



# PROVIDING COUNTRY-OWNED, INCLUSIVE AND ADAPTIVE TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE TO SUN COUNTRIES

Technical assistance (TA) has long been used as a form of development assistance to support countries; however, its success, approach and purpose vary widely.<sup>1</sup> In 2012, the United Kingdom's Department for International Development initiated a new programme approach to provide flexible TA for nutrition policy and programming, through the MQSUN project. Through this mechanism, for the first time, Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) countries were able to request TA if they did not have the country capacity, technical expertise or existing internal TA mechanism to support their nutrition planning efforts.

Since 2012, MQSUN and now MQSUN+ have provided demand-driven TA to more than 50 SUN countries as well as broader global support. At the start of MQSUN, there was no template or framework for how to successfully deliver such TA. Utilising robust monitoring and evaluation and knowledge management, MQSUN+ documents key learnings and positive practices to inform an adaptive TA process.

We have found that contextually-informed, inclusive and adaptive TA energises progress by supporting countries to develop a country-specific and country-owned framework and roadmap for action. Such TA also boosts country efforts to overcome roadblocks and make progress toward reducing malnutrition. There is a growing interest in understanding how TA delivery models function and the elements that drive its implementation.<sup>2</sup> Although there is no standard approach for providing TA, this brief highlights our applied knowledge to showcase how MQSUN/MQSUN+ TA delivery approaches contribute to strengthening the nutrition enabling environment in SUN countries.

<sup>1</sup> Cox M & G Norrington-Davies. Technical assistance: new thinking on an old problem. *Open Society Foundations*. Jan 2019. <https://agulhas.co.uk/our-work/technical-assistance-new-thinking-old-problem/>

<sup>2</sup> Price R. Technical assistance and capacity building in institutional reform: lessons learned. *Institute of Development Studies*. Oct 2019. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5db8125d40f0b637a38efaa5/669\\_TA\\_and\\_institutional\\_reform.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5db8125d40f0b637a38efaa5/669_TA_and_institutional_reform.pdf)

## Maximising the Quality of Scaling Up Nutrition Plus

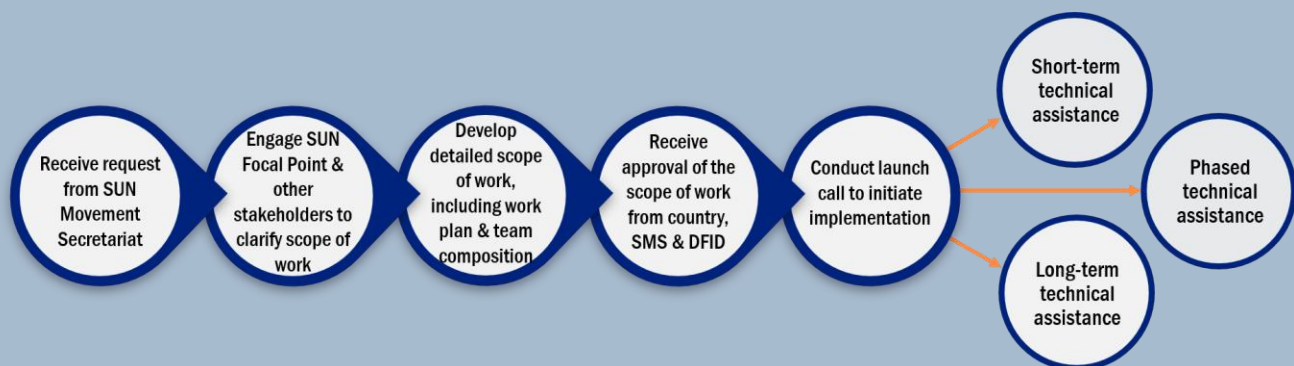
Following on the success of Maximising the Quality of Scaling Up Nutrition (MQSUN) (2012-2016), the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID)-funded MQSUN+ (2016-2020) provides technical assistance to DFID, Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) countries and the SUN Movement Secretariat (SMS) to catalyse multisectoral country efforts to scale up nutrition impact, maximise the quality and effectiveness of nutrition-related programmes, increase innovation in nutrition, support evidence generation and knowledge uptake and develop technical capacity. MQSUN+ is a consortium of five expert organisations: PATH (lead), Aga Khan University, DAI Global Health, Development Initiatives and NutritionWorks.

## Our technical assistance approach

The mandate of MQSUN+ is to be a demand-driven and 'last resort' mechanism for TA, where countries may otherwise not have the in-country resources or capacity to advance their SUN priorities. To this end, SUN countries request MQSUN+ technical assistance to catalyse the country-led process for scaling up nutrition efforts and to integrate nutrition into national priorities.

