

# Effectiveness of Technical Assistance:

How has assistance provided  
to SUN countries by MQSUN+  
(2017–2020) contributed to  
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## Honduras

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#### Key Findings

- The outputs developed by MQSUN+ were found to be comprehensive, meeting the needs and expectations of country stakeholders and providing a vision of how to improve nutrition in an emergency context.
- A legal framework is crucial in enforcing the scale up of nutrition-related interventions. Strategic actions recommended by technical assistance (TA) should be incorporated into the legal structure and institutional plans to ensure both their implementation and sustainability.
- Relevant ministries and government units (particular those responsible for developing policy, programmes, and interventions for nutrition) should be involved in the TA design and provision process, providing a multisectoral perspective and ensuring ownership and uptake of TA outputs.
- A clear scope defined with relevant country stakeholders during the TA design stage (i.e. the development of the expression of interest) ensures relevance and specificity.

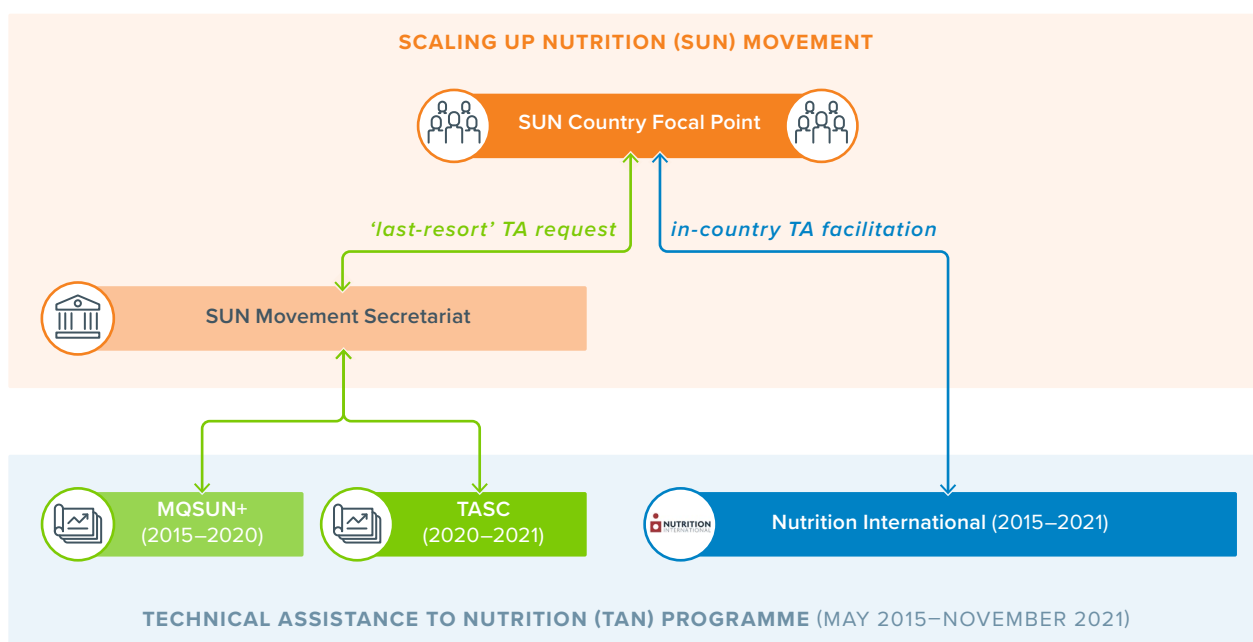
## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Technical Assistance for Nutrition programme

The Technical Assistance for Nutrition (TAN) programme is a 6.5-year (May 2015–November 2021), £35.8 million Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO)-funded initiative that provides support to the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement and FCDO staff. The Maximising the Quality of Scaling Up Nutrition Plus (MQSUN+) programme was a Technical Assistance (TA) facility within the larger TAN programme which SUN countries could access from 2015 to 2020. MQSUN+ was designed a last-resort TA provider (i.e., where no other options or capacity for meeting TA needs were available at country level) and received context-specific expertise requests from the SUN Focal Points through the SUN Movement Secretariat (SMS). This facility promoted a ‘demand-driven’ model, whereby technical support and expertise were available to overcome capacity gaps in the design and delivery of national multisector nutrition plans and other key elements of the government’s planning and implementation cycle. Following the end of MQSUN+ in 2020, the Technical Assistance to Strengthen Capabilities (TASC) project was established as a follow-on TA facility with a similar approach, led by DAI with NutritionWorks and Development Initiatives as consortium partners.

