

Summary of Support Provided to DRC-Based Stakeholders Engaged in the Humanitarian Nutrition Response

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About MQSUN+

MQSUN+ aims to provide the Department for International Development (DFID) with technical services to improve the quality of nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive programmes. The project is resourced by a consortium of five leading non-state organisations working on nutrition. The consortium is led by PATH.

The group is committed to:

- Expanding the evidence base on the causes of undernutrition.
- Enhancing skills and capacity to support scaling up of nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive programmes.
- Providing the best guidance available to support programme design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.
- Increasing innovation in nutrition programmes.
- Knowledge sharing to ensure lessons are learnt across DFID and beyond.

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About this publication

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Abbreviations

DFID	United Kingdom Department for International Development
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
FESO	Femmes Solidaires
MAMI	Management of At risk Mothers and Infants under 6 months
MOOC	massive open online course
MQSUN+	Maximising the Quality of Scaling Up Nutrition Plus
NNC	National Nutrition Cluster
OFDA	Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance
PRONANUT	Programme Nationale de Nutrition
PUNC	Nutrition Emergency Pool in DRC
RLR	real-time learning review
SAM	severe acute malnutrition
SMART	Standardized Monitoring and Assessment of Relief and Transitions
SNSAP	Food Security and Early Warning system
TA	technical assistance
TOC	theory of change
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WFP	World Food Programme

Introduction

This report summarises the nutrition technical assistance (TA) provided by Maximising the Quality of Scaling Up Nutrition Plus (MQSUN+) consultants as they supported nutrition actors in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) to consider how to improve the nutrition approach in country. This TA took the form of a real-time learning review (RLR), aiming to construct knowledge to improve decision making on interventions to prevent and cure acute malnutrition in the DRC. It provided an opportunity for key stakeholders to reflect on the operational and strategic approach. The RLR emphasised collaborative learning from current practice, research and innovation.

The consulting team began by preparing an action plan and timeline for the RLR. They then prepared a situation analysis highlighting the DRC's key nutrition-related characteristics, including political instability, poverty, insecurity, disease outbreaks and displacement, further describing the health policy environment, maternal and child health status and key features of the nutrition situation. The consulting team subsequently held stakeholder scoping conversations, which shed light on different approaches for the prevention and treatment of malnutrition in emergencies (traditional and rapid responses), the theory of change (TOC) for such responses, the current status of the National Nutrition Cluster (NNC) guidelines, emerging research and innovations and monitoring and evaluation systems. Stakeholders further investigated these issues in a two-day workshop. Given the focus on learning, the consultants who facilitated the review discussed findings and recommendations with key stakeholders before leaving the country as well as after.

Background

The scale of malnutrition in the DRC is immense. As of January 2019, 1.4 million children were suffering from severe acute malnutrition (SAM) in the country (UNICEF 2019). Over the years and presently, there has been significant investment in prevention and treatment, e.g. the United Kingdom Department for International Development's (DFID's) support to the Nutrition Emergency Pool in DRC (PUNC) project for rapid interventions in pockets of high SAM prevalence and the more recent United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) grant for SAM treatment. However, there is as of yet a lack of a clear, evidence-based strategy to inform the response in the DRC.

Additionally, in recent years, there has been a global body of research on and reviews regarding approaches to preventing and treating acute malnutrition.ⁱ These include the Wasting-Stunting (WaSt) project, which is investigating the relationship between these two forms of malnutrition (Angood et al. 2016; Angood 2014); the Management of At risk Mothers and Infants under 6 months (MAMI) project (McGrath 2016); the Coverage Monitoring Network initiative evaluating Community-Based Management of Acute Malnutrition; and a few activities conducted by the Emergency Nutrition Network (ENN) through MQSUN+ and supported by DFID to review the [causes of wasting](#), priorities

ⁱ Acute malnutrition includes kwashiorkor (oedema, fluid retention due to lack of protein) in addition to marasmus (thinness or wasting). Acute malnutrition and wasting, often used interchangeably, are terms that can give the impression of a sudden change that leads to a child becoming obviously malnourished. However, a sudden deterioration, due to illness for example, is not necessarily required.

for research on preventing wasting and the humanitarian-development nexus in nutrition. Looking forward to upcoming investments, DFID DRC would like to support an updated approach.

Key objective

The key objective of this RLR was to support key stakeholders in the DRC to strengthen the emergency nutrition response in areas of high morbidity and mortality risk, through identifying and learning from what is working well and what could be improved in acute malnutrition prevention and treatment. This included learning from current practice, research and innovation in the DRC and similar contexts. The RLR provided an opportunity for key stakeholder staff to reflect on the current operational and strategic approach to addressing acute malnutrition, as well as to leverage external expertise and advice.