MQSUN+ initiates technical assistance in response to a formal country request from the SUN Government Focal Point (a political appointee) via the SMS. Once a request is received, our project team engages with the SUN Government Focal Point and other country/global stakeholders, typically over one or more calls. During the engagement period, our team clarifies the details of the request to assess the landscape, country priorities and full extent of their TA needs. Then, we collaborate closely with these stakeholders to develop a detailed scope of work document. This detailing helps in taking a stepwise approach in TA delivery by identifying whether TA is best delivered through a short-term, long-term or phased approach (**Box 1**). As part of the scope of work development, we formulate a TA team with an appropriate mix of soft and technical skills to implement the work, including both national and international consultants. The SUN Government Focal Point ultimately approves the scope of work to ensure it reflects the country's identified needs and priorities. It is also signed off by the SMS and DFID before TA implementation begins.

**Box 1. MQSUN+'s process for initiating and implementing technical assistance.**



Our technical assistance approach usually falls into one of the following categories:

**Short-term:** We design and implement a short-term technical assistance approach when responding to country requests to support very specific activities with clear goals and deliverables, such as conducting a situational analysis or stakeholder mapping.

**Phased:** In countries where there is a need to adapt to changing country needs and priorities, we employ a phased approach through multiple scopes of work. Providing support in multiple phases allows us to identify and respond rapidly to country needs during a first phase, which is then followed by another phase with more specific activities and milestones that are aligned with country priorities and timelines. Technical assistance through this approach is structured to build upon each preceding phase to continuously adapt to the country context as well as MQSUN+ global learnings. A phased approach is best when more time is needed upfront (during the first phase) to understand the country context and develop targeted activities to be implemented during subsequent phases.

**Long-term:** In some countries, we develop a long-term technical assistance approach with a broad scope of work. This approach is best when we have a good understanding of the country context and priorities at the outset, and we can define a comprehensive and flexible work plan in one scope of work.

Figure 1. How MQSUN+'s technical support and value add contribute to the SUN roadmap.



When a country joins the SUN Movement, they are committing to ensure that programmes in all sectors are sensitive to nutrition and to increase coverage of proven interventions that improve nutrition for women and young children—following the [SUN Framework and Roadmap](#). Aligning to this process, MQSUN and now MQSUN+ support countries to bring stakeholders together in order to build an enabling environment for nutrition through the development of high-quality multisectoral national nutrition plans. Thus far, we have supported 15 SUN countries through various stages of this process; these countries are now much closer to being able to reduce malnutrition through improved implementation of multisectoral nutrition action.



## MQSUN+ guiding principles for accelerating progress toward nutrition action

MQSUN+ works within the context of the SUN Movement. We support countries to adapt and incorporate the global [SUN Framework and Roadmap](#) in their national strategies, policies and programmes, based on their unique country context and priorities. Whilst the work varies across countries, MQSUN+ TA broadly fits within four key areas: **1) assessing the country context in preparation for multisectoral planning**; **2) facilitating a consultative process to align nutrition-related actions around a common framework and/or national plan**; **3) supporting cost estimation and budget analysis to facilitate resource allocation, mobilisation and tracking**; and **4) supporting implementation planning and alignment to an endorsed plan** (Figure 1).

An important aspect of our approach is identifying good practices and lessons learnt and applying them to different country contexts. Over the past seven years, we have strengthened and refined our TA approach based on our implementation experience. Through this, MQSUN+ has identified a set of guiding principles that we apply across TA that, in our view, enhance efficiency, effectiveness and quality within and across countries to advance their SUN agenda (Figure 2).

Figure 2. MQSUN+ guiding principles for accelerating progress toward nutrition action.



### Ensuring a country-owned process

MQSUN+ encourages and promotes country leadership throughout each stage of TA from conceptualisation through to closeout. MQSUN+ has found that working closely with the SUN Government Focal Point (the political appointee), Technical Focal Point(s) (appointed by the Government Focal Point to be the TA point of contact) and other key stakeholders to develop their country-specific framework and roadmap for multisectoral planning is instrumental in building understanding of how SUN fits in their unique country context, ensuring existing country platforms and strengths are leveraged and identifying potential roadblocks or areas where TA can help accelerate the process. To this end, the following approaches have been particularly instrumental:

#### **Supporting government-led priorities and actions**

MQSUN+'s experience working with governments reflects that they want to take the lead on multisectoral nutrition planning but face challenges in conceptualising how to take this process forward and balancing competing priorities across country actors. Governments understand that the value of an endorsed multisectoral national nutrition plan is to reflect government-identified needs and priorities and encourage actors and partners to align their efforts accordingly.

MQSUN+ remains a neutral TA provider with our primary focus being to respond to and support country-owned priorities. We support countries to translate their nutrition goals into a country-specific roadmap for action. As much as possible, we foster country stakeholders, especially government representatives, to take control of the TA process. As previously noted, MQSUN+ only responds to country TA requests directly from the SUN Government Focal Point (via SMS). The Focal Point is required to approve the final TA scope of work and all outputs—ensuring their leadership is at the centre. The Focal Point, often with the support of a national SUN secretariat or multi-stakeholder platform, also typically takes ownership of the process and decision-making regarding broader stakeholder engagement. Throughout the process, MQSUN+ collaborates closely with the identified key stakeholders to define both MQSUN+'s and the country's roles and responsibilities based on the unique country needs, priorities and requests.

