CONSOLIDATING JOINT ACTION ON NUTRITION AT COUNTRY LEVEL TO MAKE A BIGGER IMPACT

UNN ANALYTICS

UNN analytical tools make their mark

Tale 21
A picture is worth a thousand words. This old saying has made a comeback, as data visualization and infographics populate essentially every facet of life in today's world. The UN Network analytical tools subscribe to this school of thought and help stakeholders take off their respective 'institutional hats' to see the situation in its entirety.

Developed as digitalization went mainstream, primarily under the auspices of UNN-REACH, the tools were later expanded to the greater UN Network (UNN) in response to popular demand. Their ability to paint the full picture, literally, with colour-coded maps, charts and dashboards, and cater to non-technical audiences (e.g. parliamentarians) has set them apart from other instruments and enabled them to endure the test of time. Over 34 countries have used one or more of these tools, some multiple times, recognizing their utility in establishing consensus among diverse stakeholders and coordinating the vast spectrum of nutrition actions. While anecdotal evidence had suggested this all along, the UNN Secretariat carried out an impact assessment in 2019, confirming this sentiment and shedding light on additional applications of the tools.

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96 UNN-REACH refers to the Renewed Efforts Against Child Hunger and undernutrition initiative, which is the intensive support arm of the UNN's multi-sectoral technical assistance facility.
97 This assessment documented the qualitative impacts of the UNN analytical tools as reported by countries rather than measuring it per se.
**The ABCs of the UN Network tools**

As part of the UN Network’s multi-sectoral technical assistance facility, the UN Network Secretariat manages a portfolio of analytical tools to bolster multi-stakeholder coordination, strengthen national capacity and scale up multi-sectoral nutrition actions. There are five tools\(^{98}\) that countries can opt to use either as a complementary set or on an individual basis. These include: (1) the Multi-sectoral Nutrition Overview; (2) the Nutrition Stakeholder and Action Mapping; (3) the Policy and Plan Overview; (4) the Nutrition Capacity Assessment; and (5) the UN Nutrition Inventory.

The tools draw on the technical expertise of the member United Nations agencies, such as public health thresholds established by the World Health Organization (WHO), dietary diversity indicators developed by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the World Food Programme and frameworks developed by the United Nation’s Children Fund (UNICEF). Furthermore, the tools identify the roles and contributions of different actors across the multi-sectoral nutrition landscape and illustrate how things sum up to a greater whole. They also generate data, including intervention coverage at sub-national levels, for the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement’s Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL) system and the respective country dashboards, helping to foster mutual accountability within the SUN community.

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Methodology

The impact assessment explored the uses of the UNN analytical tools at the country level. All countries who had ever used the tools had the opportunity to participate through an online survey that was sent to national teams after having been piloted in two countries. Ultimately, nineteen people from twelve countries replied of varying profiles, including SUN Government Focal Points (see Figure 11). These countries include: Burkina Faso; Burundi; Chad; the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC); Ghana; Guinea; Lesotho; Mali; Myanmar; Nepal; Sierra Leone; and Zimbabwe. All but two countries (Burundi and DRC) had employed the tools in concert with UNN-REACH facilitation support.

FIGURE 11.
Profile of respondents

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The first part of the questionnaire explored the use of the full ‘toolkit’ whereas the second section included questions pertaining to the use of each tool on an individual basis. Participants indicated the extent to which the tools had impacted nutrition governance processes and systems through the following rating scale: greatly; moderately; minimally; or not at all. They also had the opportunity to supplement their responses with qualitative feedback. This helped to contextualize the findings and maximize the learning acquired through the assessment. Nearly half of the respondents (47 percent) provided insights about all five tools, while 41 percent provided information about one singular tool and the remaining 12 percent provided answers on a sub-set of them. Almost all respondents (94 percent) had been engaged in the mapping exercise, making it the most documented tool in the assessment.

**Key findings from the assessment**

This article highlights the main takeaways from the impact assessment as well as more recent efforts to make the tools better known to prospective users. Additional insights are discussed in the full impact assessment report, prepared by the UNN Secretariat.

This multi-country review was able to identify comparative trends, considering temporal and geographic differences. Overall, the findings demonstrated that tools had a notable impact on: (1) nutrition advocacy; (2) national information systems; (3) the engagement of government institutions in nutrition; and (4) multi-sectoral/stakeholder coordination. In contexts where the full suite of analytics had been utilized, all respondents reported substantial improvements in multi-sectoral coordination and nutrition advocacy as well as increased involvement of government institutions in the national nutrition agenda (see Figure 12).
FIGURE 12.
Impact of full UNN analytical portfolio

The impact assessment was also helpful in documenting a series of knock-on effects, such as supporting data-driven planning and mainstreaming nutrition across sectors. According to 90 percent of the respondents, the Multi-sectoral Nutrition Overview (MNO) had increased nutrition knowledge, especially among government authorities from parliamentarians to ministry staff and district officers. These secondary impacts have further helped to advance the nutrition agenda in the countries surveyed, demonstrating that their utility transcends the initial four themes.

