

## A CALL FOR CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT: RECOGNIZING FOOD AND NUTRITION SECURITY AS FUNDAMENTAL RIGHT

Pakistan has been in a state of nutrition emergency for decades. It is among the top three countries in the world with high prevalence of stunting among children under five years old. Four out of ten under-five children in Pakistan are stunted, 18% are wasted, and 10% are overweight.<sup>1</sup> And the situation hasn't improved in the last seven years. It has become a grave concern as the prevalence of stunting and wasting is considered very high, according to the WHO's Cut-off values for public health significance.

Aiming to monitor the overall nutrition situation in the country and advocate for adequate nutrition budgetary allocations and policy and legislative reforms, the Scaling Up Nutrition Civil Society Alliance (SUNCSA) Pakistan was established in December 2014. The Alliance was formed after an intense consultative process among key stakeholders, including more than 70 civil society organizations (CSOs) from across the country. Since its establishment, the Alliance has put the nutrition agenda front and centre in the national policy paradigm through extensive policy advocacy, capacity building, demand creation, and knowledge generation. SUNCSA has also expanded its membership across the country. As of 2021, it already has 167 CSO members from international NGOs and national and community-based organizations. Nutrition International is the Alliance convenor since 2015, hosting the secretariat and spearheading SUNCSA's policy advocacy and knowledge generation while supporting the members' nutrition awareness raising in communities.

### Policy advocacy and nutrition-related budgetary and legislative reforms

SUNCSA Pakistan used multiple advocacy methods



*Members of Parliament discussing malnutrition situation in the country, in a consultative meeting hosted by SUNCSA Pakistan in December 2018*

to highlight the nutrition agenda. Lobbying letters were written to parliamentarians and relevant government ministries, highlighting the need for multisectoral nutrition action, increased nutrition budget allocation, and constitutional amendment for the fundamental right of Food and Nutrition Security. Nutrition orientation and capacity building for policy makers, decision makers, media, and key stakeholders were conducted. More than 200 parliamentarians were oriented on the importance of nutrition, increased budgetary allocation, legislative reforms, and oversight for nutrition.

SUNCSA undertook concerted advocacy efforts through one-to-one meetings for the political mainstreaming of the nutrition agenda, capitalizing on the opportunity presented by the General Elections in 2018. Political manifestos (2013) of major political parties were analysed and a briefing paper, with specific recommendations for improving the malnutrition situation in the country, was

<sup>1</sup> National Nutrition Survey 2018, <https://www.unicef.org/pakistan/media/1951/file/Final%20Key%20Findings%20Report%202019.pdf>

developed. The briefing paper was used by Alliance members to lobby to political party candidates the inclusion of nutrition commitments into their party's manifestos.

As a result, all major political parties have included nutrition commitments in their 2018 political manifestos: the Pakistan Peoples' Party had a dedicated chapter on nutrition; the Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N) committed to reduce stunting and infant mortality rate by 25% each and implement a nutrition strategy on the first 1000 days of life; and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), the ruling party, included multisectoral nutrition-sensitive commitments in their manifesto and publicly announced it through the newly elected Prime Minister during his first speech.

SUNCSA Pakistan used mass media and social media campaigns to advocate for nutrition policy and generate public discourse. The campaigns advocated for nutrition financing (#InvestinNutrition), multisectoral nutrition sensitive actions, balanced diet, multisectoral nutrition-sensitive COVID-19 response, Right to Food and Nutrition Security (#FNSOurRight), and Nutrition for Growth Year of Action (#N4G). These campaigns, conducted intermittently since 2016, have increased the demand for nutrition action in communities and converged policy focus on nutrition. The campaigns helped usher the following efforts: 1) the allocation of PKR 500 million for nutrition projects at federal level and PKR 12 billion annually for nutrition interventions for 3 years in Sindh; 2) the establishment of Nutrition Cell

in Punjab; 3) the initiation of the Chief Minister's Stunting Reduction Program in 11 high burden districts in Punjab Province; 4) the extension of nutrition programs in Balochistan to seven more districts; and 5) the declaration of malnutrition emergency in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province.

To sustain media focus on nutrition, SUNCSA built the capacity of more than 300 journalists on how to develop nutrition-sensitive content. A Media Core Group on Nutrition has been established, which is comprised of journalists from all over the country, to improve coordination and provide them easy access to authentic nutrition information and resources.

Supported by a series of policy briefs, SUNCSA continued one-to-one and group consultations with parliamentarians to advocate for multisectoral nutrition-sensitive policy making, increased nutrition financing, and legislative amendment to recognize food and nutrition security as fundamental right in the constitution of Pakistan. The Alliance developed a position paper advocating for the constitutional amendment and a cross party, special group on nutrition was nominated under the Parliamentary Task Force for SDGs in the National Assembly of Pakistan to take on this discussion and process forward.

