



## UNN PEOPLE



*Leadership, coordination  
and advocacy hold key  
to strengthen joint action  
for nutrition in Rwanda*

INTERVIEW WITH THE UNRC

*Tale 7*

Rwanda joined the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement in December 2011, one of the early-riser countries. Between 2012–2016, the country received UNN-REACH support, helping to nurture approaches such as joint nutrition programming.<sup>24</sup> The UN Network (UNN) was set up in 2016, after phasing out the REACH country engagement, and comprises five United Nations agencies: the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the World Food Programme (WFP), the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD).

We interviewed Fodé Ndiaye, the United Nations Resident Coordinator (UNRC) in Rwanda since July 2017, on his views regarding nutrition and UN collaboration in the country. Prior to his appointment in Rwanda, Fodé served as the Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator in Niger for five years. The heads of different United Nations agencies in the country supported the preparations for this interview, including Julianna Lindsey (UNICEF); Edith Heines (WFP); Gualbert Gbehounou (FAO); and Dr Kasonde Mwinga (WHO) as well as the Resident Coordinator Office Team Leader, Josephine Ulimwengu.



*Fodé Ndiaye (left), United Nations Resident Coordinator for Rwanda, visits UN programming site on World Food Day, October 2019  
FAO/Teopista Mutesi*

<sup>24</sup> The UNN-REACH (Renewed Efforts Against Child Hunger and undernutrition) initiative was founded in 2008 and has used a multi-sectoral approach to build national capacity in nutrition governance and scaling up actions against malnutrition.

## Question 1: What do you see as the role of the UNRC in nutrition?

The role is centered around leadership, coordination and advocacy. As Resident Coordinator (RC), I lead the work of the UN Country Team, which consists of all the UN heads of agencies, and that is the highest governing body of the UN in Rwanda. Nutrition is an important part of our United Nations Development Assistance Plan 2018–2023 (UNDAP II, now known as the Cooperation Framework), which is aligned with and contributing to the implementation of the National Strategy for Transformation [2017–2024], which in turn, is grounded in the 2030 Agenda and the Africa Agenda 2063.<sup>25</sup> The UNDAP II has an outcome directly linked to nutrition; outcome 3, that “By 2023, People in Rwanda, particularly the most vulnerable, enjoy increased and equitable access to quality education, health, nutrition and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services”. Nutrition is also mainstreamed in the other pillars of the UNDAP II, economic transformation and transformational governance.

An important concrete achievement for the UN in Rwanda within the field of nutrition was the development of the joint UN agency programme, *Effectively Fighting Chronic Malnutrition in Rwanda: Phase I (2013–2018) and Phase II (2018–2023)*, which piggy-backs on the agencies involved in the SUN Movement. This 6.5 million USD programme is supported by the Swiss Development Corporation and UN agencies, including FAO, UNICEF, WHO, WFP and IFAD, lining up with important ministries such as the Ministry of Local Government, Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Agriculture, and of course, the National Early Childhood Development Programme (NECDP). The NECDP is a Government programme with the general mission to coordinate all interventions that support adequate ECD for children from conception to six years of age, as outlined in the Rwanda

<sup>25</sup> Agenda 2063 is the blueprint and master plan for transforming Africa into the global powerhouse of the future. Available at <https://au.int/en/agenda2063>.

Early Childhood Development Policy.<sup>26</sup> We made sure to emphasize these multi-sectoral linkages, even more so in Phase II of the programme, to address stunting in Rwanda. The joint programme has been endorsed by the participating Government entities as well as the Ministry of Finance, and the Government leads the implementation of programme activities and provides in-kind support.



26 NECDP is the national agenda mandated to coordinate inter-sectoral action to implement community-based interventions for nutrition, including growth monitoring and promotion at community level, cooking demonstrations, micronutrient powders to reduce anemia in young children and kitchen gardens to improve dietary diversity.

As RC, I am also representing the UN in different coordination mechanisms, for example co-chairing the quarterly Development Partners Coordination Group (DPCG) meetings and the annual Development Partners Retreat, where government and development partners meet to discuss important matters, including nutrition, related to the development of Rwanda. I bring the UN perspective, but also the perspectives emerging from discussions in the DPC Group via monthly meetings.

## **Question 2: How has the SDG framework and a wider understanding of nutrition helped to galvanize UN collective action?**

The Government of Rwanda has long considered improving nutrition as a top priority. Nutrition is also linked to human capital building, which is key for the country to achieve its development goals. The SDG framework, as I mentioned before, has stressed the importance of applying a multi-sectoral approach that cuts across other goals. At least twelve of the seventeen goals, including SDG2, contain indicators that are highly relevant to nutrition. In the country, we have various sectoral policies and strategies that are aligned with the SDGs and these make a good entry point for UN action in advancing nutrition. Awareness-raising on the Agenda 2030 is also helping to promote sustainable development in line with the Government's 2050 Vision to improve living standards.

