



UNN PEOPLE

Streamlining progress in Myanmar

TAKEAWAYS FROM THE
SCALING UP NUTRITION –
UN NETWORK RETREAT



Tale 5

From 10–11th February this year, a nutrition-focused retreat was held in Yangon, organized by the country’s United Nations Network. Its purpose was to review collective UN efforts on nutrition in Myanmar over the past three years and to solidify a joint plan to help the government implement the Multi-sectoral National Plan of Action for Nutrition (MS-NPAN). While the event was framed as a UN Network (UNN) retreat, a range of other actors active in the country’s SUN Movement attended to ensure alignment and complementarity.



Group photo of the participants at the UN Network retreat, February 2020

WFP Myanmar

High-level officials from government, development organizations and academia were present, including the Chair of the country UNN, the Director/Global Coordinator of the UN Network, Representatives/Country Directors of each member agency, technical colleagues as well as representatives from the National Nutrition Centre,¹⁶ the SUN Civil Society Alliance (CSA) and the SUN Business Network (SBN). The workshop was funded by UNICEF, the chairing agency of the UNN in Myanmar, with preparations led by the UNN-REACH Facilitator.

On the first day, moderators updated participants on the progress of the SUN Movement and its UN Network as well as the MS-NPAN. Experiences were exchanged along with lessons learned. This was followed by a brainstorming session on UNN priorities for 2020. The second day's agenda included more interactive sessions, covering diverse topics from planning for the next phase of the MS-NPAN to public financing, preparation for high-level events and further efforts to articulate the country UNN's priorities for the year ahead.

Soe Nyi Nyi, the UNN-REACH Facilitator for Myanmar, was pleased that so many stakeholders were in attendance. "It has been three years since the first retreat, which is a long time. We needed to discuss what the network is planning and what we aim to achieve, to choose priorities for the implementation of the MS-NPAN, which runs from 2018–2023. [It also gave us an opportunity] to discuss the challenges we've faced and how to strengthen the network with the government."



UNN-REACH Facilitator, Soe Nyi Nyi, facilitates group work during the retreat, February 2020
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¹⁶ The National Nutrition Centre currently serves as the Secretariat of the country's SUN Movement.

A review of progress from 2015 to the present

The history of government engagement in the nutrition agenda is strong, observed Dr. Purnima Kashyap, Director/Global Coordinator of the UN Network. For example, the creation of the MS-NPAN in 2017–18 was a country-led process. “Myanmar has taken ownership of having the REACH facilitator and they support SUN facilitation. They continue to work on a collective agenda. [The collaboration around the MS-NPAN] wasn’t led by the UN, but this group of stakeholders contributing towards a national plan.”

The ensuing expansion in nutrition programming has led to progress on various fronts. According to figures from the 2020 Global Nutrition Report, Myanmar is on course to meet the global targets for under-five overweight and exclusive breastfeeding.¹⁷ While stunting has declined from just over 40 percent in 1990 to 29 percent in 2016, there remain 1.4 million children under five years of age who are classified as stunted (DHS 2015–16). “At the same time, acute undernutrition, or wasting, remains high affecting 7 percent of preschool children.”¹⁸

Soe led this review during the retreat to help make sure participants were on the same page. The recount started with the initiation of the UNN in 2015 among four United Nations agencies, with membership expanding to four others in 2016. Soe went on to describe how the UNN moved swiftly to support the government with sweeping nutrition stocktaking exercises (also

17 Development Initiatives Poverty Research Ltd. 2019. *Global Nutrition Report; Myanmar country profile*. Available at <https://globalnutritionreport.org/resources/nutrition-profiles/asia/south-eastern-asia/myanmar/>.

18 Government of Myanmar. 2018. *Multi-Sectoral National Plan of Action for Nutrition, 2018–2022*. Ministry of Health and Sports. Available at <https://www.mohs.gov.mm/page/7190>.

known as the UNN analytics), through its technical assistance facility, UNN-REACH. This helped the country develop a nation-owned multi-sectoral/stakeholder nutrition plan to achieve Zero Hunger and enable broader development. Evidence generation and advocacy were continued in 2017 along with the development of a National Nutrition Strategy. By 2018, the MS-NPAN was complete and plans were in motion to devise state and regional level nutrition plans. Then, UNN continued supporting the government on high-level coordination which also involves, United Nations agencies, civil society and donors. In 2019, joint activities, such as updating the Myanmar Food-based Dietary Guidelines and the formation of SBN were initiated, bringing participants up to the current situation.



UN colleagues participate in an interactive exercise to stimulate collective thinking on nutrition, February 2020
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The Outcome - Simplifying the nutrition agenda

One of the needs that emerged from the 2020 retreat is to simplify many action items. Feedback from participants indicated that the current workplan, which reflected the requirements of individual districts instead of the bigger picture, presented challenges for implementation. The agenda needs to be streamlined to issues that will really make a difference. One outcome of the gathering was an agreement to restrict the list to collective actions, instead of including those led by individual agencies.

Purnima relayed a stronger focus on results. “The government was strong on allocating resources, identifying challenges for resources and seeking funding from external sources, as well as looking at greater accountability.” This will help to measure the impact of the MS-NPAN. Retreat participants agreed it should be written with greater accountability incorporated.



UN Network Director/Global Coordinator delivers a motivational speech during the workshop, February 2020
WFP Myanmar

From Myanmar, Soe described the follow-up that was slated to happen on two levels. “The first is the technical level. The main agenda in the technical meeting was how to continue to support the MS-NPAN. This has been happening weekly, using Zoom because of the [COVID-19] pandemic. The second level is at the heads of agency level, which we haven’t been able to organize due to COVID-19. Restrictions are tighter. We are now working virtually but we haven’t met since the retreat.”

Along with the rest of the world, Myanmar has been challenged by the pandemic. The first COVID-19 case was registered in Myanmar on 23 March 2020, which interrupted some of the momentum the conference created. “COVID-19 is creating a ‘new normal,’” Soe reflected. “We are already discussing how to continue. [The first step is to address] challenges with technology on sub-national level to conduct virtual coordination with regions and states.”

After the retreat, Purnima reflected on its impact. “The collective engagement of the UN, government, Business Network, World Bank, donors and civil society was the main take-away from the meeting. They [government officials] were planning the annual workplan in alignment with what the UN would contribute to it. They were looking not only at national engagement but also sub-national. Myanmar has moved into district-level engagement on nutrition.” It will surely take some adjusting to the ‘new normal’, but with the country’s strong commitment to the SUN Movement and determination to succeed, Myanmar is on track to regain its footing and continue to reduce malnutrition in all its forms.

