



UNN PEOPLE



# A day in the life of a UNN-REACH facilitator

KOU BAAWO IN LIBERIA

Tale 4

The work of a UNN-REACH facilitator can be compared to a skilled juggler – balancing multiple interests and not dropping any of the concerns of various stakeholders – as much as it can be compared to a ringmaster who can keep track of what is happening in multiple locations at the same time. This is what a facilitator manages on a ‘good’ day, when the kinds of obstacles that might interfere with orchestrating a multi-sectoral approach to nutrition are somewhat predictable. Obstacles like funding shortages, an uncollaborative partner or an unexpected drought can be overcome with strategies proven over time.

On 1 May 2020, we (the UN Network Secretariat) spoke to Kou Baawo, the UNN-REACH Facilitator in Liberia since December 2018, who told us about how such obstacles had been shoved to the side by the COVID-19 pandemic. Liberia was in lockdown, with 152 cases. Relative to other countries, this is a low prevalence, but the government was taking necessary precautions, and Kou’s job, as she knew it, was largely on hold. For how long, it was not clear.

This prompted reflection on what this would mean for nutrition governance and how her role would need to adapt. What measures could she take to help ensure that momentum around nutrition was not lost in the face of COVID-19? How could UNN-REACH work, including the analytics, be leveraged and feed into the COVID-19 response?



*UNN-REACH Facilitator, Kou Baawo, stands with House Speaker and other members of the House of Representatives following a meeting about the role of the 54th Legislature in the Nutrition agenda, April 2019*  
 SUN Secretariat Liberia/Mameni L. Morlai

When Kou was interviewed, the UNN-REACH response to COVID-19 was in process. Since then, the country-specific workplan has been approved and includes dissemination of COVID-19 nutrition messages to counties and health facilities and support to national coordination mechanisms with partnering United Nations agencies (FAO and WFP) as well as to establish a new National Food Assistance Agency. Kou's work to strengthen the capacity of Liberia's SUN Secretariat would now entail helping those government staff to host and manage regular meetings through Zoom or Skype. The updated workplan also includes provisions to support resource mobilization for nutrition and continue UNN-REACH processes, such as the Policy and Plan Overview (PPO) and the Nutrition Stakeholder and Action Mapping. In addition, other UNN-REACH processes that involve gathering and travel or missions were restructured.

This article was originally designed to capture the myriad factors a UNN-REACH facilitator contends with on any given day, but the pandemic has changed the nature of the interview, as it is changing much of the world. Instead of a straightforward look at her daily challenges, Kou gave us a picture of her work in context; what it was on that day compared to what it was before the pandemic. Here, in her words, is a picture of her current hurdles, how they contrast with what was happening before COVID-19 and a hypothesis of what the next year might hold.

### **Question 1: *Tell us about today***

**P**ublic offices and schools are closed right now and I am working from home. All REACH activities are on hold until a revision is done to move forward. A conversation with the SUN Secretariat to continue current activities at the multi-sectoral level disclosed that [the] majority of the network members are challenged with adapting to the new way of working since many of them cannot afford internet support from home. These are things we

are thinking about as we revise our plans. We are thinking of sending out email questionnaires to gather more information, instead of face to face meetings.

In Liberia, the majority of Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement MSP<sup>13</sup> staff don't have internet support or smartphones for Zoom or WhatsApp. We've been challenged with that since the lockdown. We haven't been able to meet. We cannot discuss COVID-19 related health messages [sent from headquarters] that we have and want to adapt to the local context. Messages such as, 'What should you do if you're breastfeeding and you're suspected or infected?'

Our government counterparts don't have the technology to continue meetings. We want to support them so we can carry on. Technology is the main hurdle right now. There is a communication platform set up for the COVID-19 context. Whatever communication there is, goes through that platform.

## **Question 2: How was your agenda progressing before the lockdown?**

**R**EACH's presence in Liberia has given the nutrition programme attention and the momentum started rising with REACH presence. REACH reactivated the SUN Secretariat, started by engaging various stakeholders, and holding meetings, and finally they became [a] multi-sectoral platform with membership from all sectors.