*MQSUN+ in action: In The Gambia, MQSUN+ conducted a scoping phase to identify and build consensus on an approach for the National Nutrition Agency (NaNA) to move forward with its partners on the development of a Multisectoral Nutrition Action Plan (MSNAP) and a common results framework (CRF) to operationalise the National Nutrition Policy (2018-2025). Noting the existing policy and strong nutrition capacity at NaNA, MQSUN+ strove to support the country to identify how they can adapt and leverage these strengths for developing a multisectoral plan. In this case, we carried out a desk review and stakeholder consultations with government departments, nongovernmental organisations and United Nations (UN) agencies—which focused on understanding the programmes, activities and strategies that are currently being implemented/ planned for nutrition, their involvement in the nutrition policy and coordination mechanisms to date and their interest and potential for engagement in the MSNAP/CRF development. From these activities, MQSUN+ provided preliminary recommendations and guidance to The Gambia in moving this process forward.*

## **Providing structure and guidance to advance progress**

In-country capacity is often pointed to as a key factor in why technical assistance may be required. However, we find that many countries do have internal capacity, but given that multisectoral planning in nutrition is still new, many face roadblocks moving through the steps of the SUN process. Our approach of identifying key strengths and roadblocks and then providing any necessary structured guidance and tools to facilitate country-led action has enabled countries to advance their nutrition efforts.

*MQSUN+ in action: Detailed data on activities, targets and coverage are needed to develop high-quality costed plans. In Afghanistan, Somalia and Yemen, limited understanding of data availability was a key roadblock to costing multisectoral nutrition action plans. To address this, our TA included providing a [costing readiness assessment tool](#) that we created based on our work elsewhere. The tool helped stakeholders in each country to better understand the data required for a full costing exercise and enabled them to own the process of collecting data inputs and refining plans based on these data. All three countries now have improved capacity for costing and understanding available data. As a result, they are well on their way to having fully costed multisectoral nutrition action plans.*

## **Leveraging nutrition champions**

MQSUN+ finds that identifying and closely collaborating with key nutrition champions is essential in advancing the country's nutrition agenda throughout the TA. In many cases, a key nutrition champion is the SUN Government Focal Point or Technical Focal Point who facilitates the process. These individuals are critical in bringing together stakeholders, elevating the nutrition agenda through consultations and workshops and driving forward the steps of multisectoral planning. As much as possible, in partnership with these 'nutrition champions', we ensure stakeholders are fully engaged and apprised of the final TA outputs and suggested next steps to facilitate continued progress beyond our support and to foster sustainability.

*MQSUN+ in action: In Afghanistan, we collaborated closely with the Technical Focal Point, who has been an important nutrition champion. He has demonstrated an immense passion for advancing the national nutrition agenda. During the scope of work development, he was very active in following up with the TA team and providing the appropriate context and information when necessary. During implementation, he was our link between the UN and SUN Government Focal Point and facilitated all on-the-ground stakeholder conversations. With his highly proactive engagement in the multisectoral planning process, the country has demonstrated a high level of commitment and collaboration throughout this TA. As a result, Afghanistan is now in the process of finalising the country's first multisectoral nutrition action plan with full support from the Government Focal Point.*



Afghanistan's Government Focal Point showcases the country's Food Security and Nutrition Strategic Plan to the Global SUN Coordinator at the 2019 SUN Global Gathering. Photo credit: SUN



## Tailoring the process to the country context and evidence base

To ensure TA is tailored to the specific country context, MQSUN+ places particular emphasis at the start of TA to analyse and document the SUN country's nutrition situation, political economy<sup>3</sup> and existing related policies and strategies to ensure this is well understood and validated with country stakeholders and used to inform planning throughout the TA. This effort supports context-specific and evidence-based planning and prioritisation and informs the identification of roadblocks preventing progress in the SUN planning cycle or key strengths/opportunities that can be leveraged. Beyond this standard process, MQSUN+ has also identified other key factors important to supporting a contextually-informed and evidence-based process, including:

### **Helping countries understand the SUN process and navigate through roadblocks**

Given the novelty of multisectoral planning for nutrition, many countries face challenges in understanding and navigating through the SUN Roadmap and related process. As much as possible, MQSUN+ supports countries in contextualising the global SUN principles to a country-specific framework. This includes assisting countries in identifying bottlenecks in their nutrition planning and assessing where MQSUN+ TA can support these efforts. From this, we guide countries through a step-by-step approach and provide the resources and support necessary to achieve their nutrition planning goals.

