

# Effectiveness of Technical Assistance:

How has assistance provided  
to SUN countries by MQSUN+  
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Tajikistan

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#### Key Findings

- High-level political buy-in and readiness is key in developing multisectoral nutrition action plans. Prior to requesting technical assistance (TA), commitment and political interest to tackling nutrition challenges needs to be demonstrated.
- In retrospect, extensive research on government protocols and planning is helpful to inform a realistic approach, methodology and workplan.
- A rapid nutrition capacity assessment across sectors can inform capacity development activities within a plan, and awareness-raising activities for in-country stakeholders to promote participation and buy-in.
- The core team should include national consultants, to leverage in-country knowledge and experience, and to promote capacity development and sustainability. A national consultant can help ensure local coordination and utilisation of local knowledge.
- Specific sectoral expertise within the team can facilitate the development of sector-specific activities with relevant ministries.
- Similarly, specific expertise related to gender, equity and social inclusion (GESI) and nutrition within the TA team can facilitate access to examples, tools and resources to ensure the integration of GESI.

## 1. Introduction

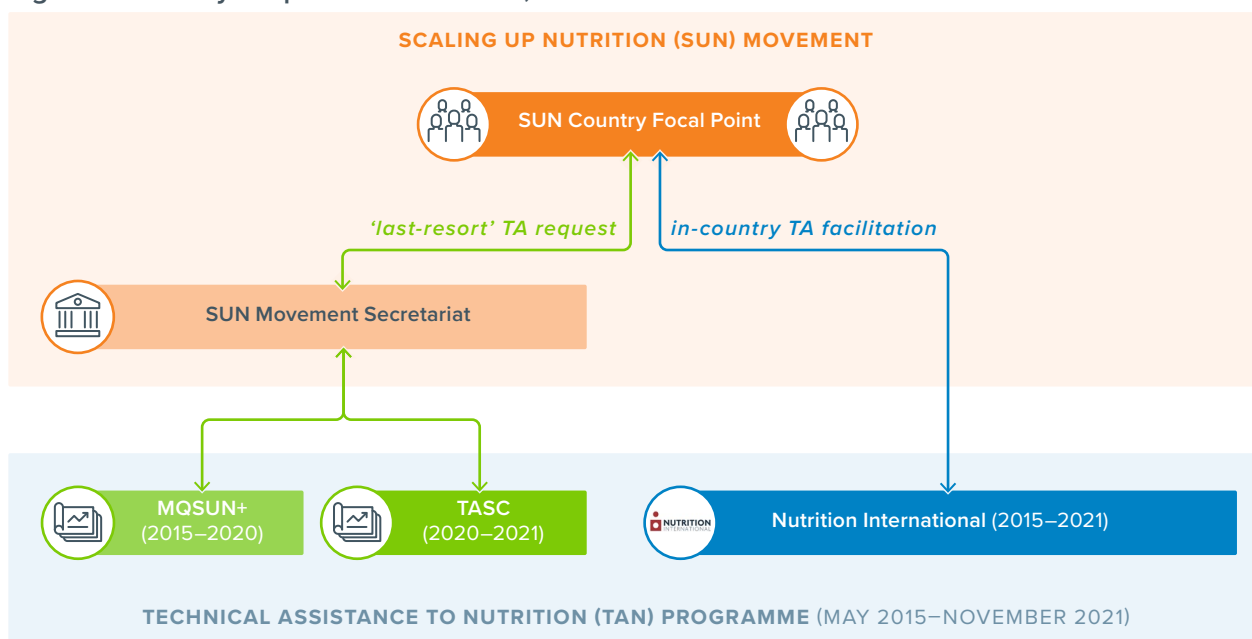
### 1.1. Technical Assistance for Nutrition programme

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.

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**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 fourteen countries where MQSUN+ provided TA between 2017 and 2020. Tajikistan was selected based on its location (Central Asia), the recent validation of the Multisectoral Nutrition Plan (MSNP), and the range of deliverables produced (policy/programme review, Costed Results Framework (CRF), and MSNP).

The case studies aimed to assess effectiveness across the TA process, including design, provision, production of outputs and onward uptake and utilisation and considered the following elements:

- Relevance and responsiveness to country context, priorities and needs
- Country capacity to contribute to and absorb TA outputs
- Quality and accessibility of outputs
- Contribution of TA outputs to: scale, enhancing GESI outcomes, governance, multisectoral coordination and collaboration, enhanced quality of programmes and policies, improved monitoring of progress in nutrition, effectiveness at leveraging resources.

