

Making the most of challenges:

the development of SBN Yemen



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Despite political instability and an unstable environment, the Scaling Up Nutrition movement in Yemen is working hard to tackle malnutrition. By engaging donors, forming relationships with the private sector, and generating awareness of Yemen's nutrition crisis, this team is transforming challenges into opportunities for the sake of their country's health.

The conflict in Yemen has been dubbed by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) as the largest humanitarian crisis in the world, with the escalation of the current situation leaving 24 million people in need of humanitarian assistance. Meanwhile, nearly 2.3 million children under the age of five in the country are projected to suffer from acute malnutrition in 2021. Amid these critical circumstances, the resilience of the people has become central to the survival and recovery of the nation and its population.

This has been demonstrated through the determination of the country's Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Secretariat to harness opportunities to engage the private sector in addressing the critical nutrition situation through the establishment of a SUN Business Network (SBN). It was clear from the beginning that this project would be characterised by determination and enthusiasm as, despite initial hesitancy among donors to establish an SBN in such a fragile context, members of SUN Yemen saw an abundance of opportunity.

Seizing new opportunities

Two years after the escalation of the conflict in Yemen in 2015, the country transitioned from the initial 'shock' phase – when the population was firmly entrenched in 'survival' mode – to the 'resilience' phase, in which people began looking to recovery and thinking about long-term solutions. This phase saw many people start their own small businesses as existing employment

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SUN Yemen's Planning and
Liaison Specialist

opportunities diminished, and the sector to which most of these budding entrepreneurs turned was nutrition and food production. As Karima Ahmed Al-Hada'a, SUN Yemen's Planning and Liaison Specialist explains, "in conflict, the only thing that people cannot stop doing is eating."

However, despite the increased quantity of food being produced and sold by these enterprises, the nutritional quality was often inadequate: they were produced with poor food safety practices, and contained an abundance of additives and chemicals. The SUN Yemen team saw this as an opportunity for the SUN Movement to target these small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and support them in making their products healthier for the public; in turn improving the nutrition of surrounding communities. The ambition to develop SBN Yemen was more of a response to the flourishing SME and start-up sector than a goal to create one and, as such, the Secretariat had the chance to support individuals already passionate about contributing to food and nutrition security in the country and transfer knowledge from outside Yemen into this arena.

In addition to the burgeoning business sector, Yemen is filled with development agencies willing and able to invest in the country's recovery. Organisations such as the World Food Programme (WFP), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the World Bank were already present and working on resilience programmes such as employment



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enhancement, farmer support initiatives, women and youth empowerment, and the provision of training, materials and brands to small businesses in the food industry. However, these programmes lacked emphasis on good nutrition, food safety and hygiene. This confirmed to SUN Yemen that it was important to create an SBN while SMEs were flourishing, people were trying to work in the food sector, and donors were present and willing to invest.

Partnering for power

Expanding on their existing relationship with UNICEF, SUN Yemen partnered with the organisation to initiate the establishment phase of Yemen's SBN. During this phase, a task force was formed from different ministries, sectors and stakeholders to ensure that a wide variety of perspectives and priorities were considered. Meetings and workshops were held with government ministries, stakeholders, the Chamber of Commerce and the business sector, which fuelled engagement and excitement among each of these sectors. Business owners especially found the presentations enlightening and interesting, having been unaware of the staggering extent to which malnutrition and stunting affects the Yemeni population.

The establishment phase generated significant momentum within the business community, especially amongst female business owners, and the response was heartening. It was clear that, despite the risks of the conflict-affected environment, business owners are present and committed and require support and training.

Strength in the face of adversity

Throughout its development, SBN Yemen has faced a number of significant challenges – above those inherent to the hostile, conflict-affected environment in which it exists. The major problem is the nation's fragmented government: a lack of legitimacy to its new structure means that governmental departments and agencies do not yield the same power as they once did. This was a primary reason behind the initial hesitancy and lack of enthusiasm among donors to invest, which hindered the SUN team's efforts in establishing the network and even resulted in members working without designated salaries.

A lack of technical capacity in the country was another significant issue, as Karima and her colleagues searched for food and nutrition experts who could provide support

and knowledge in areas such as labelling and food safety that the network could pass onto enterprises. It was discovered this expertise simply did not exist in the country, so the technical assistance the team hoped to obtain from the onset was not possible.

Lastly, although no less devastating, was the impact of COVID-19 on the initiative. Meetings and workshops could not take place as governmental and UN-implemented restrictions meant no more than 15 people could gather, while previously overlooked underdeveloped hygiene procedures became more crucial than ever as efforts to contain the virus escalated.

Prosperity in ever-changing landscapes

The secret to SBN Yemen's success is the adaptability of the people behind it, and their perspective on the challenges they face. Karima

whole-heartedly emphasises the importance of this resilient mindset, insisting that "most challenges can be converted into opportunities." Examples of this are abundant in the case of SBN Yemen: the country's lack of technical knowledge presented an opportunity to develop this capacity; the impacts of COVID-19 gave the team a chance to teach enterprises how to adapt to the new conditions; and the lack of nutrition-related initiatives being implemented by the fragmented government was perceived as a vital gap ready to be filled.

As a nation, Yemen is no stranger to challenging conditions, and the SUN Yemen team embodies the spirit of resilience in the face of these. It is with this attitude of perseverance that the team will move forward, as they now hope to partner with WFP to support the growing number of SMEs in the food system and improve the nutrition of their nation as a whole.



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