

Building parliamentary networks for nutrition in West Africa



An increasing number of countries are recognising the potential role that parliamentarians can play in highlighting nutrition. ENN's **Ambarka Youssoufane** interviewed some of the members of parliament (MPs) from Chad and Burkina Faso to find out their thoughts on advocating to improve the nutrition situation within their countries and throughout the region.

MPs working together at the regional level

A west and central Africa regional parliamentary network for nutrition was set up in 2013 following a nutrition workshop in Brazzaville, Republic of Congo, with initial membership from 10 countries (Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Chad, Central African Republic, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Senegal) participating. A number of countries, including Burkina Faso and Chad, initiated country-level parliamentary networks following this meeting, but it has been challenging for countries to take leadership in this and to move the nutrition agenda forward at parliamentary level.

The regional office of Action Against Hunger (ACF) also started supporting countries and the regional network, organising a side event during the 2016 launch of the Global Nutrition Report in west Africa to sensitise parliamentarians on nutrition issues in the region and to encourage advocacy for nutrition. A 2017 joint meeting of parliamentarians from 20 countries (co-hosted by UNICEF, the inter-Parliamentarian Union and Alive & Thrive) focused on four main themes:

1. The significance of nutrition security for development and economic growth;
2. The problems of undernutrition (stunting, wasting and micronutrient deficiencies), the emerging concern of childhood overweight and obesity in the region and examples of success in addressing them;
3. Overcoming structural and environmental barriers to nutrition and how parliaments can leverage their powers

4. Creating political commitment in taking a pro-nutrition agenda forward.

All participating parliamentarians committed to create or strengthen existing networks in their respective countries and to a set of two or three engagements in each country. To date 11 out of the 20 have set up a national parliamentary network for nutrition. Many of them were able to organise feedback on the regional meeting to their national parliament and some have even organised advocacy activities.

Setting up a parliamentary network is particularly challenging, given that parliamentarians do not have extensive knowledge of nutrition, have a high turnover rate and lack funding to organise themselves or conduct advocacy activities. Partners such as UNICEF, ACF and the SUN civil society networks have carried out some capacity building training, but there is a high turnover rate in parliaments. In Senegal, for example, some of the initial network leaders have not been re-elected. The support of external partners such as UNICEF is crucial to developing a parliamentary network for nutrition. In Senegal, they have produced a guide to action by parliamentarians for nutrition to overcome the challenges of parliamentary turnover and nutrition knowledge.



Participants of the IPU/UNICEF Seminar on investing in nutrition with members of parliament at the Parliamentarian Seminar 2017, Burkina Faso

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In Lake Chad, the focus is gradually shifting from emergency relief to strengthening the country's long-term resilience

Chad



Three MPs who are also members of the country's Parliamentary Network for nutrition (from left Rakis Ahmed Saleh, Selguet Achta Aguidi and Sodja Addjobma Nikamor) attended the first meeting of the West and Central African network in 2013, which prompted them to set up their own country network. This has grown from nine members in 2014 to a current membership of 22 MPs, due in part to information and awareness days for parliamentarians organised by the network.

"I must admit that, as Chadian parliamentarians, we were ignorant of the problem when we arrived in Brazzaville. It was through the discussions that we became aware of the seriousness of the situation and of the problem that existed in many of our regions. From the presentations, we learned that the situation here was very serious. We had not really been aware of it before. When we got home, we reported the issue to the President of the Assembly, both in writing and in person." (Rakis Ahmed Saleh)

Network members have been actively involved in the development of the national food and nutrition policy, attending meetings with various government ministries. MPs have also visited nine of the country's 23 regions accompanied by UNICEF, reporting on these missions to the network and the National Assembly on what they describe as the "raging malnutrition problem" in the country. These reports will feed into the nutrition action plan, which is being finalised.

"We organised a caravan to N'Djamena, visiting the three main hospitals to familiarise ourselves with the situation of hospitalised malnourished children. We were struck by the alarming state of these children on arrival, some suffering from chronic malnutrition and some from moderate or incipient malnutrition. Following these hospital visits, we scheduled some regional visits." (Selguet Achta Aguidi)

The parliamentarians stressed that these visits were not one-offs: they saw their role as raising awareness among the relevant authorities in each region to take over responsibility for monitoring activities to combat malnutrition, and that the MPs would be following up on such actions. Some regions

already have nutrition committees on the ground, but MPs have a role in awareness raising. Parliamentarians can support or encourage administrators to set up frameworks where they do not already exist.