“The most remarkable thing about the UNN analytical tools is their flexibility and ability to be adapted depending on the country needs. The same tool following the same methodology can be used and employed differently depending on the context and on the audience. This feature is what makes these tools so requested by country teams,” says Farah Sbytte, who coordinates the analytics workstream at the UNN Secretariat.
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Urging people in power to take action

The outcomes of the assessment affirmed the UNN analytics are powerful advocacy tools that have helped raise awareness on malnutrition in the given country and its dire consequences, among high-ranking politicians. The tools were reportedly ‘easy to understand’ and enabled decision-makers from different sectors to use them for advocacy purposes. Over 80 percent of respondents reported improved nutrition advocacy efforts for awareness-raising, planning and resource allocation stemming from the tools. While considerable impact on nutrition advocacy was observed across the board, it was most pronounced where the full set of tools was adopted. In the latter scenario, all respondents reported that the tools had moderately to greatly informed nutrition advocacy at national and sub-national levels. Impact was, nevertheless, also high for individual tool usage. For example, the vast majority (82 percent) of respondents reported that the mapping results significantly informed advocacy for awareness-raising and budgeting for nutrition.

When surveyed on the main impacts, the responses varied by tool. Half of the respondents reported advocacy and resource mobilization as a main impact for the MNO exercise which increased to 70 percent for the UN Nutrition Inventory. Various participating decision-makers described the MNO as a ‘solid advocacy tool’. In Myanmar, the MNO was both indispensable and catalytic, bringing evidence to substantiate the need for a multi-sectoral national nutrition plan as the historic new government got its feet on the ground. Similarly, the mapping exercise equipped the country’s multi-stakeholder platform (MSP) with data to inform nutrition advocacy efforts that further shaped the emerging nutrition agenda. Advocacy took a different angle in Chad, where the Policy and Plan Overview (PPO) enabled stakeholders to advocate for placing the national food and nutrition council at the presidency level as well as establishing sub-national nutrition coordination mechanisms.
Advocacy and resource mobilization often go hand in hand and the UNN analytics are no exception. The assessment revealed that the tools helped to attract domestic and foreign investment in nutrition and even to identify innovative resource mobilization schemes. In Ghana, the findings generated by the tools were crucial for prompting the sectors to develop a common analysis of ongoing nutrition investments. The Nepal PPO informed advocacy to prioritize the establishment of a common pool of resources dedicated to nutrition.

**Generating data for informed decision-making**

The UNN analytical tools are also addressing data gaps and strengthening national information systems. According to the impact assessment, two thirds of the respondents reported a considerable improvement in the availability of nutrition data, when the full toolkit was used. For many respondents (at least half), increasing data availability was considered to be a main impact of the five respective tools. They are also helping to inform national M&E frameworks and monitor the nutrition situation, including the implementation of national nutrition plans. In particular, the mapping tool was recognized for its utility in generating data to guide scale-up and identify which geographic zones to prioritize. For instance, the mapping findings were primarily used at sub-national levels in Ghana to prioritize sector activities. Regional decision-makers, furthermore, expressed interest in integrating mapping data into sub-national information systems, which in turn, feed into biannual planning processes. Sometimes, these types of applications spilled over into the UN sphere, helping to identify potential areas for joint programming and M&E mechanisms (Ghana, Mali and Zimbabwe), particularly the Inventory tool.
Respondents also valued the wide breadth of actions that the analytics encompass — both nutrition-specific and sensitive — and the ability to bridge those two tracks. In Zimbabwe, multi-stakeholder engagement throughout the UNN analytical exercises enabled the harmonization of an integrated food and nutrition information system that now serves as a central repository for nutrition data. This systematic change will, in turn, help to simplify decision-making at national and sub-national levels to ensure that no one is left behind.

**Enlarging the nutrition circle**

Addressing malnutrition involves mobilizing different sectors and hardwiring nutrition into their respective plans and activities. A whopping 94 percent of respondents noted that an increased number of government institutions, such as ministries, had become active in the nutrition arena thanks to the tools. The same assessment further revealed that an average of eight ministries were involved, with varying intensity, in the implementation of the UNN analytics at the country level (see Figure 13). This number was slightly higher for the mapping tool (nine ministries on average), which has generally been launched through a multi-stakeholder workshop and thus helped galvanize stakeholders. The numbers speak for themselves but are even more impressive, considering that nutrition has historically been perceived as a health issue. As a result, the findings from the impact assessment confirm that the UNN analytics have served as door openers for engaging additional sectors, thereby broadening nutrition beyond the health constituency.

