

# National Nutrition Plan Review: Afghanistan

In December 2016, the United Nations Network for the SUN Movement and the SUN Movement Secretariat (SMS), with the support of an expert group, developed and launched the [Checklist on the Criteria and Characteristics of “Good” National Nutrition Plans](#) (“SUN Checklist”). In 2018 and 2020, at the request of the SMS, the Maximising the Quality of Scaling Up Nutrition Plus (MQSUN+) project undertook a systematic review of 26 countries’ multisectoral national nutrition plans, according to the criteria in the SUN Checklist. This brief summarises select strengths and suggested areas for improvement with recommendations for Afghanistan, organised by each of the five areas in the SUN Checklist: (1) situational analysis and policy and programming review; (2) stakeholder engagement and high-level political commitment processes; (3) costs and budgetary framework; (4) implementation and managing arrangements; and (5) monitoring, evaluation, operational research and review. Where relevant, specific suggestions for increasing gender sensitivity for the plan are also included (see MQSUN+’s [gender brief](#) for more information).

## Afghanistan

### Name of document reviewed:

Afghanistan Food Security and Nutrition (AFSeN) Strategic Plan

### Time span: 2019-2023

### Related documents (not reviewed):

AFSeN Agenda; Public Awareness and Advocacy Framework and Plan; Capacity Assessment (forthcoming)

## Overview

The *Afghanistan Food Security and Nutrition (AFSeN) Strategic Plan* builds on the *AFSeN Agenda* to tackle malnutrition through a consolidated, multisectoral approach. Proposed activities are organised along nine strategic objectives aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals: (1) ensuring adequate economic and physical access to food; (2) ensuring food and nutrition supplies over time and in emergency situations; (3) improving the quality of nutritious diets; (4) increasing access to nutrition-related quality health care services; (5) improving water, sanitation and hygiene as well as education for better nutrition; (6) improving rural infrastructure and strengthen nutritional value chains while protecting natural resources; (7) increasing availability of nutrient-rich foods through domestic food production; (8) increasing nutritional and market value of foods; and (9) strengthening food security and nutrition governance.

## Key strengths

The plan highlights how nutrition aligns with the Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework and how it has risen in the political agenda leading to its development. This is the country's first iteration of a national plan to address food security and nutrition multisectorally. Below are a few key strengths that emerged from the review:

- Provides a clear description of the food security and nutrition context (political, socioeconomic and organisational) in the country, including key underlying determinants of nutrition and a description of the influence of gender roles and norms on nutrition.
- Proposes actions that are clearly linked with global recommendations, address a wide range of bottlenecks (financial, planning, human resource) and include a range of actions to address nutrition in emergency situations.
- Incorporates gender equality as a guiding principle of the plan, notes that groups with gender expertise were consulted in the development of the plan and includes specific actions to address the gender dimensions of nutrition (with associated indicators).
- Clearly outlines the multisectoral governance arrangements at national and subnational levels, including monitoring mechanisms from civil society and other third-party organisations.
- Includes costing information for all proposed activities, provides preliminary estimates of the financial gap and describes a finance tracking mechanism that includes on- and off-budget funding and allocations/expenditures.
- Includes a mapping of stakeholders and actions, and specifies planned consultation with local entities/communities during implementation.
- Describes in detail key aspects of the M&E framework, including data sources/collection methods, planned analyses, milestones and time frames for setting up M&E work and a multi-stakeholder review mechanism.

## Key recommendations

### Area 1: Situational analysis and policy and programming review

- Whilst the plan describes a wide range of activities, both the situation analysis and programming are weighted towards the agriculture/food security sector. There is less elaboration of the WASH, education and social protection situation, policies and programming in the situation analysis.
  - **Recommendation:** Ensure that all the determinants of nutrition are well understood and described and that data from across all sectors continues to inform nutrition analysis and programming.
- While the plan includes some good risk mitigation approaches, particularly around emergency and disaster situations, it does not systematically identify key risks to plan implementation overall.
  - **Recommendation:** Identify potential programmatic, socioeconomic, and/or political risks that might negatively impact the implementation of the plan and develop risk mitigation strategies with clear roles and responsibilities.

### Area 3: Costs and budgetary framework

- The costing section of the plan provides a clear methodology and next steps to refine the costing during the inception. However, a process for determining spending priorities is not included, despite preliminary financial analyses finding a large shortfall of existing funding for the plan's actions.

→ **Recommendation:** In addition to the key next steps indicated within the strategic plan, consider developing a plan for mobilising additional resources, and develop criteria for prioritising target groups, geographic areas and/or interventions, using available data and transparent criteria, based on the available financial resources.

### Area 4: Implementation and management arrangements

- Whilst subnational stakeholders appear to have been consulted during the plan development and certain actions incorporate community planning, the situation analysis highlights some significant disparities in nutrition indicators across the country, and the plan does not discuss how the actions will be targeted at the subnational level.