Conducting a policy/legal framework or contextual analysis at the outset is one way to identify key country roadblocks. Even if a full contextual analysis is not part of the TA scope of work, most often we will perform a quick desk review to take stock of all the relevant nutrition-related information and documentation. In addition to identifying information on the nutrition situation and related policies/plans, another part of this initial review is understanding the governance structures in which the TA will be operating. The results help design TA activities to address specific challenges or barriers—thereby enabling countries to make progress on multisectoral national plans to scale up nutrition.

<sup>3</sup> Department for International Development (DFID). *Political Economy Analysis How To Note*. July 2009. <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/events-documents/3797.pdf>

*MQSUN+ in action: MQSUN+ uses face-to-face stakeholder consultations and/or workshops to gather inputs and gain consensus during the development of a CRF and multisectoral nutrition plan. In Tajikistan, existing government procedures required getting permission from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to carry out such activities. As a result, after better understanding the country's governance structures, we adapted our approach and asked the relevant ministries and stakeholders to complete data collection sheets to provide the needed inputs and sent a request for comments and feedback to gain consensus during the CRF development process. By adapting our approach, the process was more successful in engaging the participation of different government stakeholders and making sure the plan was tailored to country needs.*

## **Assessing availability of country-specific nutrition data and information**

Accurate data, including nutrition status and coverage data as well as budget data, are needed to prioritise nutrition actions, track potential crises, review progress on planned activities and appropriately allocate funding. MQSUN+ aims to understand what type of data is available, the quality of data, how current the data are and where data gaps exist—which is critical not only to our TA process but ultimately to what is feasible for the country to achieve and track with the available baseline data.

Identifying and analysing data availability early on is important. As previously mentioned, we start by gathering data, reports, policies and other information during the development of the scope of work that will help us understand the country context and design the TA approach. As well, MQSUN+ helps countries in identifying data gaps from the beginning to develop realistic goals and expectations for the TA outputs. This also allows countries to better understand the data gaps and how these can advance or inhibit moving to the next steps in the SUN process—to cost their national nutrition plans, for example. MQSUN+ also strives to, where necessary, provide recommendations to countries for improving their data quality and availability. By providing countries these recommendations, they can advocate for better data collection and analysis—which will inform better multisectoral nutrition planning in the future.

*MQSUN+ in action: MQSUN+ supported Madagascar to develop a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) and implementation plan aligned to their multisectoral nutrition plan. However, a lack of recent data on prevalence of micronutrient deficiencies in Madagascar made it very challenging to rank nutritional problems or agree on target outcomes. With the momentum generated in an M&E and implementation planning workshop, the need to conduct a micronutrient survey in the country was identified. MQSUN+ supported Madagascar to develop a scope of work for this micronutrient survey. UN agencies who attended the workshop were active in the promotion and follow up of this initiative, including seeking funding to conduct the survey. The ultimate outcome was the achievement of a micronutrient survey in Madagascar that was procured via national funding.*

## **Using the contextual analysis results to raise awareness on nutrition**

The contextual analysis provides a broad landscape of the immediate and underlying causes of malnutrition—including nutrition-sensitive factors relevant to non-nutrition sectors and actors. MQSUN+ finds that a workshop to present on and validate the results of the contextual analysis (which may incorporate other key elements, such as stakeholder mapping and political economy analysis) is instrumental in raising awareness amongst these stakeholders of how different sectors contribute to and are impacted by nutrition and encourages buy-in for the planning process going forward. Not only do these workshops raise awareness, they also set the stage to advocate for nutrition in the national agenda—emphasising its significance to overall country progress and development. This early advocacy supports stronger and more engaged multisectoral planning.



*MQSUN+ in action:* In Guinea Conakry, MQSUN+ supported the country to develop a multisectoral national nutrition plan as well as a communications and advocacy strategy. At the beginning of the process, we facilitated a workshop to share the results of the desk review on the country's nutrition situation. It became clear from the ensuing discussion that many workshop participants were not aware of the extent to which nutrition was an issue, and the results of the desk review prompted extensive discussion on the seriousness of the situation. From this, it was determined that awareness raising would be a key first priority of the communications and advocacy strategy.



Participants from the validation workshop for their multisectoral nutrition plan in Guinea Conakry. Photo credit: MQSUN+

## **Bridging global and national-level evidence to inform and prioritise nutrition actions**

Through its consortium of partners, MQSUN+ maintains strong global technical knowledge and expertise in nutrition. We consider the strongest global evidence—such as the UNICEF conceptual framework for undernutrition and the *Lancet* series on Maternal and Child Undernutrition (2013)<sup>4</sup>—when giving technical guidance to SUN countries. As well, MQSUN+ is proactive in staying abreast of the latest evidence, innovations and emerging issues related to nutrition ([Box 2](#)) and sharing this knowledge with our TA teams as much as possible. Using the findings from the contextual analysis and policy review, a key value add of our TA is being able to support countries in translating current global nutrition-related evidence and guidelines to individual country contexts and local data. Another key part of this is pairing international experts with strong national consultants in order to work collaboratively to bridge global and country-specific evidence and priorities. This ensures countries have the most robust, comprehensive and applicable knowledge and data to inform and prioritise nutrition actions based on their unique nutrition landscape.