Key lessons learned from this study will feed into a synthesis report and a guidance note 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. Tajikistan nutrition situation

Tajikistan has seen a vast reduction in poverty levels in the past 18 years. Between 2012 and 2016, poverty fell from 37% to 26%.<sup>2</sup> Since 2012, the poorest regions of the country have made the most progress in poverty reduction.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, Tajikistan has the highest malnutrition rate among the former Soviet republics. Undernutrition remains a critical public health concern, particularly in remote regions and rural areas, despite significant improvement in the overall nutritional status of children and falling child mortality rates. According to the most recent Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) in 2017, almost a fifth (18%) of all children 0–59 months are stunted, 6% are wasted (low weight-for-height), 8% are underweight (low weight-for-age), and 3% are overweight.

Tajikistan joined the SUN Movement in 2013. The First Deputy Minister of Health was nominated as the SUN Focal Point, and a SUN Secretariat was established. Based within the Ministry of Health and Social Protection of the Population (MOHSP), it was supported by other government ministries and international partners, including United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) and US Agency for International Development (USAID).

### 2.2. MQSUN+ technical assistance to Tajikistan

MQSUN/MQSUN+ provided phased TA support to the Government of Tajikistan from 2015 until 2020. This case study will focus on the support provided by MQSUN+ (2017–2020).

Table 1: TA support provided by MQSUN/MQSUN+ to the Government of Tajikistan

PHASES	TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROVIDED		PROJECT
Phase 1: 2015	Policy and Programme Gap Analysis	Review of existing multisectoral policy and programme documentation, followed by a high-level workshop to agree on common goals for the development of the CRF and discussion of sectoral priorities and contributions.	MQSUN
Phase 2: 2017	Common Results Framework	Facilitation of policy and strategy dialogue within and between different sectors, and consolidation of discussions and sectoral input into a CRF for nutrition.	MQSUN+
Phase 3: 2018–20	Multisectoral Nutrition Plan	Development of a detailed action plan to guide the operationalisation of the CRF across the different sectors.	

Following the SUN Movement's multisectoral approach to nutrition, and in recognition of the need for a collective and coordinated national response to the nutrition challenges facing the country, the SUN Focal Point requested MQSUN's support through the SMS, following the SUN Global Gathering in 2014. Tajikistan's SUN Secretariat, with the support of MQSUN+ and SUN partners, has developed the national Multisectoral Nutrition Plan 2020–2025 for the operationalisation of the Common Results Framework developed in 2017.

The MSNP has four strategic objectives:

- **Strategic Objective 1:** Create an enabling policy environment for improving nutrition in Tajikistan
- **Strategic Objective 2:** Improve the quality and coverage of nutrition-specific interventions
- **Strategic Objective 3:** Improve the quality and coverage of nutrition-sensitive interventions
- **Strategic Objective 4:** Establish a mechanism for the ongoing collection, analysis, and comparison of nutrition information from multiple sectors

The plan has been developed through extensive engagement with government stakeholders, development partners, UN agencies, international NGOs, CSOs and academia, as well as through analysis of secondary data, including recent national surveys and ongoing programmes.

<sup>2</sup> World Bank. 2020. Tajikistan Overview. Washington, DC: World Bank. Available at <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/tajikistan/overview>

### 3. Methods and Limitations

Based on the review objectives and key areas (see above), an outline framework was developed for consultation with potential stakeholders through key informant interviews (KIIs). Some questions were tailored to the country context, the type of TA provided, and the stakeholders concerned.

The review team initially contacted UNICEF, given their role as the SUN donor co-convenor and their level of involvement throughout the TA design and provision process. A full list of stakeholders was obtained, including stakeholders who were involved at different stages in TA provision and/or using TA products. These included the TA provider (i.e. the consultants), the former SUN Technical Focal Point (FP) in-country, UN and partner agencies.

A total of eight stakeholders participated in the exercise including the former Technical Focal Point, representatives of UN and donor agencies, and former MQSUN+ consultants.

Due to recent COVID-19 restrictions and remote working, there were difficulties in arranging interviews and engaging with sectoral ministries. Discussions were thus limited to the TA providers, partner organisations, and the former SUN Technical Focal Point (the former Director of Maternal and Child Health in the MOHSPP). Several significant stakeholders were not interviewed, including those from the MOHSPP and other relevant ministries (including the Ministry of Economy and Trade, and Ministry of Agriculture). Furthermore, the team were unable to engage with the previous and current SUN Focal Points. Similar to the process adopted throughout the TA provision process, UNICEF facilitated the engagement between the review team and government stakeholders. Direct engagement with government stakeholders without the approval of the SUN Focal Point is not possible in Tajikistan. In addition, due to staff turnover, stakeholders who participated in the workshops, the working groups and the consultations during the TA provision are no longer in the same positions. This case study is therefore based on the perceptions of in-country stakeholders from the former SUN Technical Focal Point, staff from some key UN agencies and donor partners, and the MQSUN+ consultants involved.

