

Engagement for a prosperous Nigeria:

devising state-specific initiatives to tackle malnutrition



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In 2020, Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Business Network (SBN) Nigeria began a training initiative to build the skills and knowledge of SBN members, and other small- and medium-scale enterprises (SMEs), to help businesses support the government's aim of tackling national malnutrition. The initial training consisted of a funding master class and a food safety and nutrition workshop. This case study looks at the initiative in more detail, focusing on the Kano and Cross River states, to understand how it seeks to align the public and private sectors on the issue of malnutrition.

Food insecurity and malnutrition are significant concerns in Nigeria. Over a third of children under the age of five experience stunting, and one in eight do not live to see their fifth birthday. Maternal death rates are also high, at one in 30 women, while 11% of women are underweight and 28% are overweight or obese.

These issues have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, as its knock-on effects have caused food prices to rise and made nutritious food more difficult to access. Furthermore, in the north-west of the country, armed conflict by militant Islamist group Boko Haram has resulted in two million people being internally displaced and at risk of starvation.

The Government of Nigeria has long recognised the importance of nutrition and its role in development – and is thus committed to addressing the issues of malnutrition. As such, the National Multisectoral Plan of Action for Food and Nutrition 2019-2023 is currently in place, which aims to reduce malnutrition and stunting and increase the rates of exclusive breastfeeding.

To support this, SBN Nigeria is assisting local governments and businesses in Kano and Cross River states with strategy creation, education and training workshops, and crop fortification.

Obstacles to overcome

The states of Kano and Cross River in the north-west and south-east of Nigeria, respectively, are both impacted by food insecurity and malnutrition. However, these are driven by notably different social and nutritional contexts.

In Kano, many agricultural-focused small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) face difficulties obtaining loans or grants with which to start, register, or improve their businesses – in turn, meaning they're unable to offer more nutritious food. A lack of labour is also an issue, as the social and cultural restrictions of this mainly Muslim area mean that only men are allowed to be involved in agricultural production and associated work.

In Cross River, food storage and preservation are the primary concerns. Cold storage facilities for harvested product are typically unavailable, leading to high levels of food waste – an issue compounded by infrastructure challenges, such as poor roads linking farmers, off-takers, and markets. Education and awareness around the importance of good nutrition, food safety, packaging, and preservation, is also lacking among smaller SMEs.

The government has already launched various initiatives in Cross River State to help tackle these problems. For example, primary healthcare centres have been educating pregnant women on the importance of breastfeeding and complementary feeding practices for after their child is six months of age, and school programmes have been rolled out to provide better nutrition to children. They are also offering basic equipment to local agro-businesses at more affordable prices, and supporting the production of bio-fortified crops, such rice and cassava.

However, limited funding and contextual challenges – including the COVID-19 pandemic

and #EndSARS protests – have hampered progress; which is why input from and collaborations with organisations such as SBN are crucial.

Pillars of support

SBN has taken several key approaches to elevate and propel the Nigerian Government's existing initiatives. The first is the launching of an SME capacity building programme, designed to help SMEs develop a robust set of skills through a series of in-person and virtual workshops. Held between March 2020 and May 2021, these entailed: education on basic nutrition and food safety, and highlighting the links between the two; a funding masterclass, providing SME owners and entrepreneurs with knowledge on accessing finance, identifying funding opportunities, and assessing their businesses' financial risk profile; and training on food preservation- and safety-related processing and packaging techniques.

Alongside government departments, these workshops were conducted and facilitated in collaboration with additional stakeholders, such as the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN), United Nations World Food Programme (WFP), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the Nigerian Association of Small-Scale Industrialists (NASSI), and Smallstarter Africa.

Outside of this programme, SBN spoke to individuals in Cross River State (and also Plateau State) about the challenges that women face in business. This led to the launch of an event in Lagos entitled 'Business Through A Gender Lens' – to which members of government, chambers of commerce, and women's groups were invited to discuss how women can be supported to move into different trades and take on active roles in the agricultural and food production sectors. SBN hopes to continue addressing and finding



solutions to these challenges during the next phase of sub-national engagement projects.

Last but not least, to aid businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic, SBN – together with GAIN – launched a financial support programme for SMEs. While GAIN offered funding for recovery grants, SBN was instrumental in organising and managing aspects such as applications and submissions, communicating with businesses, and disseminating information and guidelines.

An optimistic outlook

Although the sub-national engagement programme is still in its early stages, the initial results and feedback are optimistic. For instance, more than 100 businesses, a good number of which are women-led, attended the workshops over the 14-month period – which is viewed as a positive step in engagement levels.

Funding has been secured for the initiative to be scaled-up in existing states and rolled out into others across Nigeria. There has already been demand for this as, after sharing details about the initiative on their social media channels,

SBN in Cross River State received a number of requests from businesses in other states for similar training.

SBN is also set to conduct an evaluation of the trainings provided thus far – to explore their impact, learn whether the government and SMEs have made any changes as a result, and identify future priorities.

The organisation plans to continue helping progressively build the capacity and skillsets of businesses in selected states and, funding permitting, aims to implement a new programme that specifically supports women entrepreneurs.

This is in addition to providing guidance and assistance to the Nigerian Government in its plans, including helping local governments align with National Policy on Food and Nutrition-led targets and goals, developing radio programmes on food and nutrition safety to aid with capacity building and training, and engaging more with farmers and agricultural value chain actors located in rural communities.

Enhancing engagement

As SBN's initiatives evolve, it's important that feedback is noted to ensure offerings to government, and SMEs remain optimal and effective. For instance, some attendees of the sub-national engagement programme noted that the trainings could be made more accessible, as they are currently only offered in the English language and community groups and elders were not consulted during their development – making them less relevant and prohibitive to some. The scope of training could also be expanded to include other topics (such as how to reduce post-harvest loss, nutrition labelling, and new products using locally-available foods) and also be more inclusive towards micro-sized enterprises, who are often overlooked and have different requirements.

To help achieve their goal of reaching more women entrepreneurs, SBN and the Chamber of Commerce could focus on engaging more with stakeholders in this area (such as the government ministry dedicated to women's affairs). SBN and government officials could also organise meetings with key stakeholders in different states to help better understand priorities and areas of weakness.

Government partners in Cross River State have also shared a desire to collaborate with the wider SUN network to help create greater access to nutritious foods and also to develop a database of local entrepreneurs.

Finally, for impact to be truly sustainable, there needs to be a focus on consistent engagement, effective showcasing of successes, and ongoing advocacy with the government to ensure that policies, regulations, and guidelines reflect and support agri-businesses' needs and requirements.



For more information contact:

Ibiso Ivy King-Harry,
SBN Nigeria Coordinator
sbnigeria@gainhealth.org