In addition to MQSUN+, countries were able to access TA through Nutrition International’s Nutrition Technical Assistance Mechanism (NTEAM), under the TAN programme. Nutrition International (NI) provides longer-term in-country support, responding to direct requests from the SUN Focal Point and agreed through prioritisation exercises with members of multi-stakeholder platforms.

Figure 1: Country Requests to MQSUN+, TASC and NI



## 1.2. Purpose / objectives of the case study

To understand the effectiveness of TA design and provision, TASC undertook a series of case studies of TA provided by MQSUN+ to a number of countries, selected according to a set of pre-defined criteria.<sup>1</sup> The studies were undertaken in consultation with PATH, the MQSUN+ consortium lead, but without their direct involvement. These case studies will be used to identify best practices and lessons learned, to inform the future design and provision of TA.

Using the pre-defined criteria, the review team selected six case study countries from a list of 14 countries where MQSUN+ provided TA between 2017 and 2020. Honduras was selected based on its location, short duration of support, and the provision of ‘remote’ TA (versus in-country visits) by MQSUN+ international consultants.

The case studies aim to investigate the following key areas:

- The process of identifying and articulating TA needs (TA design)
- The relevance of the TA provision to the country context and needs
- Country capacity to contribute to and absorb TA outputs
- Utilisation of TA outputs (beyond the provision of TA)
- How TA has empowered and promoted country-led and country-driven action

Key lessons learned from this study will feed into a synthesis report and a ‘best practice’ checklist for use by those requesting TA (e.g. country governments and other partners) and those providing TA (SMS, national and international TA providers, United Nations (UN) agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), civil society organisations (CSOs), academia) .

<sup>1</sup> Stable/fragile conflict-affected context; long-term/short-term TA provision; types of support provided (national nutrition plans/policies, advocacy/communication strategies, M&E plans, costing, development of roadmaps etc.); ‘remote’ versus in country provision; geographical location and language

## 2. Case Study Background

### 2.1. Honduras nutrition situation

Honduras joined the SUN Movement in 2019, as its 61st member and the fourth Central American country to join. The move signalled the Government's commitment to nutrition, with a corresponding policy agenda that has included updating the country's National Food and Nutrition Security Policy and Strategy (PyENSAN),<sup>2</sup> together with an associated Action Plan (2019-2023).

Honduras has highly unequal income distribution and vast disparities exist between urban and rural areas, regions, and social groups. More than half of the population (60%) live below the poverty line. Although almost three quarters (72%) of households depend on agriculture, the country is characterised by inequitable access to land, insufficient food production, high unemployment, and vulnerability to natural disasters. Twenty-three percent of children under five years old are stunted, which is higher than average for the region,<sup>3</sup> with rates of up to 40% in the Dry Corridor, where a large proportion of the indigenous population lives. Anaemia affects 29% of children under five, with a prevalence of up to 60% in babies aged 6-8 months. Fifteen percent of women and girls of reproductive age are also affected. An estimated 59.5% of adult (aged 18 years and over) women and 51.8% of adult men are overweight or obese.

### 2.2. MQSUN+ technical assistance to Honduras

MQSUN+, funded by the FCDO and led by, began providing TA to the Government of Honduras between June and September 2020.

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Honduras was faced with the unprecedented direct impacts of the virus as well as its indirect effects on food and nutrition security. As food production and commerce slowed, food security deteriorated, necessitating prioritisation of nutrition-related measures. Unidad Técnica de Seguridad Alimentaria y Nutricional (UTSAN)<sup>4</sup> (a unit established in 2015 within the Ministry of Coordination and responsible for public policy on Food Security and Nutrition) made a call for localised solutions. A multisectoral approach was emphasised to support food security and nutrition (FSN) and underpin the COVID-19 response. It was critical to garner support from a wide range of sectors and stakeholders, with the aim of galvanising greater political support for the actions required.

A series of emergency decrees were issued, the first of which created a cross-ministerial commission for a coordinated response to COVID-19, directed by the National Health and Security Ministries. To strengthen the integration of nutrition into the response, TA was requested through SMS to provide UTSAN with the necessary evidence, tools and documentation to support advocacy for high-level political commitment for nutrition in the COVID-19 response. They also wanted the TA deliverables to offer a baseline for the subsequent updating and strengthening of medium- and long-term policies and strategies for food and nutrition security.