### 4. Findings

#### 4.1. TA design

##### 4.1.1. Relevance of technical assistance

Prior to requesting TA, the Government of Tajikistan took steps to demonstrate a commitment to tackling nutrition challenges in the country. This included successful application for SUN Movement membership, the appointment of a SUN Focal Point, and placing nutrition as a priority rooted in the National Development Plan. This facilitated the identification of goals and the multisectoral actions required to address the multiple and complex causal pathways to malnutrition, primarily through the development of a CRF and the MSNP. Developing the MSNP and the CRF are separate processes. The MSNP is typically elaborated after a CRF has been developed, with the aim of providing a narrative to accompany already detailed and agreed plan components.

Respondents found that the TA occurred at the right time for the Government of Tajikistan, as government policies and priorities were aligned and the MOHSPP showed interest in pursuing the development of the CRF and the MSNP. Following the programme and policy gap analysis conducted by MQSUN in 2015, the National Development Strategy of the Republic of Tajikistan integrated nutrition, along with food security, as a strategic development objective to be achieved by 2030. Food security had initially been identified prior to the programme and policy gap analysis review, and nutrition was added following the review recommendations.

## National Development Strategy of the Republic of Tajikistan for the period up to 2030

The ultimate goal of the long-term development of Tajikistan is to improve the population's living standards based on sustainable economic development. To achieve this, the following strategic development objectives are defined for the next 15 years:

1. Ensure energy security and efficient use of electricity
2. Exit from communication dead end and turn the country into a transit country
3. Ensure food security and people's access to good quality nutrition
4. Expand productive employment.

In addition to the above, in June 2018, the Coordinator of the Global SUN Movement and Assistant UN Secretary-General, Gerda Verburg, visited Tajikistan and met with top government officials. Respondents expressed that this visit helped to raise the profile of nutrition as a significant national issue.

### 4.1.2. Demand and priorities for TA

Country stakeholders were made aware of the MQSUN TA facility while attending the 2014 SUN Global Gathering, and the SUN Focal Point subsequently requested MQSUN's support through the SUN Movement Secretariat. UNICEF was tasked to facilitate this request between government stakeholders and SMS/MQSUN. It is important to note that country stakeholders in Tajikistan spoke limited English, and consequently relied heavily on UNICEF to disseminate global information to the government and to the MOHSPP.

The need for TA became apparent due to the growing political interest in developing a multisectoral nutrition action plan. It is unclear whether the identification of TA needs was entirely driven by government stakeholders or whether the main technical partners played a key role in generating the demand. Various accounts have emphasised the pivotal role UNICEF played in driving the nutrition agenda in Tajikistan, with the approval and agreement of the SUN Focal Point. Although UNICEF have a dedicated Nutrition Officer in the country, they did not have sufficient internal availability to provide the TA.

In Phase 1 of the support, at the request of the former country SUN Focal Point and UNICEF, MQSUN consultants conducted a policy and programme gap analysis, which was informed by stakeholder consultations and a review of existing multisectoral policy and programme documentation. This was followed by a high-level workshop in September 2015 to agree on a common overarching multisectoral goal for the development of a CRF, reflecting nutrition targets such as the World Health Assembly and Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) targets, and to initiate discussions on sectoral priorities and contributions towards the achievement of this goal. As a result of this exercise, food security and good quality nutrition were included together as a core goal in the National Development Strategy 2016–2030.

The recommendations from the policy and programme review conducted under MQSUN set the scene for defining follow-on TA undertaken by MQSUN+: the development of a CRF and MSNP. Work on the CRF began in early 2017, followed by the development of a detailed nutrition action plan to guide the operationalisation of the CRF across the different sectors.

A terms of reference (ToR) was developed by the SUN Focal Point, supported by UNICEF and the SUN Secretariat, and then shared with MQSUN+. After receiving the ToR, MQSUN+ prepared an expression of interest (EOI). The MOHSPP set objectives through UNICEF, who were the main country interlocutor during the EOI development process, as it was conducted entirely in English.



### 4.1.3. National consultant capacity

Nutrition as a discipline in Tajikistan is very limited, and capacity is therefore very low.

Thus, in-country nutrition expertise was difficult to find. MQSUN+ hired three national consultants to support the TA in collaboration with the international consultants. First, a consultant was recruited to act as the national liaison. With her pre-existing nutrition knowledge and prior experience with the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition, her role was to support the MQSUN+ team in data collection; facilitate day-to-day activities with the MOHSPP, the SUN multi-stakeholder platform and other relevant in-country stakeholders; and support the collection of feedback and comments on the MSNP chapters. Another national consultant was recruited to support the data collection from different ministries. Additionally, the former SUN Technical Focal Point (who was also the former Head of Maternal and Child Health) was recruited later in the process to support the MQSUN+ team in finalising the CRF and MSNP. This addition to the team provided a wealth of knowledge on the local context, as well as awareness of government structures and ways of working.

