

DEVELOPING NUTRITION AWARENESS IN MYANMAR TO REDUCE MALNUTRITION

In spite of its strong macroeconomic growth and poverty reduction efforts over the past decade, Myanmar continues to suffer from high prevalence of maternal and child undernutrition. While stunting or chronic undernutrition has declined from over 40% in 1990 to 29.2% in 2016, there are still 1.4 million children under five-years-old who are stunted (DHS 2015-16). Acute undernutrition, or wasting, remains high, affecting 7% of preschool children. Micronutrient deficiencies are also a cause for concern, with anemia affecting 57.8% children (6 to 59 months) and 46.5% women. The prevalence of low birth weight (LBW) is at 8.1%, which is an important indicator in maternal and child nutrition since it is the direct result of poor nutrition in pregnancy. Adolescent mothers are at higher risk of having LBW babies, and every year, more than 50,000 teenage girls give birth in Myanmar. The four manifestations of maternal and child undernutrition (stunting, wasting, micronutrient deficiencies, and LBW) each have unique etiologies and require distinct approaches to be addressed.

The Scaling Up Nutrition Civil Society Alliance (SUN CSA) Myanmar was launched in February 2015 to unite civil society organizations (CSOs) and amplify the voice of small, independent, sub-national, and national organizations to end malnutrition in all its forms. In 2016, World Vision, with the support of the Steering Committee, organized a sub-national SUN CSA in the Ayeyarwaddy Delta Region.¹

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the SUN multi-sectoral platform adopted COVID-19 health guidelines for its plans and activities. While the Multi-Sectoral National Plan of Action on Nutrition (MS-NPAN) also adopted COVID-19 measures in its processes, Myanmar's nutrition agenda did not materialize due to the political turmoil caused by the February 2021 coup. Thereby, SUN CSA was unable to engage with parliamentarians and the media to strengthen the visibility of nutrition needs in communities.

Efforts to promote nutrition awareness

SUN CSA Myanmar built its credibility and strengthened its presence at national and regional levels to become a key stakeholder in shaping national nutrition plans and programs and in engaging with

SUN multi-stakeholder platforms and the Myanmar Nutrition Technical Network.



SUN CSA engaged in the development of the Multi-sectoral National Plan of Action on Nutrition in 2018

The alliance was involved in nutrition promotion activities: the nutrition radio program of the National Nutrition Center (NNC) of the Ministry of Health and Sports; celebration of the nutrition promotion month led by the Yangon Regional Health Department; the nutrition promotion public event of the UNOPS Livelihood and Food Security Trust Fund held at People's Park in Yangon; and community nutrition promotion campaigns held every August with the sub-national SUN CSA. During the nutrition promotion month in 2020, the alliance held the Nutrition Can't Wait Campaign and a nutrition article writing contest.

SUN CSA Myanmar also supported the NNC and UN REACH in collecting data for Myanmar's first national Nutrition Stocktaking Exercise to map current programs and policies and inform a national nutrition strategy. This was presented at the symposium Building Nutrition Agenda hosted by the Department of Medical Research.

The alliance joined multi-stakeholder platform meetings to produce evidence-based documents on nutrition policies and programming. Breastmilk substitute (BMS) reports were developed, as well as a case study titled, "Final report from BMS study tour to Vietnam and Myanmar, SUN CSA Myanmar Statement in Support of Stronger Regulation and Enforcement of the Order of Marketing Formulated Food for Infant and Young Child in Myanmar." Key messages were disseminated via media articles, radio and television

¹ <https://www.suncsamyanmar.org/sun-csa-decentralization-lessons-learned-from-ayeyarwaddy-delta-regional-sun-csa/#:~:text=SUN%20CSA%20Myanmar%20was%20formalized,SUN%20CSA%20Ayeyarwaddy%20Delta%20Region.>

spots or interviews, and social media posts. The case study was also featured in the September 2017 Global Babies Before Profit report.

With the alliance's active support in nutrition awareness, the NNC endorsed SUN CSA Myanmar to Yale University as the government's partner in pilot-testing the Becoming Breastfeeding Friendly (BBF) Initiative in 2017.



At the Becoming Breastfeeding Friendly Initiative in 2017

Becoming Breastfeeding Friendly (BBF) Initiative

The BBF initiative enabled the country to assess its readiness to scale up breastfeeding protection, promotion, and support. Based on the implementation lessons of the project, nine priority policy recommendations were synthesized to make Myanmar a more breastfeeding friendly country. This was presented to more than 200 stakeholders composed of high-level officials and decision makers from the government, parliamentarians, development partners, and media during the 2018 National Nutrition Promotion Month.²

In 2017, SUN-CSA Myanmar held activities that are congruent to the BBF project. A press conference was held where Save the Children, the lead convener, launched its report, "Don't Push It". It uncovers the aggressive marketing activities of six global BMS companies, which together own more than half of the market.³ The alliance called on the industry to publicly commit in upholding the international Code, which prevents companies from promoting milk formulas. The press conference was attended by representatives from government agencies like the Food and Drug Administration, UNICEF, mothers and lactation experts, and media from 24 agencies. The 5th BBF Meeting was organized on 27th August 2018 in Mandalay where BBF recommendations, a policy brief, and a complete policy report were launched.

Parliamentarians participated in the Nutrition Consultation Meeting of the Ayeyawaddy Regional Parliament on 19th February 2019 and engaged in taking nutrition promotion forward. Local-level advocacy workshops were planned to equip CSOs on effective engagement with parliamentarians, followed

by advocacy/consultation workshops with members of Parliament in early 2021 but these were curbed by the Military Junta.