"There are focal points at regional, departmental and sub-prefecture levels. We lobby governmental and decentralised authorities. We support government action. We complement it – indeed, we help to raise awareness about this scourge. On the ground we have also seen that we are getting the message out there, the call to tackle malnutrition, in a variety of ways. We also see that the local authorities are somewhat lacking in knowledge, but thanks to us they are learning how serious the situation is. We feel that the message at this level is very important." (Sodja Addjobma Nikamor)

The MPs stressed the importance of raising awareness about exclusive breastfeeding and nutrition during the first 1,000 days of life; without such an understanding among parents, communities, healthcare and social workers, they felt that "even if we vote for an additional budgetary provision, without awareness that would be a wasted effort." Initiatives such as community radio with broadcasts on nutrition in local dialects can be useful in disseminating education messages.

The network is currently involved in a number of initiatives, including drafting a bill to penalise the import and sale of non-iodised salt; legislation for applying the marketing code for breastmilk substitutes; and legislation for the fortification of foods with iron, folic acid and vitamin A. They have also considered proposing a bill to prohibit the marketing of Plumpy'Nut, the therapeutic food used to treat children with malnutrition, which they have been informed was widely available for sale but being used by adults.



Burkina Faso

Excerpts from an interview with **Gnomou Nissan Boureima** (left), a parliamentarian and Mayor of Houndé, a department of the province of Tuy in the Haut-bassin region in the west of the country, who trained as a nutritionist at the University of Constantine in Algeria.

What is your role in the parliamentary network for nutrition of Burkina Faso (BF)? How was it created?

I am the coordinator of the parliamentary network for nutrition in Burkina Faso. After graduating from university, I joined the Directorate of Nutrition at the Ministry of Health for seven years. In 2015 I was elected as a parliamentarian in the National Assembly and I thought that the best way to move the nutrition agenda is to create a parliamentary network for nutrition. The network was created in 2016 and now has 35 members.

What is the objective of the BF parliamentary network for nutrition?

The network's aim is to promote nutrition and contribute to the fight against malnutrition from the National Assembly perspective. Parliamentarians can make the government fund nutrition interventions to fight malnutrition, in addition to donor funding. Currently, most nutrition interventions in the country are funded by external donors, but this funding is not sustainable and we need to get the government to consider nutrition as a development priority.

How is the network working to achieve its objectives? What activities have been organised to date?

None of the parliamentarians are nutritionists (although some are health professionals), so one of the first activities was to sensitise our fellow parliamentarians about nutrition, with the help of the SUN networks (the UN network, the civil society network and the government focal point). The parliamentary network has been working to develop and adopt laws on nutrition, such as enforcing the International Code on the Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes and measures to exclude the raw materials for producing ready-to-use therapeutic food from taxes. We have also succeeded

in adopting a nutrition budget line for nutrition under the 2016 finance law, which started with one billion CFA (US\$1.75 million) and is planned to increase to three billion CFA (US\$5.25 million) in 2020.

Is the parliamentary network part of the SUN Movement in BF?

Yes, we participate in the SUN multi-sector platform activities, including developing the national multi-sector nutrition action plan and the food security policy. I personally take part in the SUN country call with the SUN focal point and other network coordinators.

What relationship do you have with other parliamentarians outside BF?

In west and central Africa we have created a regional network for nutrition and we held an event here in BF to bring together parliamentarians from 20 countries. We have also had discussions with Peru, where parliamentarians were able to make the government reduce the rate of malnutrition through ambitious nutrition interventions.

As a network, do you have external support?

Yes, we have support from the SUN civil society network, which provided information and financial support to participate in international workshops. The SUN UN network also supported us in organising the parliamentarians' sensitisation workshop in BF.

Is the cause of nutrition heard by government? By parliament?

In parliament we are heard very well, but within the government it's just starting. I came from the government side and joined parliament, so I know that nutrition is diluted within the health sector. Nutrition is just starting to be heard by the government, because, for example in the Ministry of Health, a budget line has been created for nutrition and was even mobilised. However, it remains for us to create a budget line for each nutrition-sensitive ministry, such as agriculture, etc.

What are the factors that allowed for the creation of a budget line for nutrition?

The advocacy conducted by the SUN civil society network and supported by the parliamentary network was able to convince some parliamentarians to support the idea. There was also a favourable environment due to the fact that a new development plan was adopted in BF, one of the objectives of which was to develop human capital in the country. So, we started by saying there is no way the government can develop human capital without fighting malnutrition. This logic was understood by the government, which accepted to create a budget at least at the Ministry of Health level. We will need to use other tools to get the government to create nutrition budget lines in other nutrition-sensitive ministries.



Mid upper arm circumference (MUAC) measurements being taken at a clinic in Burkina Faso to assess nutritional status

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