Prior to development of the CRF (Phase 2), a capacity assessment was conducted to examine existing capacity in nutrition across the different sectors (Phase 1). This was to:

- Engage with key policy makers to identify principal constraints and understand the capacity needs to be addressed to enable the scaling up of activities;
- Make strategic, relevant, and specific recommendations to build the capacity of national, provincial and district nutrition personnel.

The assessment framework was adapted to the Tajikistan context from the World Health Organization's Landscape Analysis Country Assessment Tool, and 30 stakeholders across the sectors were interviewed. The assessment included questions on the situation, priorities, policies, and ongoing activities in relation to nutrition. Notably, the assessment did not include any questions which would assess capacity to understand gender, equity and social inclusion (GESI) considerations in relation to nutrition policy.

During Phase 3, the results of the capacity assessment were reflected in the final chapter of the MSNP. They have also been used to inform the large number of capacity-strengthening activities which feature in all of the nutrition-specific/nutrition-sensitive chapters of the plan.

Whilst the capacity assessment conducted was limited in scope and cannot be generalised, there is acknowledgement and consensus that building nutrition capacity is a fundamental requirement in tackling malnutrition and helping Tajikistan achieve its SDG and other global goals. The capacity assessment also emphasised the importance of cascading national policy and strategic nutrition objectives to the sub-national level. This requires capacity development (such as tailoring nutrition trainings, information, education and communication materials, and guidelines), as well as additional recruitment to enhance capacity in the medium and longer term.

### 4.1.4. International consultant capacity

MQSUN+ recruited two international consultants to support the development of the CRF and the MSNP. Country stakeholders found the MQSUN+ consultants appropriate for the TA required and possessing relevant expertise and background in nutrition.

One UN representative noted that fluency in a local language (i.e. Russian or Tajik) would have been useful, as there were challenges in the translation process which was found to be time-consuming.

### 4.1.5. Political economy analysis

During the planning and design phase, a political economy analysis was not conducted to sufficiently understand planning processes and government protocols. The MQSUN+ consultants stated that, in retrospect, more extensive research on procedures, permissions required, and the political/bureaucratic context would have been helpful to inform the team on realistic timeframes. A better understanding of the political context could also have changed the approach, methodology and

the workplan, as the initial objectives and timeframe were quite ambitious. For example, a costing deliverable was part of the initial plan, however due to time constraints and limited in-country capacity, the team was unable to start work on this.

## 4.2. TA provision process

### 4.2.1. Capacity development

The limited nutrition capacity and knowledge within government necessitated additional capacity development tasks to raise awareness and willingness to participate in developing the plan and identifying multisectoral activities which could contribute to nutrition objectives. Prior to the development of the TA outputs, the MQSUN+ consultants were required to lead a sensitisation and buy-in process with government stakeholders through sectoral working groups, providing awareness-raising and training sessions on nutrition with most working groups. Sessions included basic concepts in nutrition (e.g. causes and drivers of malnutrition, and sectoral approaches to address these). The aim of this initial training was to encourage and facilitate participation in the development of the MSNP chapters. Although some respondents underlined the importance of this sensitisation process, it is difficult to determine whether it resulted in buy-in and participation by government stakeholders. It should also be noted that working group participants were not interviewed as part of this review, thus the usefulness of the sensitisation process cannot be verified.

A UN representative expressed a need for similar sensitising sessions at the sub-national level to strengthen local nutrition governance, knowledge and awareness. Other respondents highlighted the need for more capacity and buy-in at senior political level.

### 4.2.2. Involvement of government ministries

MQSUN+ conducted a high-level parliamentary event to launch the TA provision process. This engaged the SUN Government Focal Point, the previous SUN Technical Focal Point, UNICEF and the GIZ-funded SUN Movement Secretariat, to facilitate the set-up of working groups on nutrition in each of the sectors concerned, which should meet on a regular basis to elaborate detailed action plans for each sector. As well as MOHSPP, these included representatives of the Ministries of Agriculture, Education and Science, Industry and New Technology, Economic Development and Trade, and Finance, plus CSOs and development partners. To some degree, gender considerations were integrated in the formation of these groups through the participation of the Committee of Women, under the presidential office. These groups were formed to: raise awareness on nutrition; promote a participatory approach and work collaboratively to develop sector strategies; and develop the MSNP chapters with those stakeholders. The intention was to create a sense of ownership, and ultimately lead to better absorption and utilisation of the plan. Country stakeholders were involved in the facilitation of these working groups, for example both the SUN Focal Point and the Technical Focal Point presided over the working group meetings. Respondents have widely reported that this was a helpful process, and provided active engagement and discussions with good attendance across the sectors. However, convening the working groups and sectoral stakeholders on a regular basis proved extremely difficult, and this approach was not successful in obtaining the level of detail required for each chapter. The MQSUN+ consultants mentioned that the engagement varied based on awareness levels (e.g. MOHSPP were more engaged compared to other ministries, while some ministries did not engage at all).