*MQSUN+ in action:* In Vietnam, MQSUN+ is supporting the National Institute of Nutrition to develop a strategy for the establishment of a national SUN Business Network (SBN)—aligned to their national nutrition plan—to increase the private sector's contribution to improved nutrition. A key piece of this TA is providing a connection to the global SBN and supporting the translation of global guidance, such as the SBN toolkit, to their specific country context. For example, our lead consultant is leveraging this partnership with the global SBN to connect with other established national SBNs—communicating with them to understand their learnings and evidence in setting up a national SBN to inform Vietnam's strategy. This approach of bridging global learnings and guidance with country-specific stakeholder consultations is likely to ensure that the resulting SBN strategy will be tailored to what is pertinent and applicable to nutrition in Vietnam and, therefore, more effectively engage the private sector in how they can contribute to improved nutrition action in the country.

<sup>4</sup> UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund). *Improving Child Nutrition: The Achievable Imperative for Global Progress*. New York: UNICEF; 2013. Lutter C et al. Maternal and Child Nutrition Lancet Series. *The Lancet*. 2013;382(9904).



## Box 2. Considering underlying/cross-cutting factors to maximise nutrition planning.

To effectively understand the country context, it is key to consider underlying or crosscutting factors that contribute to nutrition action. As such, MQSUN+ considers several crosscutting factors in planning and implementing technical assistance to SUN countries for multisectoral nutrition efforts:

**Bridging the gap between humanitarian and development efforts.** Our project has robust experience working in fragile and conflict-affected states, where there is a great need to improve coordination between humanitarian and development efforts for nutrition. Through our TA, we support the identification of existing humanitarian and development efforts in order to bring both humanitarian and development actors into the planning process, identify opportunities for alignment and ensure these are integrated into their national policies and plans.

**Integrating gender and equity.** In our TA, we meaningfully consider gender in the contextual analysis, including the different needs of men, women, girls and boys, how gender inequality influences immediate and underlying causes of malnutrition and how these factors could be addressed during multisectoral nutrition planning. MQSUN+ uses this information to encourage conversations on gender equity in-country—taking into consideration existing cultural sensitivities, norms and standards.

**Emerging issues.** We are currently seeing additional global emphasis on other nutrition-related issues and looking for ways to integrate these underlying factors into our work, as appropriate and aligned with government interest. These issues include food systems, disability, adolescent nutrition and universal health coverage.



### Facilitating inclusive multi-stakeholder engagement

MQSUN+ encourages the involvement of all relevant stakeholders throughout the TA. This includes facilitating a consultative process across TA activities and encouraging representation of minority and vulnerable groups throughout the process to support inclusiveness, buy-in and accountability. Key areas where we facilitate inclusive multi-stakeholder engagement are:

#### **Leveraging stakeholder mapping to engage key actors**

In addition to conducting a contextual or policy/legal framework analysis at the onset of TA, often times MQSUN+ also conducts stakeholder mapping to highlight who all the actors are in delivering current nutrition-related interventions and programmes—including government ministries, donors, UN agencies, civil society and nongovernmental organisations. This information is key to understanding who all the appropriate stakeholders may be to engage during the multisectoral planning process. Whilst the government ultimately decides who should be involved, MQSUN+ strongly encourages the engagement of all relevant ministries—not just those primarily recognised for their contribution to nutrition, such as Education or Agriculture, but other related ministries like Women’s Affairs, Financing and Planning and Commerce. We also foster the active participation of nongovernment partners, such as UN agencies, donors and civil society organisations, as much as possible and relevant.

*MQSUN+ in action: In Afghanistan, MQSUN+ conducted a stakeholder mapping and power analysis to guide the development of their CRF and Afghanistan Food Security and Nutrition (AFSeN-A) Strategic Plan. The results of the mapping were presented and discussed at a stakeholder workshop to ensure consensus and drive the process forward. Engaging these stakeholders at the onset of the process helped to facilitate continued input and buy-in during the multisectoral planning and costing process. As well, it was recognised that the Ministry of Women’s Affairs was not consulted in the initial planning process. In recognition of this missed opportunity, MQSUN+ encouraged the country to involve that ministry in the finalisation of the CRF and Strategic Plan to ensure that these documents include women/gender-responsive activities and consider gender and equity holistically.*