The specific TA objectives were to support UTSAN with the materials necessary to create an 'Action and Strategic Operation Plan for Food and Nutrition Security during Coronavirus, within the PyENSAN Framework'. PyENSAN is the guiding framework that provides guidelines and strategic actions aiming to ensure access to adequate food and nutrition, with sustainable agri-food systems, and fostering communities that are resilient to crises and climate change. As a result, the following documents were developed:

- A revision of the legal framework of the official COVID-19 response in Honduras (Deliverable 0)
- A compilation of guidelines for the subsequent development of an 'Action and Strategic Operation Plan for Food and Nutrition Security during Coronavirus' (Deliverable A1)
- An advocacy document with guidelines for the integration of food and nutrition security (FNS) in the COVID-19 response (Deliverable A2)

2 BORRADOR PYENSAN 2030 18012019 EC SL RM 3 editado FINAL.pdf (ceniss.gob.hn)

3 <https://globalnutritionreport.org/resources/nutrition-profiles/latin-america-and-caribbean/central-america/honduras/>

4 Technical Unit for Food and Nutrition Security (UTSAN)

- Suggestions for the reorganisation and updating of the National Food and Nutrition Security Policy and Strategy (PyENSAN) and the National Plan for Nutrition in the coming months (Deliverable A3)
- A series of guidelines for the adequate planning and management of food assistance (Deliverable B1)
- A summary of guidelines and tools for food and nutrition security planning, for use at the subnational level (Deliverable B2)

In addition, a list was compiled in conjunction with UTSAN regarding processes, steps and technical inputs which UTSAN and the rest of the National Food and Nutrition Security System (SINASAN) should implement, with the goal of scaling up and strengthening the food and nutrition system in favour of improving nutritional outcomes in Honduras.

### 3. Methods and Limitations

An outline framework was developed for consultation with country stakeholders through key informant interviews (KIIs) or focus group discussions. The review team initially contacted the SUN Movement's Country Liaison Team to connect with the SUN Focal Point and Technical Focal Point in country. A total of four stakeholders participated in the exercise.

Discussions were limited to the TA provider, the SUN Movement's Country Liaison Team (CLT) and UTSAN members (including the SUN Focal Point and Technical Focal Point). Although the review team requested contact details of any other stakeholders involved in the TA and those using the deliverables, UTSAN was unable to provide these. It should also be noted that as the TA was only of short duration (four months), it is assumed that only a limited number of stakeholders were involved.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. TA design

#### 4.1.1. Demand for TA and priorities

The need to integrate nutrition within the COVID-19 response was initially identified by UTSAN, and this was then directly communicated to the SMS CLT. The main stakeholders involved in the initial stages were the current SUN Focal Point who is also the current director of UTSAN and the former SUN Focal Point, initiated discussions on getting TA support with SMS in March 2020. Respondents stated there was also some engagement from academics and donors. A respondent added that more actors should ideally have been engaged at this stage, although in the context of the pandemic it was difficult to consult with a larger group of people, especially high-level civil servants who were already preoccupied with the COVID-19 response.

Respondents stated that the TA was timely and appropriate, as the TA reportedly helped to broaden the COVID-19 response to include nutrition. In addition, respondents widely agreed that the TA was critical in supporting the response plan during the initial stages of the pandemic and addressed the impacts of COVID-19 beyond the public health domain.

The SUN Focal Point (FP), who is placed in UTSAN, was informed by SMS of the request for TA using the MQSUN+ facility. It was reported that other TA providers were not identified or approached for this support. The EUROSAN-Occidente project<sup>5</sup> had previously provided TA to UTSAN, funded by the European Union (EU), working with the Secretariat of the General Coordination of Government through UTSAN to improve the food and nutrition situation in Honduras through innovative solutions to improve production and support the development of public policies. One aim of the MQSUN+ TA was to complement other pieces of work prepared or provided by EUROSAN-Occidente.

5 Inicio – EUROSAN-Occidente

#### 4.1.2. Scope

The TA was initiated at the end of the MQSUN+ contract, which generated pressure to start the TA as soon as possible. For this reason, the expression of interest (EoI) was left quite open. The international consultant contracted by MQSUN+ was initially requested to work on the review of the decrees, the advocacy document, and the document outlining suggestions for the reorganisation and update of the National Strategy for Food and Nutrition Security and the National Plan for Nutrition. However, expectations of the list of deliverables grew as the TA progressed. UTSAN requested additional support in developing guidelines for the planning and management of food assistance, and a summary document highlighting guidelines and tools for food and nutrition security planning for use at sub-national level.