Given the difficulty in convening the sectoral working groups as an approach for development of a detailed multisectoral action plan, MQSUN+, in collaboration with its in-country partners, took the decision to draft the action plan based on existing country documentation (including sectoral policies, plans, programmes and guidelines) and the data/information collected through the sectors, and then to submit the chapters for review and comment as they were produced.

The former MQSUN+ consultants collected primary data on key sectors (i.e. water, sanitation and hygiene; health; education) through KIIs and stakeholder consultations. This included information about existing policies and programmes in each sector and ongoing nutrition-related actions, as well as data on target populations (e.g. number of children 0-6 months and 6-59 months old,



number of women of reproductive age, number of school-age children, number of children with acute malnutrition, number of pregnant women with anaemia, etc), infrastructure (e.g. number of primary and secondary schools, health facilities, water points), human resources (e.g. health workers, extension workers), and social protection (e.g. number of vulnerable women prioritised in social protection strategies, coverage of food baskets to vulnerable families, and current linkages between vulnerable families on social protection lists and nutrition services). The data collected were used to inform the various activities proposed in the MSNP chapters. However, a key limitation was the lack of data collection and verification of plan activities at the sub-national level.

Respondents reported difficulties in getting stakeholders to engage in the development of the MSNP chapters. Throughout the process, it proved difficult to maintain discussions on nutrition planning, as the focus would shift to discussions on resourcing, rather than developing a plan or a policy. It is possible that these difficulties relate to a lack of knowledge and expertise on nutrition, or perhaps a lack of clarity on roles and responsibilities, as some respondents stated initially the former MQSUN+ consultants were expected to take ownership and work independently in producing the deliverables. However, it may also be an indication of a more extensive problem related to the placement of the SUN Focal Point in the MOHSPP, which restricted the FP's capacity to convene government stakeholders or leverage contributions from other ministries.

#### 4.2.3. Involvement of international actors

UNICEF has been intricately involved in the TA design, provision, facilitation and organisation of meetings on behalf of MQSUN+, and also in the dissemination and utilisation of the outputs following their completion. The reason for this is that government protocols dictated that MQSUN+ could not directly engage with or submit deliverables to the MOHSPP or any other government body. Consequently, UNICEF played an important role as facilitator. One respondent considered that MQSUN+ appeared to be supporting UNICEF rather than the government. However, without their support, MQSUN+ consultants reported how they would have certainly struggled to engage with the relevant government stakeholders. UNICEF played a critical role in providing linkages, despite the difficult bureaucratic government processes, and ensuring alignment with the country's strategic goals.

Between 2015-2017, other international actors such as USAID had several meetings, consultations, and interviews with nutrition-related stakeholders, including the MOHSPP, to define TA priorities. USAID initially provided co-funding for developing the CRF. They also provided input in the workplan, but due to declining interest in pursuing the development of the CRF/MSNP (as a result of the long development process), they later withdrew their support.

Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and WFP, as members of the SUN platform, participated in the initial inception of the TA by providing relevant documentation and taking part in the initial workshop. Although active in nutrition, World Health Organization (WHO) had limited involvement in the TA delivery process. In Tajikistan, WHO focuses on non-communicable diseases such as overweight and obesity. It had previously supported the MOHSPP on other health-related policies and interventions, including the development of the Nutrition and Physical Activity Policy, and their input may have been valuable from this perspective.

#### 4.2.4. Timeframe and duration of technical assistance

As previously noted, there was general consensus among respondents that the TA came at the right time for the country, as national priorities and strategies with relation to nutrition were sufficiently developed for the TA to be relevant and absorbed. However, the process of developing the deliverables took longer than initially anticipated.

In addition to slow and bureaucratic government review and validation processes, the translation and feedback process played some role in this. As the draft of each chapter was finalised by the MQSUN+ team, it was shared with UNICEF for initial comment and then translation. Translated chapter drafts were then sent by UNICEF through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the SUN Focal Point in the MOHSPP, for review and further dissemination to relevant sector stakeholders. Any subsequent feedback from those stakeholders would then require translation by UNICEF before finally being shared with and addressed by the MQSUN+ team.

Although the translation and review process was cumbersome, many respondents reported that the challenges relating to the political context, described in section 5.2.6, contributed significantly to the extended duration.