The tools went a step further. The findings also demonstrate that they have notably strengthened capacity in the vast majority of cases (90 percent), including in data management, a priority identified in the 2018 Global Nutrition Report. Involved personnel, including SUN Government Focal Points, ministry representatives and different SUN networks, were actively engaged in the different stages of the analytics. This reportedly increased both their individual technical skills as well as
institutional capacity at national and sub-national levels. Capacity strengthening is the primary focus of the Nutrition Capacity Assessment, whereas for the other tools, it is pursued through the engagement process. Not surprisingly, 80 percent of respondents cited capacity development as the top impact of the tool. In Chad, the capacity assessment informed the development of a capacity strengthening plan and resource mobilization to support its implementation, while the tool was used in Myanmar to assess existing capacities at sub-national levels to implement the new national nutrition plan. The mapping exercise, led by national actors with the support of the UNN Secretariat, also lent itself to capacity strengthening (Nepal). Overall, the UNN tools have equipped national teams with the means to be able to replicate the exercises in the future and to extract data for the MSPs and other decision-making, as needed. With that said, the respondents voiced interest in having periodic refresher trainings.

FIGURE 13.
Number of ministries involved in the implementation of the UNN analytical tools

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Working together more effectively in a crowded landscape

Actors in the nutrition community are often highly specialized in one aspect of nutrition, approaching the subject from one sector or even one intervention. The tools provide a rallying point and enable diverse stakeholders to find the least common denominator upon which to ground collective action and coordinate efforts, particularly the mapping exercise. In this manner, the participatory processes behind the tools are of paramount importance to the findings that are generated by them.

Overall, more than half of respondents reported major improvements to multi-sectoral nutrition coordination through using UNN tools. When the full portfolio of tools was adopted, this figure went up to 100 percent. The tools also provided a means to strengthen the links between national and sub-national coordination mechanisms. Most respondents identified enhanced coordination as the main impact of the tools, with 90 percent exhibited for the MNO and 87 percent for the mapping. The impact assessment, furthermore, affirmed that the analytical tools provided an entry point to establish, operationalize and progressively strengthen the functionality of MSPs. Not only did those platforms become more dynamic, they were empowered to improve national oversight of nutrition actions across stakeholders (e.g. Mali and Myanmar). In Zimbabwe, the inventory tool was able to identify shortfalls in UN coordination, spurring corrective action that increased equity in nutrition actions implemented in rural and urban areas. These trends suggest that the UNN tools are integral for scaling up nutrition, and a need to make them increasingly available to SUN and non-SUN countries alike.

99 Read an exclusive interview with the SUN Government Focal Point in Mali to learn more about how the Nutrition Stakeholder and Action Mapping has improved coordination across sectors. Available at https://bit.ly/3qLHzAS.
Demonstrating impact and learning about country experiences has prompted others to come forward. The DHIS2 Symposium, held between 1–17 September 2020, is a prime forum for participants to ask questions and share insights, particularly among countries who already use the District Health Information Software, version 2 (DHIS2). Thanks to UNN-REACH funding from Irish Aid, Abu Mortay Kamara, Monitoring and Evaluation Officer at Sierra Leone’s SUN Secretariat, and Farah Sbytte, from the UNN Secretariat, participated in the virtual symposium, where the UNN tool for Nutrition Stakeholder and Action Mapping was demoed for participants, including decision-makers in government ministries.

The UNN presentation placed an emphasis on how countries have undertaken the mapping exercise and thus applied the DHIS2 software outside the health sector. Examples from Burkina Faso, Lesotho, Mali and Niger were highlighted to show how the findings are being used to guide decision-making at the sub-national level (see Figure 14). Migrating what was formally an Excel-based tool to the DHIS2 platform conferred a series of benefits, particularly automated functions for customization and data analysis. This facilitates efforts to tailor the tool to the country context in terms of which interventions are mapped and at what geographic level. It also expedites the completion of successive rounds of mapping (e.g. annual reiterations) to track progress over time, thereby reducing the financial burden on countries associated with replication. In addition, the tool enables countries to store data on national servers. This means that Government is the custodian of mapping data, further increasing ownership in the exercise as well as related follow-up.
A two-way flow of knowledge. Farah’s participation at the symposium also enabled the UNN Secretariat to keep abreast of new developments and other applications of the DHIS2 software, which could potentially shed light on future enhancements/upgrades for the UNN tool, such as the ongoing integration of budgetary data. Additional colleagues involved in the country mappings will be able to attend the annual DHIS2 conference later this month, organized by the University of Oslo. This event attracts a more technical audience, particularly web developers, and will also help spread the word about the UNN mapping tool and its various uses.
Looking ahead

The impact assessment provided valuable information about the effectiveness and utility of the UNN analytical tools. It also unveiled other striking insights. Among these, the UNN tools were found to have triggered increased commitment to joint efforts, including at sub-national levels. This alone is a positive outcome and merits further exploration. Similarly, the assessment identified areas for improvement, such as leveraging nutrition data that is stored in existing health-related DHIS2 systems for the mapping to further streamline processes and enhance information management. Continued demand, both from countries looking to embark upon these exercises for the first time and those looking to conduct successive rounds to track progress over time, are further testament to their popularity and usefulness. The challenge lies in mobilizing resources to help countries benefit from them. However, with the country-driven ethos of SUN 3.0 and the elevated role of knowledge management, the skies look promising.