The lack of clarity on the scope of the TA meant that the list of deliverables continued to grow, as the needs were many. One informant suggested that additional guidelines could have been developed internally at UTSAN. Therefore, an initial assessment outlining the deliverables required would have been valuable. This is to ensure the last-resort approach is maintained, and the TA provider is responding to TA requests which cannot be developed by in-country capacity.

#### 4.1.3. National capacity to support and contribute to the TA process

For this particular TA, a formal process to assess capacity in country did not take place before or during the TA, although one respondent stated that UTSAN may have had the capacity to develop some of the deliverables requested of MQSUN+. Honduras has had many TA assignments completed through the EU, and more recently funded by UN agencies, and respondents highlighted that existing country capacity should be considered and taken into account during the design of the TA.

The consultant contracted had regional expertise, and country stakeholders found them to be an excellent choice, possessing the relevant expertise and background in nutrition as well good functional skills.

#### 4.1.4. Gender, equity and social inclusion

This TA assignment did not include explicit gender, equity, and social inclusion (GESI) considerations, and minimal efforts were reportedly made in ensuring the design incorporated GESI considerations in the objectives, scope of work and tasks. Moreover, the need for GESI expertise or the participation of women, girls, and other potentially disadvantaged groups in consultations were not considered in the TA design or during its provision. As one respondent noted, this is difficult to do in short-term consultancies, where the number of days is already very limited to achieve the set objectives.

### 4.2. TA provision

#### 4.2.1. Timing of technical assistance

The timing of the TA was opportune in that the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and humanitarian assistance partners were seeking a national plan related to FSN and the pandemic. Respondents also found that although the TA was a short-term consultancy, given that the effects of the pandemic will continue for some time, updates to the Action and Strategic Operation Plan for Food and Nutrition Security will be necessary, and the work of the MQSUN+ consultant provides a good base for conducting these.

#### 4.2.2. Remote TA provision

Due to the constraints of the pandemic, the consultant provided online remote support to UTSAN, using Zoom for meetings, emails for validation and approval of the outputs, and WhatsApp to maintain regular discussions. This mode of support was considered to have worked very well and was said to have not compromised the quality or effectiveness of TA provision, although country stakeholders said that in-person support would have been preferable if circumstances

had permitted, for better engagement with various sectoral stakeholders as well as high-level civil servants, enriching the quality of the outputs.

### 4.2.3. Capacity development

The TA provision process reportedly helped to build some capacity informally (through meetings and emails) within UTSAN, although there was very little engagement outside of UTSAN and thus capacity development was limited. One respondent remarked that the TA should be “a gap filler,” and the TA should fulfil an urgent need whilst simultaneously providing the tools to address future needs. Ultimately, the TA process itself should foster capacity development, by engaging with actors delivering programmes locally and promoting a ‘learning by doing’ approach. As noted previously, this approach was not taken and some deliverables could have been developed nationally. A ‘learning by doing’ approach would have been more challenging to adopt due to the short duration of the TA and the necessity of remote provision only.

### 4.2.4. Involvement of government ministries and international actors

During initial discussions to prepare the EOI, the SUN Focal Point assigned a liaison person to participate and collaborate with the consultant. The current SUN Technical Focal Point was given this responsibility, and had regular meetings with the consultant to share feedback from country stakeholders and to validate the outputs. Otherwise, the TA outputs were developed independently by the consultant, with feedback on drafts provided primarily by UTSAN. UTSAN did attempt to engage other stakeholders throughout the TA provision process, but were unsuccessful due to competing priorities.

Country respondents stated they would endeavour to involve more actors from all sectors for future TA, and emphasised that although UTSAN is mandated to coordinate public policy around FSN, they should not be the only actors involved in these types of TA.

### 4.2.5. Availability and use of data

The TA consultant conducted a comprehensive desk review of policies, emergency decrees, food security law, a review of secondary data (from FAO and OCHA), previous TA deliverables (provided by EUROSAN) and public spending reports. In addition, the consultant had access to an analysis of public spending on food security completed in 2019, and an analysis of the costs of the double burden of malnutrition.

### 4.2.6. Gender, equity and social inclusion

In the process of developing the guidance documents, the TA consultant reviewed existing guidance on gender in the context of COVID-19, focusing particularly on revisions and actions required to ensure gender-sensitivity. An example of this is the review of evidence published by the National Institute for Women (INAM)<sup>6</sup>, which analysed the gender equity integration included in the food security and nutrition policy in comparison, which was included in the FNS guidelines for sub-national level.