#### 4.2.5. Availability and use of data

The MQSUN+ team used a range of data sources to inform the CRF and the MSNP, including the TA design and development of deliverables. Data sources included the WHO/WFP 2012 report, which was the first real documentation of nutrition issues in Tajikistan.<sup>3</sup> Other sources included the DHS (2012, 2017), the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys, and the national micronutrient status survey (2016).

#### 4.2.6. Political economy

A major challenge for the TA consultants was the strict government protocols to be followed when engaging with government stakeholders. International consultants are required to report and seek approval from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for every meeting held with government stakeholders, which can take weeks. UNICEF sought the relevant approvals and permissions to conduct each meeting on behalf of MQSUN+, but this process was time-consuming and required significant preparation. For this reason, meetings between the TA team and the SUN FP were extremely rare, which did not help in terms of relationship-building and slowed the process. To overcome these issues and alleviate the bureaucratic burden, working groups were set up by in-country stakeholders, inviting a number of key government stakeholders to participate, for which approval was only needed once. This way of working removed the need to seek approval for each bilateral meeting with a government stakeholder, however this meant the TA team could only engage with government via the working groups. Although the working group model can facilitate some engagement with government stakeholders (in particular in contexts with heavy administrative processes), this meant the former MQSUN+ consultants had a very limited window to collectively engage with ministries. Engagement through this channel was also very high-level and the information collected was not sufficient to further develop the MSNP chapters.

An additional contextual challenge was the level at which SUN stakeholders were convened in Tajikistan. In many countries, the SUN Focal Point is positioned at the level of senior government, for example within the Presidential or Prime Ministerial office, with the power to convene the various government ministries implicated. The SUN Focal Point is a political position, requiring high-level engagement, and the ability to convene government and other stakeholders and call for their participation in the SUN Multi-Stakeholder Platform. In Tajikistan, the SUN Focal Point is linked to the Deputy Minister of Health position. Respondents across the board agreed that the current positioning of the SUN FP constrains a multisectoral approach in responding to national nutrition priorities. For example, requesting information from other sectors/ministries currently requires petitioning high-level government (i.e. Prime Minister or President's office) to make these requests on the MOHSP's behalf, as they do not have the authority to make these requests directly. This poses a huge challenge for multisectoral nutrition coordination, planning, implementation and reporting. Nevertheless, in a recent SUN coordination meeting, there were some promising discussions around positioning the SUN FP role in Tajikistan at a higher political level (i.e. the Deputy Prime Minister's office).

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

In relation to data collection, the MQSUN+ team ensured gender disaggregation in the collection of sectoral information, but no disaggregation was conducted for other marginalised groupings

In relation to the representation and inclusion of diverse voices, the respondents in-country stated that there was some participation of relevant experts to ensure the consideration of women, girls and other potentially disadvantaged and excluded groups. The Committee of Women, under the presidential office, had some involvement in developing the plan, through participation in consultations, workshops and in reviewing the draft. On the other hand, other respondents felt the

3 World Food Programme (WFP). 2021. Tajikistan Overview. Washington, DC: WFP. Available at <https://www.wfp.org/countries/tajikistan>

inclusion of GESI perspectives was not sufficiently addressed, as the focus was to meet the basic requirements of nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive actions.

Respondents reported GESI to be implicitly linked to the objectives and activities in the MSNP, and the plan was described by some as 'gender-sensitive'. Although the plan did not have explicit chapters on GESI, some respondents have stated that by its nature, the CRF and MSNP target women (in particular, pregnant women, lactating mothers and women of reproductive age), children under five and vulnerable families. As the plan is focused on regions with high rates of malnutrition, this also promotes equity.

Respondents stated that GESI considerations were indirectly included in the plan, capturing the basic nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive aspects, although a systematic GESI approach was not taken. Others found the plan to be lacking in terms of explicit GESI-related components, noting that although some goals and activities foster a gender-sensitive approach, the document does not explicitly describe actions required to address gender-related determinants of malnutrition. Former MQSUN+ team members concurred with this and stated that, in retrospect, each chapter should have included a specific section on GESI.

### 4.3. Quality of TA outputs

Respondents agreed that the MSNP developed through the TA by MQSUN+ is of good quality. The TA delivered the first MSNP for the country, and was considered to be realistic and with the right level of analysis, using accurate and available data. The deliverables reflected the coordination efforts, as well as country-level discussions and inputs.

The former SUN Technical Focal Point stated that the MSNP achieved its objectives and provided a detailed action plan. He suggested that a midterm review (although currently not planned or budgeted for) may be conducted to assess the continued relevance of the objectives and the activities outlined in the plan.

The MQSUN+ team based the format of the MSNP on the SUN Checklist on the Criteria and Characteristics of 'Good' National Nutrition Plans<sup>4</sup>, with adjustments made after feedback from country stakeholders, particularly with relation to national government planning requirements. This includes page limits, indicators, tabular formats, figures, images and other regulations affecting the overall format. A detailed situational analysis included in the first draft of the plan had to be reduced, and consequently limited data and contextual analysis on nutrition is presented within the MSNP and CRF.