## **Collaborating with partners to develop a well-defined scope of work**

Countries often come to MQSUN+ with a high-level motivation to take forward their nutrition planning. However, the process can seem daunting and often countries express that they do not know where to start or request assistance for everything. Through various modes of communication and engagement, MQSUN+ supports countries to identify their TA priorities and develop a scope of work that clearly describes the technical background, approach, work plan and each TA team member's role. As much as possible, this process is a collaborative effort with multiple stakeholders, including government representatives, SMS and other nutrition partners; we also define the government's and other key stakeholders' roles in the process, including identifying opportunities for cost-sharing activities. Defining roles at the onset of the assignment encourages consistent stakeholder participation and engagement. Including a realistic timeline and clearly outlining key tasks for each activity helps the work run smoothly and ensures accountability. Whilst we include enough details to guide our approach, it is also important for the scope of work to be flexible—allowing us to be adaptive to changing country context and priorities.

### **Keys to a well-defined scope of work**

- Assess country priorities and capacity to identify TA needs.
- Develop the scope of work in collaboration with country stakeholders.
- Include a realistic timeline.
- Use available data or evidence to inform activities.
- Define country roles and key stakeholders.
- Identify cost-share partners and agree on activities to fund.

***MQSUN+ in action:** MQSUN+ received a TA request from Sudan to support their multisectoral planning efforts in partnership with the UN Nutrition Network (UNN)—at both global and country level. We led a scope of work development process, in close collaboration with UNN and the SUN Government Focal Point, to map out the process and identify how best to leverage key strengths and funding from UNN and MQSUN+ as well as other in-country actors. In this case, a phased approach was identified as the best option—whereby UNN led the first phase of a contextual analysis and comprehensive stakeholder mapping. As part of this first phase, MQSUN+ is collaborating with country stakeholders to define a country-specific roadmap to take the planning process forward based on the unique country context.*

## **Facilitating cost sharing**

Cost sharing has been another useful tool when providing technical assistance to SUN countries. Sharing financial or in-kind costs with government or other organisations—including UN partners such as the World Food Program (WFP), UNN, UNICEF and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and donors such as GIZ, USAID and DFID—helps foster country ownership, encourages stakeholder collaboration and ensures accountability. In each country, we support the SUN Focal Point to identify local partners and opportunities for cost sharing and document these joint efforts in the scope of work.

Cost sharing works best when we collaborate with stakeholders to achieve a common goal and identify specific activities or costs that make the most sense for the partners to fund. For example, it is often more efficient for partners to fund activities with a shorter timeline, such as a specific workshop, compared to paying for ongoing costs like staffing. By cost sharing with partners who are already active in-country, their buy-in and contribution to the process foster long-term engagement and sustainability for nutrition efforts.

***MQSUN+ in action:** In Somalia, MQSUN+, in its role as facilitator, supported the country to prepare a budget for in-country consultation workshops that would inform and gain consensus on the development of their multisectoral nutrition plan. Part of this was encouraging and supporting the SUN Focal Point to obtain commitment from local donors and UN partners to fund these workshops.*



## Leveraging existing capacity and prioritising capacity building

Building capacity is inherent to the delivery of MQSUN+ technical assistance—striving to boost sustainability of our support to SUN countries. As much as possible, MQSUN+ identifies key capacities of in-country actors and maximises their role and participation in the multisectoral planning process to take advantage of their existing skills and knowledge. As well, opportunities for close country collaboration and capacity building are kept at the forefront throughout the TA. We recognise that capacity needs are organic and non-linear. The MQSUN+ approach to capacity building is to be adaptive and responsive to the country/stakeholder needs as they unfold during TA implementation and to tailor our approach accordingly. Key components of this approach include:

### **Fostering functional and technical capacity strengthening**

MQSUN+ seeks opportunities to implement both formal (e.g. through trainings) and informal (e.g. through collaboration) capacity-building efforts, as relevant and requested by the country. Throughout our TA, we apply a “learning-by-doing” approach to encourage relevant country stakeholders to work alongside MQSUN+ in the process to ensure understanding and buy-in to take the work forward. This approach supports both technical and functional skills building. In practice, this may include, for example, providing structured guidance or tools to support the country team in progressing through a key step in their planning process or identifying a country counterpart to work alongside an MQSUN+ consultant. Regardless of the approach, MQSUN+ have found the importance of supporting both technical skills (e.g. costing and data mapping) as well as more soft or functional skills (e.g. convening multiple stakeholders and advocacy) to advance the progress of our TA efforts and overall multisectoral planning for SUN countries.



