differently. If you are energetic, you are hyperactive. If you feel committed to an issue, you're emotional. These kinds of things are heavy and very present. That's not always easy.

[At the UN] we integrate gender at all levels. We have a strong gender inter-agency group and gender is positioned in the UNDAF,⁸ and we work a lot with women's organizations. We are following up on the system-wide plan and the gender scorecard. There is resistance by leadership to do more – not only with male, but also female leaders.

[The struggle is not] just with gender equality, but also diversity, people with disabilities, the LGBTI community and indigenous, Afro-descended people. All of these groups are included in the frame of a human rights-based approach.

These are critical issues that affect nutrition. The day before yesterday, we were at a women's center in a disadvantaged part of San José, where the incidence of obesity is huge. The more you go into the underprivileged community, the issue of diet is critical, as is the access to a nutritional diet. Women are some of the most effected, and their children by extension.

8 UNDAF refers to the United Nations Development Assistance Framework, recently superseded by the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF).