



UNN CAPACITY STRENGTHENING

United Nations agencies  
support Afghanistan's  
Food Security and  
Nutrition Agenda



LOOKING FORWARD TO A NEW ERA

Table 9

*This article is a collaboration between a number of key nutrition actors in Afghanistan, including: **Said Shamsul Islam Shams**, coordinator of the Technical Secretariat of the AFSeN-A; **Maureen L. Gallagher**, until recently Chief of Nutrition for UNICEF Afghanistan and **Zakia Maroof**, a nutrition specialist working with UNICEF; **Muhebullah Latifi**, National Nutrition Coordinator at FAO; and **Muhammad Akbar**, Programme Policy Officer with WFP and **Martin Ahimbisibwe**, Head of the WFP nutrition team in Afghanistan.*

Afghanistan has the potential to make significant progress on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with its rich natural resources and young population. However, the country also faces considerable challenges in terms of complex and protracted conflicts, climate change, gender inequalities and widespread poverty. Some progress has been made in tackling malnutrition but stunting and wasting levels in children under five remain high at nearly 41 percent and 10 percent, respectively.<sup>31</sup>

The country joined the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement in September 2017 and launched the Afghanistan Food Security and Nutrition Agenda (AFSeN-A). Three United Nations agencies – the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the World Food Programme (WFP) – have been active contributors to Afghanistan’s multi-sectoral nutrition response and committed to providing financial support to AFSeN-A’s Technical Secretariat for a minimum of two years. The UN Network is combined with donor partners in Afghanistan and known as the UN-Development Partners Forum.

<sup>31</sup> Development Initiatives Poverty Research Ltd. 2019. *Global Nutrition Report; Afghanistan country profile*. Available at <https://globalnutritionreport.org/resources/nutrition-profiles/asia/southern-asia/afghanistan/>.

## **Question 1: What role has the 'UN Network' played in supporting the development of Afghanistan's multi-sectoral nutrition response?**

There have been three main phases of UN support for nutrition in Afghanistan: before, during and after establishing the Afghanistan Food Security and Nutrition Agenda (AFSeN-A). In the first phase, the support included both nutrition-specific activities and agriculture activities via various platforms. This was followed by a second phase where three United Nations agencies (FAO, UNICEF and WFP) provided technical and financial resources to establish, enable and operationalize the National Technical Secretariat of the Food Security and Nutrition Steering Committee (the multi stakeholder platform, as spelled out in the AFSeN-A). This secretariat was housed within the Office of the Chief Executive from October 2017 to April 2020, which enabled multi-sectoral and high-level engagement with the Government of Afghanistan.

During this period, the three United Nations agencies (set up as the UN-Development Partners Forum) focused on advocacy and technical support to enhance multi-sectoral dialogue and coordination of food security and nutrition (FSN) and preparing a roadmap for the AFSeN-A, including a multi-sectoral strategic plan that has been developed and is being rolled out.

The UN-Development Partners Forum has also played a critical role in enhancing the current capacity of the AFSeN secretariat, particularly with scaling up nutrition coordination at provincial level, although this is still at an early stage. The three agencies have backed up the AFSeN focal point in all provinces where one or all agencies have a presence, resulting in stronger and functional provincial committees in several locations.



**Question 2: *What are the comparative advantages of engaging with the ‘UN Network’ that are not available from other networks?***

Having the three United Nations agencies sitting together as a network has enabled a streamlining of approaches so that organizations were not having parallel conversations with the same body. This has helped to reduce duplication of efforts and double funding, and promoted a strong dynamic relationship between the different agencies, for example, providing joint technical support for the AFSeN strategic plan.

“The ‘UN Network’ shares common objectives and is able to align its operational plans to complement the AFSeN Agenda. This, in turn, is underpinned by the commitment of the United Nations agencies to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and their multi-sectoral approach,” noted Said Shamsul Islam Shams, coordinator of the Technical Secretariat of the AFSeN-A.

### **Question 3: How did the United Nations organize itself to discuss nutrition in Afghanistan?**

The respective agencies found a critical need to work together to strengthen national capacity to address nutrition challenges using a multi-sectoral approach – and establishing the AFSeN secretariat offered an appropriate platform for this. A common agenda was established to further guide national and UN priority actions.

The United Nations agencies therefore organized themselves through existing structures, for example, the Development Partners Forum, with UNICEF and WFP co-chairing the forum on a rotating basis alongside Canada (Global Affairs Canada); the One-UN for Food Security, Nutrition and Livelihoods; and the One-UN for Nutrition (sub-working group). Each agency also co-chairs one of the three working groups established under Afghanistan's Nutrition Executive Committee, overseen by the Deputy Prime Minister. These include: the food security working group (FAO); the nutrition working group (UNICEF); and the public awareness and advocacy working group (WFP). Nutrition is also discussed in the Nutrition Cluster, the Food Security and Agriculture Cluster and various technical working groups.