→ **Recommendation:** Ensure that subnational stakeholders continue to play a pivotal role in operational planning for implementation to support equitable targeting of interventions—ensuring that populations in greatest need are prioritised.

### Area 5: Monitoring, evaluation, operational research and review

- The plan provides a strong M&E framework with a clear system and defined roles and responsibilities; however, existing data gaps and measures to strengthen routine and survey nutrition information systems are not elaborated in the plan.

→ **Recommendation:** Consider conducting an assessment of the data quality and completeness of current routine information systems and include measures to address gaps in the M&E framework and analyse the information. In addition, ensure that M&E systems have the capacity to collect and analyse data by sex and age in order to inform decision-making. Establish and strengthen M&E capacity to monitor plan performance at the start of implementation, as feasible, to support rigorous collection and validation of indicators and timely review of progress.

## Moving forward

These recommendations can be considered and applied, as feasible and relevant, to the inception phase and implementation process for Afghanistan's Food Security and Nutrition Strategic Plan. In addition, the Box on the following page indicates more detailed and prioritised key next steps based on the broader MQSUN+ support to Afghanistan in the development of this plan. For additional information on how closely this plan aligns with the SUN Checklist, please contact SMS to request a full copy of the plan review.

For more practical guidance on multisectoral nutrition planning, see the resources included in the [SUN Checklist](#) and refer to the [forthcoming multisectoral nutrition planning toolkit from MQSUN+](#)

### Recommended next steps from MQSUN+ technical assistance to Afghanistan

MQSUN+ supported the development of the AFSeN Strategic Plan under a separate technical assistance (TA) assignment. For the purpose of this systematic review, the reviewers were not involved in the plan development, and hence, this brief provides recommendations based on the independent review alone. However, given that MQSUN+ had developed a separate handover note for Afghanistan following the country TA, the specific recommended next steps from the TA are included here for reference (see handover note for additional context):

#### Immediate steps:

- Discuss status and agree on the next steps to be taken, including publishing the documents developed, preparing the launch and initiating the inception phase. This entails meetings with the core group, sectors and all partners.
- Discuss and agree on a workplan for the inception phase, including the requirements to finalise the operational parts of the Strategic Plan, the sectoral workplans, indicators and M&E system, mobilisation of resources and the already drafted implementation plan. This is also the basis for a detailed costing exercise to follow.

#### Inception phase:

- Establish functional and operational structure to start the implementation:
  - Ensure that the Technical Secretariat becomes part of the permanent Government structure; prepare to avail public sector resources to maintain its functions (on-budget procedures, preparation of government work and budget plans).
  - Ensure human resources are in place and coordination structures are functional (between sectors, but also between national and subnational level).
  - Finalise reporting and monitoring system (finalise M&E indicator and activity matrix).
  - Ensure functionality of the multisectoral information and knowledge management system; ensure that responsibilities and accountability mechanisms are set and followed up—e.g. semi-annual meetings by the steering committee, monthly meetings by the technical working groups.
  - Facilitate sectoral work planning for scale up of existing proven interventions and to prepare and initiate new activities for plan implementation.
- Support provinces in the development of provincial multisectoral plans; use the AFSeN Strategic Plan as the ultimate framework and host workshops at subnational level, where situation permits, otherwise at national level.
- Prepare for an advocacy and fund-raising campaign and events; seek further opportunities and options for leveraging resources.

#### Costing-related next steps:

- Develop a detailed and nuanced costed action plan providing accurate estimates. Build on and use the documents developed. This could be done through the following steps:
  - Establish a 'financial planning' core group that includes representations of all sectors' planning officers as well as a representation by the Ministry of Finance.
  - Generate the required information and support the preparation of a detailed and nuanced costed action plan.
  - Gradually improve the financial planning: (1) work jointly with technical officers in each sector to guide and seek the information required to complete the detailed costing matrix; (2) conduct a financial gap analysis—identify the level of actual and planned allocation and commitments, identify the financial gaps; (3) update advocacy messages and campaigns accordingly and seek funding opportunities (e.g. donor conference).
- Build capacities to plan and manage financial resources; seek opportunities to gradually build human capacities of the 'financial planning' core group on matters related to financial planning and management for nutrition. This could be through a guided process, on-the-job training and supervision, online seminars or studies of best practices (e.g. Nepal or Bangladesh).
- In the longer term: Establish a financial planning and tracking system for nutrition-specific and -sensitive activities. This could be followed by an expenditure review allowing for identification of insights and learning and improved planning.

MQSUN+ belongs to the Technical Assistance for Nutrition (TAN) programme with partners Nutrition International and the Emergency Nutrition Network to strengthen the capacity of the 60 countries within the SUN Movement to deliver policies and programmes which reduce malnutrition.

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### Acknowledgements

This brief was compiled by PATH under MQSUN+. Contributors included Amanda Coile, Carrie Hemminger, Tamsin Walters, Patti Welch and Jolene Wun.

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