The primary purpose of the checklist is to assist the systematic review of existing MSNPs. It also serves as a complementary guiding tool in the development of new plans, and in this context it served as a useful guide on content, as there were limited examples from other countries at the time. Government planning cycles or format requirements were belatedly provided to the team, who then had to adapt the format of the plan. The lack of clarity on the format reportedly led to delays in finalising the MSNP. In addition, reaching agreement on the format and content of the CRF was a challenge. An MQSUN+ consultant noted that a standard format for a CRF did not exist and there were differing understandings of what a CRF should look like.

### 4.4. Utilisation of TA outputs

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

The MSNP was signed and launched by the President of Tajikistan in February 2021. The plan has since been disseminated at national level to high-level government stakeholders, ministerial representatives, UN agencies, development partners and donors. Dissemination measures include:

- A Parliamentary roundtable.
- An official letter to ministries and government stakeholders outlining the official decree validating the plan and the commencement of implementation by relevant sectoral ministries.

4 The SUN Checklist on the Criteria and Characteristics of "Good" National Nutrition Plans

- SUN Coordination Meetings led by the SUN Focal Point attended by relevant ministerial stakeholders, partners and international actors.

As of late 2021, the MOHSPP has not been able to publish the plan online. However, it is in the process of developing a webpage dedicated to nutrition, where the plan will eventually be hosted.

One respondent described how a newsletter for nutrition stakeholders was proposed to be developed by the MOHSPP, to provide updates on implementation progress of the plan. This would be beneficial for international actors and donor partners in keeping abreast of nutrition-related discussions and priorities at the government level, although respondents were not aware of any progress on this.

#### 4.4.2. Uptake of TA outputs

Shortly after the launch of the MSNP, a meeting was held by the SUN Coordination Council (under the MOHSPP, comprising members from multiple ministries and agencies) to discuss next steps in terms of the uptake and utilisation of the plan for each sector/ministry. In this meeting, the establishment of sectoral working groups was proposed, and ministries have been tasked with setting these up to develop sectoral implementation plans reflecting the objectives and activities in the MSNP. In subsequent meetings, ministries will be required to report on the working groups' progress with relation to these. Working groups are also required to report to the SUN Coordination Council on a quarterly basis.

In addition to the working groups, UNICEF has been requested by the MOHSPP to present relevant sector-specific sections of the plan to ministries, to underline its importance and raise awareness of the MSNP in each ministry. Although these activities are in the planning stage, a challenge in Tajikistan is the high staff turnover in ministries. Respondents described regular changes in ministerial representation at the SUN Coordination Council, making it difficult to maintain institutional memory and to progress towards goals and objectives.

Respondents highlighted plans to disseminate the plan at sub-national level, although this has not yet happened due to COVID-19-related restrictions. Respondents reported that working groups are also to be set up at regional level, to develop regional implementation plans for the MSNP. The Terms of Reference for the regional working groups is being developed by the MOHSPP and supported by the former SUN Technical Focal Point. Capacity development and training will be a key activity, to sensitise regional and national stakeholders on nutrition.

UNICEF is planning to support the Ministry of Trade and Economy to integrate aspects of the MSNP into District Development Plans, by providing relevant policy documents and capacity development support from consultants in six districts. This support should build the capacity of the Ministry of Trade and Economy, and ultimately empower and enable them to integrate the MSNP into the remaining district plans.

Country-level respondents reported that training materials relating to capacity development activities described in the MSNP are in the process of being developed, to suit a range of needs (i.e. from basic to expert knowledge).

#### 4.4.3. Monitoring and reporting

In Tajikistan, once a plan has been approved through a government decree, it is then subject to annual progress reporting to government. The MOHSPP is therefore now required by law to report on the progress of MSNP implementation. To manage this responsibility, the MOHSPP has established a new department tasked with coordinating and collating progress updates from the various ministries; monitoring implementation progress; and ultimately preparing annual reports to the government on multisectoral coordination and the overall status of implementation. A reporting format has not yet been developed, due to difficulties in finding relevant resources in Russian.

#### 4.4.4. Capacity

All respondents agreed that the TA provided by MQSUN+ has made a huge contribution to improving knowledge, awareness, and capacity of country stakeholders around nutrition and its multisectoral drivers. It has galvanised action in scaling up nutrition within government, and respondents have found decision making for nutrition to be strengthened.

An example of increased capacity of country stakeholders can be found in the recent development of a Micronutrient Deficiency Programme. This was developed for the MOHSPP by the former SUN Technical Focal Point, who was a national consultant for MQSUN+ following his retirement from his governmental position. Exposure to developing the MSNP reportedly enabled him to lead on the development of the programme independently, without external support.