#### **Question 4: *Has the AFSeN-A Development Partners Forum been effective? If so, in which ways?***

The Forum has achieved a number of milestones, not least helping to develop the AFSeN Strategic Plan (2019–2023) that was signed off by the Government of Afghanistan; creating a national authority to control food quality;<sup>32</sup> and mainstreaming nutrition into legislation. For example, the mandatory fortification of flour and edible oil was ratified in 2018/19 thanks to AFSeN. However, there is no measurement for the Forum’s overall effectiveness. More regular meetings and measurement of tangible outcomes might help to make the nutrition agenda more visible. It has been difficult to get traction for nutrition funding in the country, despite high-level meetings.

#### **Question 5: *How is the UN-Development Partners Forum collaborating with other SUN networks?***

There is collaboration between networks both inside the country and also at the global level. Within the country, the member United Nations agencies have provided various forms of technical assistance to Afghanistan’s Civil Society Alliance. Efforts are in place for the Forum to support the strengthening of the SUN Business Network as a way to advocate for and strengthen nutrition-sensitive food systems and related policies. Nevertheless, there could be improvements in bilateral engagement between stakeholders, who are involved in multi-sectoral platform meetings (currently disrupted due to COVID-19). The Technical Secretariat has been pushing for tangible outcomes, in particular from civil society.

<sup>32</sup> The responsibility and funding were previously split between the Ministry of Public Health and Agriculture.

## **Question 6: How do SUN networks such as the UN-Development Partners Forum need to adapt in the context of fragility and the COVID-19 pandemic?**

**F**ragile states like Afghanistan, with a high proportion of vulnerable people, have been exposed to the effects of COVID-19 in terms of delivery of health and social services, reduced household incomes, broken livelihoods and access to quality diets. However, the pandemic has also brought various stakeholders closer together in establishing ways to improve services to vulnerable people amidst competing government priorities. The SUN networks can take advantage of the strengthened multi-stakeholder platforms and dialogue for innovations to establish more comprehensive approaches and improved service delivery within the COVID-19 response.

“During school closures, UNICEF and WFP have been collaborating on community-based programmes for deworming interventions. The Government is now looking to focus on more home-based care – COVID-19 could be a game changer for increasing community delivery of nutrition interventions in Afghanistan,” says Maureen L. Gallagher, former Chief of Nutrition for UNICEF Afghanistan.

The COVID-19 nutrition response is being coordinated by the United Nations through the Nutrition Cluster. This has included the provision of guidance on programming for various nutrition interventions in context of COVID-19 and adaptation to the local setting, joint resource mobilization for the emergency response, joint advocacy for scaling up treatment and preventive nutrition services, and joint advocacy to reinstate the multi-sectoral coordination secretariat for food security and nutrition (AFSeN).

**Question 7: *What are the challenges for nutrition with the country's new political administration? How are the United Nations agencies collectively working together to support the government to overcome these challenges?***

The announcement of the presidential election results in March 2020 was followed by a political transition that brought about several changes in governance structures. Around the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic set in. As both issues continue amidst other pre-existing issues (e.g. peace, security, education, health and social services delivery), the country faces a number of competing priorities. This has generally slowed the pace of government-led nutrition initiatives as well as the ability of the UN-Development Partners Forum to engage with and support the government.

The 'UN Network' is now working closely with the AFSeN secretariat to ensure that it is reinstated. This effort envisions that the AFSeN secretariat is made financially and operationally sustainable by embedding it in the Government's formal structure (Tashkeel). United Nations agencies have also been providing technical support for the country's COVID-19 operational response and the United Nations Resident Coordinator is a member of the national COVID-19 committee.





### **Question 8: *Can you tell us more about the new governance structures in place for nutrition in Afghanistan?***

**A**n official letter has now been received, confirming that the Administrative Office of the President (AOP) is to house the Technical Secretariat, with a request for financial support from United Nations agencies. Such support for the multi-sector platform (AFSeN-A) is to be provided for a transition period, until the Government determines a sustainable strategy.

The move to the AOP presents another opportunity for the AFSeN secretariat to resume work and retain its multi-sectoral coordination role. Placing it at this high level enables leadership and some influence over other relevant sectors and ministries. It also provides an opportunity to transition into a fully-fledged, government-funded unit or authority.

**Question 9: *What more could be done in the future to improve collective UN engagement in nutrition to support the Government? and how?***

The One-UN approach has been imposed on the United Nations by the Government, but it is debatable as to how much agencies are ready to work as one. At the policy and strategic level, the United Nations mandate in a country should clearly spell out a multi-sectoral approach to nutrition. Is it written in their strategy<sup>33</sup> and are they accountable for it? At the operational level, the ‘UN Network’ could benefit from including more members. For example UN WOMEN and UNDP are not part of the Network.

“In the past, country-level support has been based on the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF). The ‘UN Network’ also needs to have a common country action plan that is aligned to the AFSeN Agenda. This has the potential for United Nations joint action plans to ensure synergy in planning, implementation and co-funding with minimal duplication and a stronger focus on national priorities,” explains Zakia Maroof, a nutrition specialist working with UNICEF.

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<sup>33</sup> The United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework, formerly UNDAF.