Outputs

The RLR team produced the following outputs, as planned:

- A. Inception report outlining the key findings from the desk review and initial stakeholder engagement, as well as a detailed work plan for this TA.
- B. Workshop report, including presentation materials (e.g. slide deck), agenda and proceedings.
- C. Final report summarising the main findings and recommendations of the review on current operational and strategic approaches to respond to acute malnutrition in the DRC, including an annex of recommendations for cluster guidelines revisions.
- D. Draft terms of reference for future TA to be provided to the DFID Humanitarian Team over the next year.
- E. This report summarising the TA provided.

Support beyond the scope

As the focus was on learning, the consultants worked as much as possible to respond to requests from stakeholders that seemed out of the main scope of work as set out, but which seemed important for supporting the learning journey. For example, the consultants met stakeholders' requests to share evidence and learning documents on the use of linear programming for improving local recipes, application of a TOC for continuous quality improvement of interventions, the surge approach and massive open online course (MOOC) on strengthening local governance with a systems approach. The team also provided review comments on material about the integrated management of SAM, as well as related job aids that were developed during a previous mission. One of the consultants and a technical support team member from MQSUN+ joined a two-day, live-streamed, regional UNICEF conference held in Dakar on 'The State of Policy and Practice on Approaches for the Prevention and Care of Children with Wasting'.

Implementation Summary

The RLR team was composed of two international nutrition experts and was gender balanced. Their process of implementing this TA can be summarised as follows:

- A work plan, documentation desk review and remote and in-country scoping conversations with key stakeholders prior to the field visit, resulting in a summary of their ideas and opinions; a situational analysis; a mapping of approaches and a plan for the TA.
- In-country data collection in Kinshasa, including meetings with key stakeholders, resulting in further information on the current status of acute malnutrition prevention and treatment in country; a review of the NNC's technical guidelines.
- Field sites visit, which shed further light and offered clarification on the major findings from the earlier meetings with stakeholders.
- A workshop that had as its main goal to present and discuss initial reflections and feedback on current practices, as well as allow learning during discussions.
- Data analysis and summary of findings and recommendations.
- Final report that finalises analysis and recommendations, including technical guidelines revisions.
- Periodic consultations with DFID DRC as each output was delivered.

Field visit

The fieldwork included visits within two provinces (Kasaï and Kasaï Central) to multiple offices, 12 health facilities and three households. This included meeting with key staff/volunteers/members of:

- The two provincial health divisions (*divisions provinciales de la santé*).
- Three zonal health offices (*bureaux centraux des zones de santé*).
- Nine health areas (*aires de santé*).
- Community volunteers (*relais communautaires*) and community groups (*comités de développement de la santé; cellules d'animation communautaire*).
- Seven nongovernmental organisations.
- The World Food Programme (WFP).

Workshop

The workshop participants comprised 47 representatives (including 12 women) from 36 partner agencies with a vested interest in strengthening the response for preventing and treating acute

malnutrition, including Programme Nationale de Nutrition (PRONANUT), the NNC, NNC partners, UNICEF, WFP, United States Agency for International Development (USAID), European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations, the World Bank and the University of Kinshasa.

Participants explored the quality of the emergency nutrition response strategy in the DRC through step-wise, iterative, participatory and collaborative learning from current practices and innovation. They did so in order to consider the effectiveness of strategies to prevent and treat acute malnutrition in the DRC and to identify lessons to inform changes.

Analysis and writing

The RLR method had a qualitative focus and by its nature provided neither an in-depth analysis nor a comprehensive evaluation. The analysis combined the data collected in the inception phase and in country with additional insight from the workshop. Findings were triangulated and the report writing focused on a synthesis of the analysis results that led to the conclusions and recommendations of the exercise. These were consolidated into a draft report and shared for review; following this, there was written feedback and discussion with several key stakeholders (DFID, UNICEF, WFP and NNC partners).

Capacity building

Contribution to technical knowledge

On many occasions, participants mentioned how the discussions during the field visit and workshop proceedings improved their technical knowledge and understanding of the issues they face. However, they cannot always address or know how to manage these issues because of limited (or restrictive) guidance.

Document and tool sharing

Tools used in the workshop guided discussions and analysis towards an improved understanding of key issues; these tools included mind mapping, applying a TOC and stakeholder mapping. An example of a tool that was shared to improve knowledge on locally available food recipes was [Optifood](#), a linear programming software that uses mathematical optimisation to calculate how to improve diets at the lowest cost through using locally available foods; it identifies gaps in current diets and suggests locally available foods to fill them. The team also shared information on understanding differences between action/operational research, implementation research and systems research. Scoping conversations included sharing information on piloting and/or evidence from innovative approaches and workshops that have been conducted, for example, with WFP.