Representatives from marginalised, vulnerable and indigenous population groups did not participate in the TA process, but it is expected that changes made as a result of this TA may have an impact on these groups. For example, the TA provider included a chapter on gender mainstreaming in deliverable A3 (Suggestions for the reorganisation and updating of the National Strategy for Food and Nutrition Security and the National Plan for Nutrition), specifically recommending adaptations to target priority vulnerable groups who are disproportionately affected by the pandemic (e.g. school children without access to school meals, informal workers, and families in urban areas with high population densities).

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6 The National institute for Women

### 4.3. Quality of the TA outputs

Respondents agreed that the deliverables developed through the TA by MQSUN+ were of good quality. The TA was found to be comprehensive and to meet the needs and expectations of country stakeholders, who stated the outputs have empowered them and provided a vision of how to improve nutrition in an emergency context. In addition to identifying gaps and opportunities to improve nutrition outcomes, the TA documented achievements, providing country stakeholders with a sense of positive reinforcement.

### 4.4. Utilisation/outcomes of TA provision

#### 4.4.1. Launch and dissemination of TA outputs

Although no launch event or communication strategy was prepared to formally launch and disseminate the TA outputs, the TA provider did have an opportunity to present key findings via a validation meeting attended by UTSAN. Respondents noted that as the specific intention was to present the TA findings to high-level civil servants from relevant sectors (including health, agriculture, finance) the TA outputs were not widely shared at senior government level. However, the recommendations were promoted at sub-national level through several meetings between UTSAN and select municipalities to present recommendations in relation to planning and resource assignment. The advocacy document, which aims to secure high-level political commitment, has not yet been utilised. Respondents attributed this to the upcoming elections in Honduras and the current complex political context. The outputs have also been shared with some key stakeholders, including the EU.

#### 4.4.2. Uptake of outputs

Stakeholders from UTSAN reported they have reviewed and digested the outputs' contents, and utilised many of the TA's recommendations, in particular on engagement at local level to mobilise municipal authorities. Country participants noted that key messages from this TA were relayed during meetings with local government, with the aim of promoting nutrition-related activities in their plans.

UTSAN have confirmed two main instances of utilisation. Firstly, the Escuela Agrícola Panamericana Zamorano, a university, is redesigning a diploma on food security and nutrition, focusing on nutrition monitoring. Secondly, based on the key points highlighted in the guidelines for developing an FNS action plan during COVID-19, EUROSAN has commissioned TA to support local authorities in understanding what changes have been implemented and to diagnose the planning capacity at that level.

#### 4.4.3. Capacity development

As well as the additional TA commissioned to support local authorities in planning, UTSAN has recruited new staff to support sub-national implementation. There are 298 municipalities in Honduras, organised into 40 groups called Mancomunidades. The purpose of these groups is to share budgets and collectively prioritise actions (e.g. construction of health centres, roads). UTSAN have been strengthening the integration of nutrition through these groups, including the recruitment of three nutritionists to support implementation and strengthen capacity in three Mancomunidades, with plans to extend this to other Mancomunidades.

#### 4.4.4. Engagement with ministries

Respondents reported how UTSAN has attempted to influence the Ministry of Health (MOH) to prioritise nutrition-sensitive and nutrition-specific interventions, based on the findings and recommendations of the TA, in particular prioritising the first 1,000 days of life. UTSAN recognises that financial mechanisms (such as the budget) can be utilised to leverage and place conditions on the MOH to meet certain indicators, and thus UTSAN has been advocating for the commitment of financial resources. MoH has tentatively planned to create a nutrition-specific unit, however more support and action from its leadership is required to actualise this.

The key objective for this TA was to support the integration of FSN in the COVID-19 response, however UTSAN have so far been unable to engage and influence other ministries, in particular the Ministry of Social Development, which is responsible for delivering food assistance in the COVID-19 response.

#### 4.4.5. Political economy and stakeholder mapping

In terms of issues and constraints in using the outputs and implementing the recommendations, UTSAN expressed the need to work more closely with the institutions and ministries responsible for developing policy, programmes, and interventions for nutrition from a multisectoral perspective. Respondents found recommendations difficult to implement, as the TA did not involve the relevant stakeholders and sectors, due to many competing agendas and priorities including the response to the pandemic, upcoming elections, and the process of building back from devastating tropical storms that recently hit the country.