Nutrition Consultation Meeting with Ayeyawaddy Regional Parliament in 2019

During Breastfeeding Week, the alliance launched a media program titled, "Potential influence of the marketing strategy used by formula milk companies on perception of infant feeding practice for children under 2 years old in Yangon region". This was developed in three languages.



Stakeholder endorsement to scale up breastfeeding in 2018

In March 2019, SUN CSA Myanmar held a nutrition advocacy workshop with media, which focused on reporting nutrition issues and supporting working mothers to breastfeed. This media workshop was planned annually starting from 2021 but was also curbed by the current political situation.



Nutrition Advocacy Workshop with the media

Building capacities of the CSA and its members

SUN-CSA Myanmar provided technical and capacity building trainings to members on Basic Nutrition, 1000 Days Nutrition, Designing for Behavioral Change,

² <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31403109/>

³ Save the Children, Don't Push It: Why the Formula Milk Industry Must Clean Up Its Act (Save the Children 2018).

and Basic MEAL Nutrition and Facilitation. From June to December 2020, 12 member organizations were trained and from January to June 2021, trainings on Designing for Behavioral Change and Basic MEAL Nutrition for 36 member organizations (51% of total 70 CSA member organizations in 2020) were facilitated.

In 2019, the SUN CSA Myanmar secretariat assessed the operational capacity of members in implementing nutrition specific and sensitive interventions and in engaging with the MS-NPAN. The alliance carried out an online survey on capacity resource mapping participated by 26 members and self-administered questions on the same topic answered by 10 members. Meanwhile, an online survey about the engagement status of members with MS-NPAN was also carried out, with 21 members responding and 11 members answering self-administered questions on the same topic. From the results, it was recommended that SUN CSA build the capacity of members to engage with MS-NPAN interventions to support nutrition guidelines and protocols, coordinate access for nutrition service delivery, encourage the MEAL system, and promote engagement with relevant stakeholders.

SUN-CSA Myanmar also participated in two regional discussions: the 2017 Asia Region Civil Society Workshop hosted by SUN CSA Indonesia and the 2017 Asia Regional Learning Exchange in Nepal. SUN-CSA Myanmar also joined the regional conference “Creating Breastfeeding-Friendly Health Systems in the ASEAN Region and Beyond” in 2018. Through the technical assistance of Action Sprout, the CSA was also able to share updates with members and external stakeholders through the improved SUN CSA Myanmar Facebook page, which now has more than 2500 followers.

Continuing nutrition advocacy and involvement in multi-stakeholder platforms

The alliance (through the Secretariat, Chair, and Co-Chair) represents the civil society sector in Multi-stakeholder Platform (MSP) meetings, providing inputs to the MS-NPAN in 2018. LIFT funded SUN CSA Myanmar’s Phase III of the three-year project Leveraging Essential Nutrition Actions for Reducing Malnutrition (LEARN), which will end on May 2023.

SUN CSA Myanmar’s continuous efforts to make Myanmar breastfeeding friendly could be one of the contributing factors in the increase of exclusive breastfed infants (0 to 5 months) to 51.2% and the reduction of under-five stunting to 29.4% in 2019.⁴

Lessons learned

Regular coordination is key to keep the movement active and aligned. As membership grew in 2015-2016, maintaining their engagement became more challenging, especially when the organizational focal persons leave without sufficient endorsement to their successor. The alliance was able to keep the movement active and aligned by holding annual CSA

meetings, general assembly, and quarterly sharing sessions. In 2018, regular coordination meetings were held for Steering Committees at national level and sub-national levels, along with other SUN Networks and national nutrition clusters.

Lessons and experiences of CSAs are worth sharing with alliances and nutrition advocates. SUN CSA Myanmar shared its achievements and challenges in five short interviews published by the Emergency Nutrition Network (ENN). Increasing membership was a challenge at first. Some organizations, especially international NGOs who are strong and active, require higher level approval within their organization to join the alliance whereas some local NGOs and grassroots community-based organizations do not respond to emails and phone calls from the secretariat. Nevertheless, SUN-CSA Myanmar was able to increase memberships, reaching 70 members in 2020.

The SUN-CSA Myanmar Chair also presented a case study highlighting successes, progress and lessons learned during the 2017 Asia Region Civil Society Workshop hosted by Indonesia’s SUN CSA. Moreover, member exchange learning visits were arranged for cross learning and sharing among CSA members on specific nutrition issues.

What’s next for SUN-CSA Myanmar?

The recent coup d’etat and COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the communication lines and coordination within the alliance and constrained the alliance’s engagements with parliamentarians and the media. Nevertheless, SUN CSA Myanmar adapted four priorities in 2021: 1) strengthening capacity of CSA members on both technical and institutional capacity development; 2) reviewing SUN CSA Myanmar’s current set up for system strengthening and sustainability of the network; 3) knowledge sharing and learning among CSA members at the national and regional levels to enhance CSO engagement; and 4) strengthening community monitoring and reporting of BMS violations.

From 2019, SUN CSA Myanmar supported the mobilization workshop for MS-NPAN’s implementation in different states and regions. But since the coup, there have been no proper legitimization, leadership, and involvement from government agencies. After coup in March 2021, the SUN UN network facilitated meetings with nutrition stakeholders and networks in Myanmar to consult on “Adapting MS-NPAN”, with SUN CSA engaging with nutrition stakeholders.

It’s challenging to gather key information on policies and budgets from external stakeholders due to the lack of human resources, bureaucracy, red tapes, and weak communication within government departments. Still, the alliance continues to support nutrition advocacy and CSO engagement, strengthening both nutrition specific and nutrition-sensitive programs of CSOs in Myanmar, and supporting the MS-NPAN.