Capacity needs

Whilst not a training, the workshop was an excellent opportunity for over 40 participants to acquire new knowledge and insights, and apply tools that assist in their professional environment. The consultants came to appreciate that knowledge management skills and capacity development are

much needed by most of the partner organisations. Many partners are accustomed to having access to normative guidance through programme descriptions, logical frameworks and national or global guidelines for implementation. However, they do not yet have the skills to adapt strategies to the fast-changing context.

Gender consideration

In the scoping conversations and at other moments, the team made stakeholders aware that they needed to apply gender-sensitive approaches as part of the mandate of the DFID investment.

Creating opportunities

Most if not all partners involved in the scoping conversations have gender-sensitive approaches included in their mandates. It is also important to note in terms of gender representation that there were 77 scoping interview participants, including 29 women, and there were 47 workshop participants, including 12 women.

Engaging gender-experienced stakeholders

Most key stakeholders target the most vulnerable populations; their work includes addressing gender vulnerabilities. One of the stakeholders, Femmes Solidaires (FESO), is a women's organisation.

Gender-based challenges

The team noticed and commented on the absence of women amongst the staff of some of the partner organisations. They were told, for example, that field conditions and travel by motorbike were too strenuous for women. These types of conversations show the challenges present for addressing equality of opportunity and potentially equity of outcomes.

Dissemination and uptake

During the workshop, the step-wise method of exploring concepts or aspects with tools that brought perceptions into the multiple discussions encouraged participants to be creative, share valuable tacit knowledge and broaden their understanding (enabling its adaptation and implementation in a local context). The collaborative learning on which key aspects in the response worked (or not) created a new dynamic of looking at a reality that was taken for granted. This experience created an environment of innovative thinking and the desire for a new way of working to fight acute malnutrition. Workshop participants noted that the partner exchange, facilitation methods, learning methodology and experience sharing were amongst the workshop's strengths.

During the review of the pieces produced (particularly the workshop report, main report and NNC guidelines feedback), written and verbal feedback from several key stakeholders were considered important for building ownership and buy-in.

Challenges and Lessons Learnt

Challenges and lessons learnt in the RLR include:

- Site visits did not include all of the models of emergency nutrition response that are in place, e.g. the PRONANUT-led intervention in Ituri Province set up as a routine child service. The consultant team tried its best to gather as much information as possible from key stakeholders to compensate for the missing information.
- Due to travel constraints, the team was unable to conduct a more thorough preparation for the workshop. Additionally, the two-day agenda did not allow as much time as desired for in-depth learning and discussions. Nonetheless, national and international key partners were briefed ahead of time to garner their effective support to the workshop facilitation.
- Some key stakeholders were not reached for the initial scoping discussions (e.g. European Union and USAID Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance/OFDA), but they were pursued again later. For OFDA, the Food for Peace team filled in, which makes sense given that OFDA and Food for Peace are in the process of merging into a new bureau.
- The workshop was held immediately upon return from the field, which made for some tight logistics. For example, the flight from Kananga to Kinshasa was cancelled and then was delayed the day before the workshop, which left limited time to organise workshop logistics. Also, though the PATH office was able to assist and was very helpful in organising logistics (e.g. providing their newly inaugurated meeting space), important competing priorities had impacts on these efforts, e.g. difficulty in obtaining workshop materials for working group sessions.
- Sharing the draft workshop agenda and facilitation plan with PRONANUT and NNC allowed them to propose changes; this led to effective ownership of the workshop process and motivation for enthusiastic participation. In the same vein, sharing the draft final report with key stakeholders yielded constructive inputs, which were integrated into the final version.

Next Steps

The following are key technical recommendations made from the RLR:

- **Strengthen the Food Security and Early Warning system (SNSAP)**—which functions as a nutrition surveillance system—for example, by expanding sensitivity, decentralising support and piloting community-based growth-monitoring and promotion for improving breadth and quality of data whilst ensuring the promotion of good nutrition and preventing malnutrition. This would make the verification of the nutrition situation by a Standardized Monitoring and Assessment of Relief and Transitions (SMART) survey redundant.
- Reconfigure/improve the **response package to be more flexible** and **promote the use of a TOC as a tool for monitoring quality improvement and adapting interventions to changing needs/contexts**.

- **Encourage new and ongoing projects to integrate implementation research** to better understand how, for whom, in what circumstance and why change occurs. Explain the evidence-action-outcome link and pilot test a continuous quality improvement approach.
- **Adapt the humanitarian paradigm for preventing and treating acute malnutrition** by kick-starting development interventions and building resilience capacity of the health and community system, then addressing major shocks with quick life-saving interventions.

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