#### 4.4.6. Empowering country-led action

Respondents described how the outputs have contributed to the re-design of the new Food Security Policy by UTSAN which is due to be updated in 2023, as the recommendations from the TA will be integrated. In addition, the legal framework on food security is being modified and redrafted to include nutrition., although this cannot be exclusively be attributed to the TA delivered by MQSUN+, as other forms of TA have been implemented prior to and since MQSUN+'s involvement, all of which have had an influence. Respondents emphasised that a legal framework is crucial in enforcing the scale- up of nutrition-related interventions, and that actions recommended by TA should be incorporated into the legal structure and institutional plans to ensure both their implementation and sustainability.

Country stakeholders recognise that it is difficult to implement and comply with set plans due to budgetary constraints. Although there is public spending on agriculture, very little is allocated to nutrition programmes. Respondents reported that there have been no changes in budgeting recently, and there needs to be a stronger push and advocacy by relevant ministerial stakeholders at the high political level for budgetary allowance for nutrition.

## 5. Key Messages and Lessons Learned from Honduras

### 5.1. TA design

#### 5.1.1. Agreement on TA scope

- Jointly agree on TA priorities and ensure the scope in the EOI is specific and relevant.
- Identify and rationalise the key deliverables required during the EOI development process, to ensure the most pressing needs are met and avoid scope creep. The EOI should address urgent TA requests which cannot be developed by in-country capacity.

#### 5.1.2. Assessing in-country capacity in relation to the scope

- Ensure the TOR and TA design are informed by an assessment of in-country capacity, skills and availability to support the development and implementation of TA outputs by the country stakeholders.
- Research and consider country stakeholder contexts, in particular timeframes and cycles, to ensure the relevant country stakeholders are able to fully engage and take ownership (e.g. elections, policy, plans, programmes, budgets).

### 5.1.3. Involvement of national and sub-national stakeholders

- Ensure the involvement of both national and sub-national stakeholders in the TA design, to ensure the TA meets need and promote uptake of TA. Conduct a stakeholder mapping exercise to identify key stakeholders for engagement.
- Ensure the TA design includes a clear description of roles and responsibilities of country stakeholders, and that the importance of their inputs and feedback is discussed early on.

### 5.1.4. Assembling a team

- Provide country stakeholders with CVs or profiles of TA consultants with various expertise levels to ensure a good match of skills to needs and priorities, and complementarity with existing in-country capacity.
- Consider the need for specific expertise related to gender equality, equity and inclusion, and nutrition within the TA team, bringing practical examples, tools and resources.
- Consider the need for regional/bilingual nutrition expertise in countries with limited working English knowledge.

## 5.2. TA provision process

### 5.2.1. Remote TA provision

- Integrate interactive and participatory approach (including assignment of specific tasks and participation in interactive exercises) with country stakeholders, adopting a 'learning by doing' approach, via online webinars and workshops.

### 5.2.2. Involvement and ownership of country stakeholders

- Define the roles and responsibilities of the TA provider and the country stakeholders involved in the process of document development, to ensure full participation and ownership of all relevant stakeholders. A checklist of suggested stakeholders with specific roles and responsibilities (including GESI expertise with the responsibility to ensure integration) would be helpful in better identifying those who should contribute to the process.
- Take into account the current political economy for nutrition and proactively discuss/support country stakeholders to consider how best to utilise the TA outputs within the current context (such as during an election).

## 5.3. Utilisation of TA

### 5.3.1. Validation, launch and dissemination

- Consider the development of a costed dissemination plan for all relevant TA outputs as part of the TA provision, including supporting the development of resources, such as handover notes, standardised presentations and policy briefs (for different audiences at national and sub-national levels).

### 5.3.2. Support sub-national uptake

- Consider supporting country stakeholders with implementation of recommendations at the sub-national level. Sub-national planning processes can be supported through the provision of resources (such as roadmaps, standardised presentations, and briefs) for regional and community audiences.

## Annex 1 – Abbreviations

ANIES	National Agency for Economic and Social Inclusion
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office
GESI	Gender, equity and social inclusion
GTNA	Groupe Technique de Nutrition et Alimentation (Technical Group for Nutrition and Food)
MQSUN(+)	Maximising the Quality of Scaling Up Nutrition (Plus)
NGOs	Non-governmental organisations
PNDSE	Plan National de développement Social et Economique (National Social and Economic Development Plan) 2016–2020
SMS	SUN Movement Secretariat
SUN	Scaling Up Nutrition
TA	Technical assistance
TAN	Technical Assistance for Nutrition programme
TASC	Technical Assistance to Strengthen Capabilities project
TOR	Terms of reference
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WAHO	West African Health Organisation
WHO	World Health Organization

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