MQSUN+ facilitating a table discussion during a functional capacity-building workshop retreat for SUN Focal Points in Stockholm, Sweden. Photo credit: SUN

***MQSUN+ in action:** Under our TA for the fourth round of the [SUN budget analysis](#), we tailored our capacity-building activities to the needs of each country. Some countries needed limited support to carry out the exercise whilst others requested more direct capacity building. In Mali and Gabon, our international consultant made country visits to provide direct, intensive support to build the capacity of Nutrition Cluster Coordinator stakeholders to carry out the exercise. In the Central African Republic, the consultant worked remotely to conduct intensive capacity building with stakeholders—including with an SMS local consultant, SUN Focal Point and nongovernmental organisation partners—to carry out the exercise.*

### **Engaging both global and in-country perspectives in the TA team**

To maximise a global nutrition perspective as well as context-specific knowledge and experience, as much as possible, MQSUN+ forms TA teams that pair international consultants with national consultants to support the TA process. International consultants are often experts with key technical focuses related to nutrition who have worked in multiple countries, which allows them to bring other countries’ experiences and apply them to a new context.



National consultants are critical, as they understand the specific country context and current nutrition situation and often already have established relationships with government representatives and other nutrition stakeholders—which is important for navigating through existing structures and processes. They are also key to engaging regularly with country stakeholders, participating in stakeholder workshops and providing tools and guidance to facilitate country input. Overall, their inclusion supports local capacity building, promotes country ownership and boosts sustainability for nutrition.

By including a combination of a national consultant and an international consultant, we can bring the global SUN perspective and, at the same time, build local capacity for carrying the work forward once the TA is completed. One MQSUN+ international consultant has noted the importance of this symbiotic relationship: “the national consultants I have worked with have brought further quality and technical excellence to the work, for example with their knowledge about micronutrients, fortification, etc. and excellent network of specialists. There has certainly been an element of mutual capacity development.”

*MQSUN+ in action: In Kyrgyz Republic, the contributions of two national consultants were vital to supporting the overall development of the country's costed Food Security and Nutrition Programme (FSNP). The primary MQSUN+ national consultant was a strong advocate for increasing attention on nutrition, which helped to motivate the different stakeholders in the process. Specifically, her involvement was vital in collecting and analysing national documents for their relevance to nutrition; organising and facilitating scoping meetings and workshops with different stakeholders across a range of sectors; representing the team during workshops, roundtables and working group meetings; and ultimately being the country-based point of contact for MQSUN+'s support. A second national consultant assisted the Ministry of Agriculture/Food Security and the FSNP Technical Working Group to cost the FSNP and conducted a full costing of the different components of the final plan. Both consultants provided high-quality technical expertise and on-the-ground support for the country-led efforts—contributing to a strong, costed FSNP. Stakeholders in Kyrgyz Republic are now implementing the plan to make progress on goals to reduce malnutrition.*



## Continuously monitoring and learning for adaptive TA

MQSUN+ has developed an adaptive approach to supporting countries through the SUN Roadmap and planning cycle by leveraging cross-country and global learning and supporting the evidence base for addressing and integrating nutrition. In the last seven years of

MQSUN/MQSUN+ implementation, we continuously captured positive practices and lessons learnt to refine our TA. MQSUN+ fosters a collaborative process, by creating opportunities for our TA teams working across different countries to come together on a regular basis to share learnings, tools and approaches and problem solve together. This supports cross-country learning, capacity building for multisectoral planning and leveraging existing tools and approaches for efficiency, including the following:

### **Utilising innovative M&E and knowledge management for adaptive technical delivery**

MQSUN+ uses a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation and knowledge management system to foster continuous collection of and discussion on key learnings for real-time learning and adaption. Reflections and lessons learnt from our TA are collected and documented through a variety of channels, including monthly updates from TA teams working across countries and global assignments, periodic technical and update calls with TA teams, final activity or country handover reports and TA satisfaction surveys and interviews.

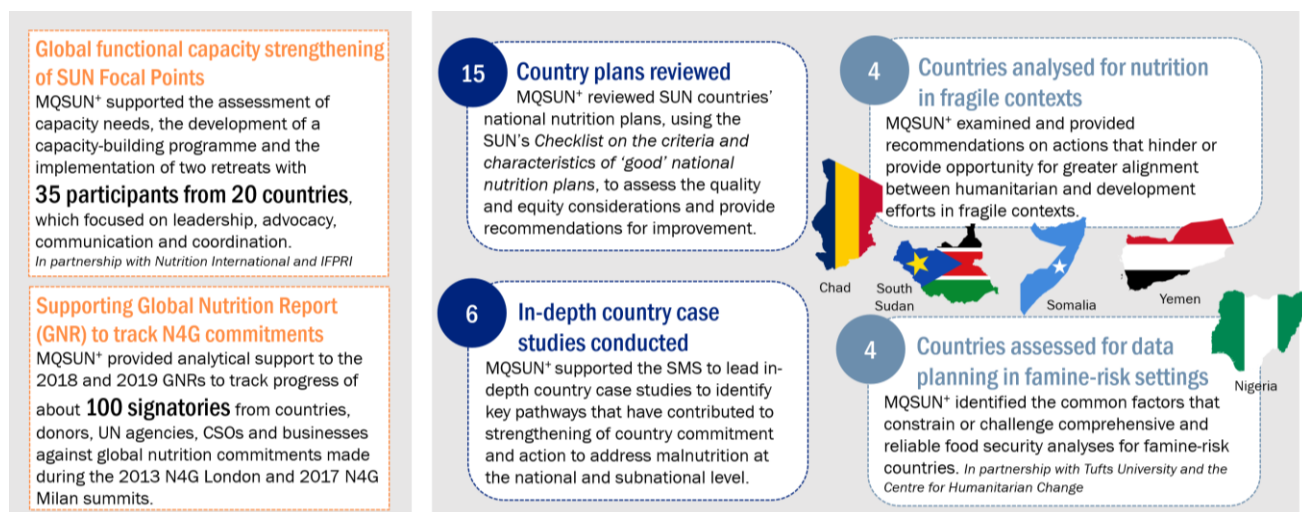
We regularly collate learnings from across these sources to inform future and current TA. Weekly calls with TA teams are utilised to discuss and reflect on these cross-country learnings and encourage immediate application and adaption into our ongoing country TA, where relevant and possible.