The Alliance succeeded in getting reinforcement of nutrition commitments from the highest state level, when the Honourable President of Pakistan inaugurated the National Nutrition Conference in 2020 and appreciated the work of SUNCSA and its



*SUNCSA Pakistan hosted a national consultation for nutrition policy prioritization, participated by national and provincial parliamentarian held in December 2018*

partners. More than 200 stakeholders including policy makers/parliamentarians, decision makers, development partners, CSOs, and academia attended the conference.

Thirty parliamentarians have been mobilized and engaged as Parliamentary Nutrition Champions who commit to highlight the need for a sustainable parliamentary oversight forum for nutrition.



*Parliamentary Nutrition Champions pledged to use their influence for a robust multisectoral nutrition response in the country.*

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, SUNCSA continued advocacy efforts using virtual platforms and produced multiple knowledge products i.e. Factsheet and socio-economic impact of COVID-19 on nutrition sensitive sectors; Guideline for nutritionally balanced ration packages; multilingual booklet on nutrition-sensitive COVID-19 prevention, protection, and resilience actions.

### Response of the Pakistan Government

As a result of SUNCSA Pakistan's initiatives with government and other stakeholders, the government prioritized nutrition by taking on various efforts at the federal and provincial levels. Prime Minister Imran Khan expressed his commitment to addressing malnutrition during his first victory speech in 2018 and repeated it many times thereafter. The Pakistan National Nutrition Coordination Council (PNNCC) was established



*Key members of Parliamentary Taskforce for SDGs attending the National Assembly to discuss the need for recognizing Food and Nutrition Security as fundamental constitutional right. The event was held in July 2021.*

in 2019 to provide leadership and guidance for nutrition policy and actions in the country and is headed by the Prime Minister.

In January 2020, the National Nutrition Forum (NNF) was established under the Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives (PD&SI) to coordinate the implementation of nutrition programs in the country. The forum is the result of consultations between the national SUN secretariat and SUN networks, stressing the need for effective and improved coordination. The Ministry of Health established an 18-member Nutrition Advisory Group (NAG) in October 2020<sup>2</sup>, to review and revise the federal government's nutrition plan, review the malnutrition situation in the country, and develop the National Nutrition Action Plan and road map. The NAG's recommendations were forwarded directly to the Prime Minister of Pakistan for approval.

The government's flagship social protection program, Ehsaas (Compassion) Program, contained key nutrition interventions to reduce stunting in under-five children. The program was initially launched in nine districts and was later expended to 14 districts. It contributed largely in creating an enabling environment and commencement of a serious nutrition discourse. A revised strategy of the program included the Constitutional Amendment to move Right to Food from the "Principles of Policy" section to the "Fundamental Rights" section".

SUNCSA continues to campaign in making food nutrition and security a fundamental right in

<sup>2</sup><https://nation.com.pk/18-Oct-2020/health-minister-sets-up-nutrition-advisory-group>

the country's constitution. Lately, the federal government approved USD 2 billion to address malnutrition and stunted growth in high burden districts across Pakistan. This effort will ultimately benefit around 70 million people, particularly women, adolescent girls, and children.

### Results and lessons from SUN-CSA Pakistan's experience

Convening such a large alliance is not an easy task. There were instances when expectations were too much. Some members have lost sight of owning the advocacy of the CSA, especially with the reduced interaction within the alliance due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, not all member organizations have in-depth understanding of the multisectoral nature of nutrition and the limited resources hindered continuation of SUNCSA activities.

Beyond the CSA, the Alliance found it difficult to engage policymakers and decision makers in virtual platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the Alliance's Executive Committee members, who operate at different federal units in the country, helped maintain engagement with key stakeholders through individual and small group meetings.

It was observed that spaces for CSOs in Pakistan are shrinking due to the revised registration policy of the federal and provincial government. Nevertheless, SUNCSA Pakistan remains optimistic and active amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. It mobilized stakeholders for Nutrition4Growth (N4G) commitment and initiated a discourse, which resulted in the government's commitment to recognize Food and Nutrition Security as a fundamental constitutional right and include it in Pakistan's Social Protection Program's (Ehsaas Program) post-COVID Strategy. The technical support and facilitation provided by the SUN secretariat and SUN networks have been key facilitating factors in continuing SUNCSA Pakistan's advocacies amidst the changing nutrition landscape.

With a clear 5-year strategy (2021-2025) that SUN CSA Pakistan developed in line with the national nutrition strategies and goals, and the SUN 3.0 strategy through a consultative process, the Alliance remains positive that it can continue to move the nutrition agenda forward in the country for the next five years.



*Honorable President of Pakistan stressed nutrition prioritization and implementation during SUN-CSA's National Nutrition Conference in 2020*