Another success was engaging with lawmakers to get their attention for nutrition. During a visit from [the] SUN Global Coordinator [and Assistant Secretary-General], Gerda Verburg, on 7–9 March 2019, she met with the

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<sup>13</sup> MSP stands for multi-sectoral platform.

President. This gave the President the awareness that nutrition is on the global agenda and Liberia is featured. The government has already placed nutrition as a priority, reducing stunting in particular, so there was need to focus and work with the Ministry of Health and the SUN Secretariat to achieve this. The President nominated some top officials we could work with, and in May 2019, we engaged 33 lawmakers.<sup>14</sup> Presently, we have one active nutrition focal person in the House of Representatives. To add, we have started work on developing a multi-sectoral nutrition strategic plan.

Liberia is divided into fifteen counties, engaged through the civil society organizations (CSOs) and SUN civil society alliance, with representatives from health, WASH, education and other sectors. We were able to visit seven counties, where civil society actions on nutrition have started. The engagement we started at the county level was rapidly gaining momentum and [unfortunately it was also interrupted]. In one of the counties, the superintendent was so impressed with the meeting we had with them last January, that he asked for a follow-up meeting with the SUN Secretariat before COVID-19 shut everything down.



*Provision of office supplies and equipment to the Ministry of Health for Liberia's SUN Secretariat, August 2019*

UNN-REACH/Kou Baawo

<sup>14</sup> To learn more, visit <https://www.unnetworkforsun.org/news/un-nutrition-lobbying-starts-pay-liberia>.

### Question 3: Looking towards the future, how will your plan be adapted to the pandemic?

We are planning on pushing activities that cannot be implemented because COVID has pushed everything back one or two steps. That's one reason we are planning on doing a desk review, focusing on "the impact of COVID-19 on the nutrition of vulnerable populations: women and children under-five, especially malnourished children, as well as gender issues." This review is still pending approval from headquarters.



Portrait of Kou Baawo, the UNN-REACH Facilitator in Liberia

Anonymous photographer

One thing we are focusing on now is [keeping] track of existing programs. [For reference], we are using the context of Ebola and considering what was done during that crisis. There was a rapid review of policies and strategies to support the response and development of a national plan involving all sectors; community engagement and involvement; and setting up an Incidence Management Team with the involvement of county authorities. The involvement of all stakeholders, development and implementing partners and donors was an essential part of the response.

We were moving into starting the Nutrition Stakeholder and Action Mapping, but presently that activity has been postponed. Stunting is a frontline issue, but before we engage with that, we wanted a multi-sectoral strategy so that we implement together. All the sectors have different strategies and policies; there is a need to align.

We are in the process of moving the SUN Secretariat focal point into the Office of the President, we were in the process of getting the lawmakers (through the

focal point) to agree to this and support the initiative. If we stop at this point, the progress might be stalled.

Now things are on hold. These important actions we started have to be pushed forward into the coming year. We are not sure how long COVID-19 will last.

#### **Question 4: In light of the current situation, what are your top two asks for nutrition?**

**L**iberia has been recovering from a long-term civil crisis and a broken economy. The population has lived on relief and assistance, followed by the global crisis of COVID-19 in just two years under new government leadership. Liberia is still recovering, and more importantly, major support to nutrition programs is heavily donor-driven. My asks would be that government moves the national development agenda forward in preparation for sustainability. A multi-sectoral strategic response plan for nutrition with a common agenda for sustaining ongoing efforts could make a difference. Finally, in order to reduce stunting, which is now a national priority, it is important to implement nutrition programs from a holistic stance, engaging program actions at all levels of line ministries, agencies and sectors.



While the situation is challenging and there are new complications, Kou continues to persevere. Since the interview, the UNN-REACH supported Policy and Plan Overview<sup>15</sup> was completed, an indication that nutrition processes are moving forward all things considered. The findings highlight prospects for further integrating nutrition in sectoral plans and policies (e.g. health, agriculture, water, education) by better articulating linkages and adding further details on implementation approaches. This outlines a good roadmap for follow-up, which will undoubtedly accelerate as COVID-19 subsides.

<sup>15</sup> Visit <https://bit.ly/3msDqiH> to view the Liberia Policy and Plan Overview.