Evaluating the success and impact of TA for policy and planning can be challenging given its distal relationship to nutrition impact. To evaluate our technical assistance, MQSUN+ has developed an assumption map to retrospectively assess TA assignments—considering whether TA activities led to the intended outputs and outcomes based on our set of assumptions toward nutrition impact. This process, along with our satisfaction surveys, helps us assess completed TA assignments and guide future ones by elucidating the building blocks and roadblocks to progress toward improved coverage of multisectoral nutrition programmes and policies and, therefore, advancing SUN countries' nutrition agendas.

## Providing global support to inform larger SUN Strategy and guidance

MQSUN+ also provides TA to the SMS to develop guidance for SUN countries, support global SUN efforts and inform the SUN Strategy (Figure 3). Specifically, MQSUN+ has supported SMS to systematically review and provide actionable recommendations on SUN country nutrition plans, assess and support the functional capacity needs of SUN Focal Points and improve the guidance around financial tracking and budget analysis for nutrition and support countries to carry out these activities. These efforts reinforce MQSUN+ country TA, and we leverage the outputs and learnings from these global initiatives across our country support.

Figure 3. MQSUN+ global support to SMS and scaling up nutrition evidence and guidance.



As well, MQSUN+ also supports DFID to improve the evidence base of nutrition-related programmes and efforts (Figure 4). MQSUN+ can adapt and apply these learnings to our ongoing support to countries and in continuously building the capacity of our TA teams to apply the most up-to-date evidence for quality TA.

Figure 4. MQSUN+ support to DFID to improve the nutrition-related evidence base.



## Conclusion: MQSUN+ technical assistance as a catalyst for nutrition impact

MQSUN+ technical assistance acts as a catalyst to accelerate the progress of SUN countries along the SUN transformational pathway and ultimately contribute to nutrition impact ([Figure 1](#)).

Our applied crosscutting principles contribute to enhanced quality of multisectoral planning for nutrition through: 1) strengthened multisectoral buy-in and engagement; (2) increased awareness and commitment to nutrition; and (3) strengthened planning, prioritisation and coordination to achieve common results. This, in turn, contributes to a strengthened enabling environment and effectiveness of aligned implementation for nutrition. Effective, aligned multisectoral implementation for nutrition can facilitate greater gains toward reducing malnutrition and contributing to the global Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) of zero hunger and other SDGs that are contingent on healthy and nourished families.

Further, given our mandate as a last resort mechanism, MQSUN+ also enhances global SUN progress by supporting countries who otherwise may not have had the in-country resources or capacity to advance their SUN agenda as intended. To date, MQSUN and now MQSUN+ have contributed to advancing the nutrition agendas of more than 50 SUN countries—supporting their progress along the transformational pathway toward ending malnutrition. In that time, we have supported SUN countries primarily to move forward with the initial stages of their SUN planning process. As SUN countries continue to make progress in scaling up nutrition, new TA needs are emerging, including subnational-level planning, advocacy for resource mobilisation, local capacity strengthening, implementation of nutrition action plans, strengthening M&E processes and platforms, and private sector engagement.

For more information on MQSUN+ resources, visit the MQSUN+ webpace at [mqsunplus.path.org/resource](https://mqsunplus.path.org/resource).

### About MQSUN+

MQSUN+ provides technical assistance and knowledge services to the UK Government's Department for International Development (DFID) and the Scaling Up Nutrition Movement Secretariat (SMS) in support of pro-poor programmes in nutrition. MQSUN+ services are resourced by a consortium of five nonstate organisations leading in the field of nutrition.

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MQSUN+ cannot be held responsible for errors or any consequences arising from the use of information contained in this brief. This document was produced by MQSUN+ through support provided by UK aid and the UK Government; however, the views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the UK Government's official policies.



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