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The authors would like to warmly thank their colleagues from civil society throughout West Africa for their fruitful collaboration as well as their continuous commitment in the fight against malnutrition.



Advocating for nutrition in West Africa: The role of SUN Civil Society Alliances

Location: *West Africa*

What we know: Country-level Civil Society Alliances (CSAs) are a key part of the collective action of the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement that advocates to inform and influence government action on nutrition.

What this article adds: In 2013, Action Against Hunger began a three-year programme to build advocacy capacity of CSAs within the West African region and facilitate sharing of advocacy knowledge and experiences. Local civil society actors from 12 countries created a Nutrition Champions Network. Events included three regional workshops themed on advocacy training and lesson learning (2013), budget advocacy and training (2015), and policy analysis, influence and monitoring (2017). Multi-sector advocacy and integration of nutrition objectives into other relevant sectors were cross-cutting themes. Synergies were identified with international initiatives. In 2017 a common regional advocacy workplan for the SUN CSAs in West Africa was agreed, to be delivered in 2017/18. Best practice and country experiences were shared through the Nutrition Champions Network, aided by exchange visits between countries. Challenges include accessing nutrition budget data, monitoring political commitments and lack of funding to sustain the CSAs. Implementation of the action plan and identifying funds are critical next steps.

Introduction

About one million children under the age of five die each year from undernutrition-related causes (Black et al, 2008). Recent estimates show that malnutrition rates remain worryingly high across countries in West Africa. The prevalence of child stunting equals or exceeds 40% in eight countries in the region. More than 16 million children under five are chronically malnourished and 4.6 million children are affected by severe acute malnutrition (SAM) (IFPRI, 2016). It is crucial that assistance is delivered to vulnerable populations to prevent and treat malnutrition and to ensure that every person can fulfil their full potential. As a complement to operational assistance, advocacy is key in the fight against malnutrition. Advocacy enables civil society actors to voice their expectations and priorities and create an enabling environment for the reduction of malnutrition.

All countries in West Africa, with the exception of Cape Verde, are members of the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement, which brings together people from governments, civil society,

the United Nations (UN), donors, businesses and research institutions in a collective effort to improve nutrition.¹ Civil Society Alliances (CSAs) are formed between civil society organisations (CSOs) at country-level to align strategies, programmes and resources with country plans for scaling up nutrition, supported by the global-level Civil Society Network (CSN). In this context, Action Against Hunger began a three-year programme in 2013, funded by the French Development Agency (AFD), to build the advocacy capacity of CSAs within the region and facilitate the sharing of advocacy knowledge and experiences. Local civil society actors from 12 countries (Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Madagascar, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal and Sierra Leone) were gathered to create a Nutrition Champions Network. Their role was to mobilise other stakeholders to act together against malnutrition, create and implement local advocacy plans, influence policies for nutrition, share experiences and participate in country learning exchange visits. All materials and training are delivered in French and English in order to strengthen

regional coherence among English and French-speaking countries.

Regional workshops

Several key events were organised as part of the programme, including week-long regional workshops that gathered approximately 25 members of the CSAs. The first workshop took place in October 2013 and aimed to strengthen the capacities of CSA members through expert advocacy training and the sharing of knowledge and experiences. Advocacy training sessions included subjects such as the advocacy cycle, advocacy targets and tactics and how to advocate within the media and parliament. The second workshop took place in 2015 with the theme of budget advocacy, during which training aimed to build capacity in national budget analysis. It is crucial to get accurate national data on the domestic and international budget allocated to nutrition. As nutrition is multi-sectoral, budget analysis methodologies need to capture expenditure on both nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive

¹ www.scalingupnutrition.org

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SUN Civil Society Training Session in West Africa

activities. Civil society actors are encouraged to conduct 'budget advocacy', to build their messages on quality evidence and to hold government to account. Budget advocacy includes knowledge of the budget cycle, analysis of budget lines of various ministries, meetings with government representatives and parliamentarians, participation in budget definition and budget audit. Action Against Hunger and partners have developed a manual and e-learning to support civil society in engaging in this technical and crucial process.

The third workshop was held in 2017. Training focused on the analysis, influence and monitoring of public policies, which are at the core of the civil society role, including power mapping, analysis and setting targets and developing materials for reaching all audiences. Using the Action Against Hunger advocacy toolkit² and other advocacy tools, such as the RESULTS advocacy tools³, the training combined theoretical learning with case studies, group and individual exercises and role play.

A central theme of all workshops was the value of multi-sector advocacy and how to best integrate nutrition objectives into other relevant sectors, such as health, agriculture and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH). During the 2017 workshop, a session on the multi-sector dimension of nutrition built on previous learning. Participants learned how to influence national agricultural plans to make them nutrition-sensitive, as well as how to integrate WASH issues into a nutrition strategy. These gatherings also triggered discussions on international initiatives, such as how to engage with the SUN Movement and the SUN CSN Secretariat, how to identify opportunities to work together with the African Leaders for Nutrition initiatives, and information on the 'No Wasted Lives Initiative'.⁴ This is important to make sure that information is shared at all levels and to identify synergies between global advocacy and national initiatives. At national level it is also crucial to support SUN CSAs in the building of successful working relationships with SUN Government Focal Points and their multi-stakeholder platforms. These regional-level workshops enabled CSAs from the 12 countries in West Africa to gain useful expertise and knowledge of tools which they can then apply at national level, depending on specific contexts and priorities.