The SDGs promote a collective agenda and you can't see any single UN agency being the sole custodian of any SDG – this feeds into the joint process of creating the agencies' Country Programme Documents and a conducive environment for working together. The current situation with COVID-19 has taken a toll on what we are doing, but it has also presented an opportunity to further strengthen the collective elements around supporting relevant action on the Government's development plans, where nutrition is one aspect.

### **Question 3: Can you tell us more about how COVID-19 is affecting UN joint action for nutrition in Rwanda?**

The UN has now finalized its Joint Programme against COVID-19, which was an opportunity for the United Nations to help shape the government's economic recovery plan. The Joint Programme includes a big component on agriculture, food security and nutrition as well as on social protection. Even within the Development Partners Group, we've made sure that nutrition was part of the four sub-groups that have been established to support the fight against COVID-19, especially in the sub-group for social protection and vulnerable people, co-led by UNICEF and DFID, as well as the sub-group for the food security, agriculture and nutrition, led by FAO, WFP and the EU.

These new platforms and the joint work taking place within them have helped us to broaden the stakeholders involved. Through the UN Joint Assessment on the socio-economic impact of COVID-19, some messages and policy recommendations have been shared with the government and national stakeholders, including on food security and nutrition. The UN Network has also supported the rapid analysis data collection to help provide the government with the right data in order to better handle their food distribution during the pandemic.

The Policy Brief from the SUN Secretariat on COVID-19 and nutrition<sup>27</sup> showed us some of the ways that COVID-19 has negatively impacted Rwanda. For example, access to school feeding has been negatively affected by school closures and also the closure of the Early Childhood Development centres [part of the National ECD Programme], places where young children normally have access

<sup>27</sup> SUN Movement Secretariat in collaboration with MQSUN+ and the global SUN networks. 2019. *SUN Movement Information Note on COVID-19 and Nutrition*. Available at [https://scalingupnutrition.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/SUN-COVID-19\\_InformationNote\\_ENG.pdf](https://scalingupnutrition.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/SUN-COVID-19_InformationNote_ENG.pdf); SUN Movement Secretariat. 2019. *COVID-19 and Scaling Up Nutrition Factsheet*. Geneva. Available at [https://scalingupnutrition.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/COVID-19-factsheet\\_NOV\\_EN.pdf](https://scalingupnutrition.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/COVID-19-factsheet_NOV_EN.pdf).

to food at the community level. However, Rwanda's community approach for nutrition is helping the country in the fight against malnutrition.

#### **Question 4: *Has the enhanced role of the UNRC empowered you to foster collective action on nutrition?***

The coordination efforts are supported by a stronger RC Office, with additional human resources in key areas, such as strategic planning and team leadership; economics; development finance and partnership; data management and reporting; and communication and advocacy. We've brought together all the agencies looking at various rights, including the Right to Food; we're coordinating not just on programming but also on policy and advocacy. Some of the joint programmes may not be labelled as nutrition but they still support nutrition. For example, the joint agriculture programme on Rural Women Economic Empowerment covers social and behaviour change communication activities to promote the consumption of nutritious foods among women smallholder farmers, along with the environment and resilient agriculture.

Stunting and anemia are impacting children under five and women of reproductive age more than others; therefore, we have also brought in agencies working with a gender lens perspective, such as UN WOMEN. In all our work, we are determined to reach the most vulnerable – children, women, people with disabilities and others – leaving no one behind.

We are also broadening the work to ensure that UN programmes work in the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus. We support refugees as well as host communities, and we support young entrepreneurs to develop their skills and bring more affordable food to the table. We are also right now starting a new programme in collaboration with the UN in DRC [Democratic Republic of the Congo] on cross-border trade and social cohesion in Rwanda and DRC. An important aspect of the programme is to improve livelihoods for people living in the border areas.

## **Question 5: *How best can nutrition be leveraged within the existing SUN networks in Rwanda?***

Only by applying a multi-sectoral approach, addressing both immediate and underlying factors influencing nutrition, will we be able to improve malnutrition in the country. And effective coordination is key to success. A number of SUN networks are active in Rwanda, including the Civil Society Alliance, the Donor Network and the Academia Network. The technical working group for food, nutrition and WASH is also a coordinating platform. The UN Network is supporting the process of working with the private sector, but a business network has not been set up yet. We are also discussing working with the private sector through other mechanisms, such as the DPCG, not specifically on nutrition but as part of the development agenda and supporting human capital development in the country.