Advocacy priorities for SUN CSAs in West Africa

The latest meeting in 2017 between these 12 West Africa SUN CSAs provided them with the opportunity to agree common priorities and concrete actions on advocacy for nutrition. Participants developed a common regional advocacy workplan for the SUN CSAs in West Africa with the following key objectives:

- *Improve government accountability to meet political and financing commitments for nutrition:* Many commitments have been made by governments at international, regional and national levels that have not so far been respected. It is therefore important to highlight all commitments made and hold decision-makers accountable for reaching them.
- *Improve financing for nutrition in West Africa through funding of national nutrition policies and sector policies:* Domestic financial resources are key to improving the nutrition situation of populations and funding interventions for treatment as well as prevention.
- *Elaborate, implement and monitor public policies that are influenced by civil society in favour of nutrition:* Nutrition-sensitive public policies in all sectors (including agriculture, WASH and health) contribute to creating an enabling environment for nutrition.
- *Strengthen civil society capacities in West*

Africa to speak with one voice: CSOs are major actors in pushing for the recognition of malnutrition and for the mobilisation of decision-makers; therefore the technical and financial advocacy capacities of CSOs must be reinforced.

For each key objective, specific common advocacy activities were identified to be carried out by the regional SUN CSA network during 2017 and 2018. Activities include the development of common advocacy documents for World Bank meetings and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Forums, thematic advocacy documents on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), engagement meetings with parliamentarians, participation in revision of national agricultural plans, and country peer visits and contributions to the SUN Global Gathering. These activities are complemented with indicators to enable the monitoring of the group's progress and achievement. To implement these activities, the Action Against Hunger West Africa Office supports the coordination and flow of information among CSA focal points. A monthly call is facilitated to provide updates on recent developments and upcoming activities. The network is self-sufficient and relies on common will to learn from others and share national experience.

Sharing advocacy country experiences

Through this Nutrition Champions Network it is also possible for actors involved to share best practices and feedback on national experiences. Learning from experiences between peers may be the best way to advance advocacy, avoid duplication of effort and make relevant decisions (see Box 1 for Nutrition Champion feedback). The following provides examples of the kind of national experiences that are shared:

The SUN CSA focal point in Mali shared his experience of creating a network of parliamentarians in favour of nutrition, which has been

² www.actioncontrelafaim.org/fr/actualites/publications

³ www.results.org/skills_center/activist_toolkit/

⁴ <https://www.nowastedlives.org/>

⁵ Available on request from the Action Against Hunger West Africa Regional Office, Iserra@wa.acfspain.org



Participants of a SUN Civil Society Alliance training workshop

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Group work at a SUN Civil Society training workshop in West Africa

active since 2015. Parliamentarians are invited to request the government to implement its international commitments for nutrition, follow the implementation of the National Nutrition Policy by 2021, and adopt new legislative measures in favour of nutrition (such as gratuity of care for nutrition, which enables children under five years of age to get free treatment for malnutrition in health centres). This has been useful for other countries, such as Niger, where a network of parliamentarians for nutrition is being created.

Representatives from Sierra Leone, Burkina Faso, Senegal and Mauritania gave examples of influencing their government to increase the nutrition budget with development of a specific nutrition budget line to help track this. In Burkina Faso the SUN CSA has advocated for this since 2015. Building on these country experiences, the Senegal SUN CSA, Action Against Hunger and Save the Children (SC) produced a manual for budget advocacy that can be used for any SUN CSA who wants to engage in similar long-term advocacy.

In Senegal, the SUN CSA platform, together with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and Action Against Hunger, organised a two-day training for civil society actors, including small producers, to strengthen their capacities to link agriculture and nutrition. This enabled them to influence the National Agricultural Investment Plan, which is being revised by the

government, and to ensure that the nutrition dimension was well accounted for. They agreed on a common declaration including clear advocacy messages to be used by all actors in the process.

A very recent experience is the creation of the SUN civil society platform in Liberia. Civil society actors have been active since 2013 and have advocated together for nutrition. Liberia has benefited from the experience of established CSAs and has been inspired by their example.

To support the sharing of country-level experiences, exchange visits have also taken place between Burkina Faso and Niger; Burkina Faso, Mauritania and Guinea; and Burkina Faso and Chad. Consequently, the SUN CSA was created in Burkina Faso; a strategy for community awareness on undernutrition has been strengthened in Mauritania and Guinea; and a common advocacy strategy has been drafted between Niger and Burkina Faso.

Challenges and next steps

Challenges are faced by SUN CSAs at national level and within the regional network. The SUN CSAs discuss these challenges during the regional workshops and monthly phone calls and propose solutions to overcome them.

One common issue SUN CSAs face is the difficulty in accessing information on nutrition

budgets and monitoring political commitments (such as Nutrition for Growth commitments) by governments and international donors. Data are rarely accessible and reliable and representatives must invest time and resources to get this evidence to build their advocacy. This can be improved by following thorough budget-advocacy steps or targeting relevant actors who are likely to keep this information.

Another difficulty is the lack of financing for SUN CSAs. They depend on funding from donors (including the Multi-Partner Trust Fund (MPTF) and the New Venture Fund), which is rarely long-term funding and does not support all the CSAs. This prevents SUN CSAs from conducting longer-term advocacy activities and sustaining their efforts by building on previous work through thorough monitoring. Likewise, the regional coordination of the network is not funded and is currently managed by Action Against Hunger on top of other activities. This regional dimension is of utmost importance for the SUN CSN and should be reinforced to allow optimal coordination and achieve impact at national level.

In terms of next steps it is crucial that the action plan of West Africa SUN CSAs is implemented through 2017 and 2018. This will consolidate the regional network and capitalise on the current dynamic. It is also important to define a clear funding strategy to support a continuation of this work and to facilitate more of the much appreciated regional workshops.

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Members of SUN Civil Society Alliances in West Africa