### Question 6: What do you see as the UN Network's recent successes?

We have the development of the new National Nutrition Policy, which has been approved by the Social Ministries Cluster, but the Cabinet still needs to give its final approval. UN agencies have supported the publication of the national Food-based Dietary Guidelines, the integration of nutrition in the updated curriculum for the community health workers and initiating nutritional care for the prevention and management for diet-related noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) at health facility level.

### Question 7: Can you describe some of the remaining challenges for UN engagement in nutrition and how these might be overcome?

Of course, we still have challenges. Current data is showing a decrease in stunting levels in children under five, down from 44 percent in 2010 to 38.2 percent in 2015, but prevalence still remains high, particularly among rural households and in the Western Province (45 percent). The level of wasting declined from 5 percent to 2 percent between 2010 and 2015.<sup>28</sup> We still don't know the full impact that COVID-19 will have on undernutrition.

Other elements to highlight are NCDs which are increasing in Rwanda, including obesity in certain age groups that needs attention.<sup>29</sup> This double burden of malnutrition is being tackled through the Food-based Dietary Guidelines, and also through the quality of nutrition-specific interventions via the health sector

<sup>28</sup> National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda. *Demographic and Health Survey (DHS)*. Available at <https://www.statistics.gov.rw/datasource/demographic-and-health-survey-dhs>.

<sup>29</sup> As of 2015, the national prevalence of under-five overweight is 7.9 percent, which has increased slightly from 6.9 percent in 2010. Meanwhile, 9.3 percent of women and 1.9 percent of men are obese (Development Initiatives Poverty Research Ltd. 2019. *Global Nutrition Report; Rwanda country profile*. Available at <https://globalnutritionreport.org/resources/nutrition-profiles/africa/eastern-africa/rwanda/#profile>).

and scaling up nutrition-sensitive interventions, such as agriculture, WASH and social protection. The UN is playing a key role in this.

The Government also needs to put in place long-term strategies to ensure the procurement of essential nutrition commodities, such as ready-to-use therapeutic foods (RUTFs) and micronutrient powders. The use of data to inform programming also needs to be strengthened. Rwanda is a data-rich country with strong routine monitoring systems, but we have to use them better for policy discussion in order to ensure equitable use of resources. We have a strong partnership with the National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda (NISR). In my opinion, we really have to address issues of sustainability and budget allocation because Rwanda is heavily dependent on external finance through the World Bank and other development partners when it comes to, for example, addressing stunting.

It's really important that we focus efforts on financing. Thanks in part to our advocacy, Rwanda has been included as one of the fifteen countries involved in the Integrated National Financing Framework [INFF], an initiative in the Addis Ababa agenda for action on financing for the SDGs, focusing on domestic resources. The INFF was launched by the Prime Minister [Édouard Ngirente] as part of the UN75 commemoration on 21 September 2020. The Government of Rwanda now has a better understanding of what it will cost to achieve the SDGs, including ending hunger and poverty, and of the financial flows, both the category and the amounts, that the country can tap into.

### **Question 8: *What do you think are some of the lessons learned from these experiences?***

Initially, UN agencies were working in silos with a fragmented approach, but Rwanda has been one of the pilot countries for Delivering as One UN. When we moved towards establishing the UN Network, it enabled

us to work together in a more coordinated approach and to combine resources, increase synergies and avoid overlap and duplication. We no longer have nutrition-specific programmes delivered by individual UN agencies, but rather the joint programme derived from UNDAF II (UNSDCF). This has also triggered resources from the Swiss Development Corporation, to form the basis for the joint programme on stunting.

Another lesson has been the benefits of combining efforts. As RC, I supported three approaches that were relevant to nutrition and accepted by the UNCT. These include: (1) a thematic approach – nutrition was a theme for us to focus our joint efforts; (2) a geographic approach – we started the joint programme in two districts and this yielded some positive results for reducing stunting, for us to build on for next steps; and (3) a wider approach – we went beyond the UN actors and brought in more agencies and institutions but through other lenses, such as gender, youth, governance, etc.



## Question 9: What are the next steps for nutrition in Rwanda?

The UN is now awaiting the Cabinet approval of the new National Nutrition Policy, which was recently developed. Once approved, the UN will support its dissemination to stakeholders and its implementation. There is also a National Food Composition Table in progress, which will be a good reference for professionals and food policymakers. An important next step for the UN Network is to ensure sustainability for nutrition – Rwanda scored lowest in mobilizing resources in the SUN MEAL (65 percent), and we need to strengthen domestic resource mobilization.<sup>30</sup>

As they say in the country of one thousand hills, *turi kumwe*: we are working together to come through this [COVID-19] pandemic, to build back better and to strongly support our nutrition agenda. Coordination, partnership, data and analysis, financing and sustainability remain key!



30 SUN Movement Secretariat. *Rwanda*. Available at <https://scalingupnutrition.org/sun-countries/rwanda/>.