Respondents emphasised the need for continued advocacy and capacity building, to ensure further progress in implementing the TA outputs and in scaling up nutrition. Particular capacity needs in monitoring and reporting were highlighted, as well as capacity building activities at the high-level and sub-regional level, in line with the planned activities set out in the MSNP.

#### 4.4.5. Buy-in from international actors

International actors have made some progress in coordinating efforts in response to the newly approved MSNP. Given their involvement and mandate, UNICEF initiated a process to coordinate efforts with the UN Strategic Framework for Nutrition that is being developed by FAO, WFP, WHO and UNICEF, in relation to supporting MSNP implementation. This framework is currently in draft, and needs to be signed and ratified by the member agencies.

### UN Strategic Framework for Nutrition (2021)

UNICEF initiated the development of a joint document to support the Government of Tajikistan to implement the MSNP 2021-2025. Under the framework of the MSNP, FAO, UNICEF, WFP and WHO will support the Government of Tajikistan to implement the Plan and achieve the national nutrition targets, which include:

- 40% reduction in stunted children under 5 years of age between 2020 and 2025
- 50% reduction in anaemia in women of reproductive age between 2020 and 2025
- 30% reduction in low birthweight between 2020 and 2025
- No increase in childhood overweight between 2020 and 2025
- Reduction in and maintenance of childhood wasting to less than 5% by 2025
- Reduction in adult overweight by 20% and adult obesity by 30% by 2025

#### Vision

- To reduce all forms of malnutrition in children, adolescents, and pregnant and lactating women in Tajikistan through concerted efforts in advocacy, coordination, and technical support to the Government of Tajikistan in policy, programme development and implementation for nutrition among the UN agencies

#### Strategic Objectives

1. Broaden the current narrative around nutrition from one that focuses on food security alone to one that fully addresses determinants of malnutrition in multiple systems
2. Coordinate and harmonise interventions to prevent and treat all forms of malnutrition among vulnerable groups

## 5. Key Messages and Lessons Learned

### 5.1. TA design

#### 5.1.1. Understanding national capacity with relation to TA priorities and needs

- Prior to requesting TA, demonstrate commitment and political interest to tackling nutrition challenges. High-level political buy-in and readiness is key in developing multisectoral nutrition action plans. For example, during the EOI development, agree on a minimum number of meetings between the TA provider with the SUN Focal Point and other relevant political stakeholders, to ensure buy-in and sufficient participation.

#### 5.1.2. Assembling the TA team

- Include national consultants in the TA team, to leverage in-country knowledge, translation and experience, and to promote capacity development and sustainability. A national consultant can help ensure local coordination and utilisation of local knowledge.
- Consider the need for specific expertise related to sectors (agriculture, social protection, education, etc) to facilitate the development of sector-specific activities with relevant ministries.
- 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.

#### 5.1.3. Contextual considerations

- Research bureaucratic procedures, permissions required, and the political context, to inform realistic timeframes and objectives through a political economy analysis.
- Ensure a thorough understanding of the SUN coordination mechanisms in country and the convening power of the SUN Focal Point, which are crucial in understanding the in-country dynamics and relationships between government actors.

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

- Define roles and responsibilities of the TA provider and the country stakeholders (including sub-national stakeholders) involved in document development and review, to promote participation of all relevant stakeholders.

### 5.2. TA provision process

#### 5.2.1. Capacity development

- Conduct a rapid nutrition capacity assessment in collaboration with country stakeholders across sectors, to inform capacity development activities within a plan. The assessment could also inform sensitisation and awareness-raising activities to promote participation and buy-in.
- Include an initial phase of sensitisation and awareness-raising on nutrition for country stakeholders before starting to develop outputs. Setting up working groups on nutrition for each sector to develop detailed action plans can be a useful mechanism to advocate for and raise awareness on nutrition among a wide range of stakeholders.



### 5.2.2. GESI

- Explore ways of integrating GESI into any capacity development activity as part of the TA process (e.g. sensitisation and awareness-raising workshops), and provide guidance on how to integrate GESI into technical documents such as the MSNP.
- Continuously review the inclusion and participation of an appropriate mix of stakeholders throughout the stages of TA provision, including gender expertise (i.e. ministries or government stakeholders involved in gender and inclusion).

### 5.2.3. Flexibility

- Ensure there is sufficient flexibility in TA timeframes, which is essential given the number of stakeholders involved in the process, their respective policy, programme and budgeting cycles, and any related delays, especially in countries with challenging bureaucratic processes.

## 5.3. Quality of TA outputs

### 5.3.1. Format and accessibility

- Ensure country-specific requirements on the presentation of TA outputs is sufficiently considered prior to their drafting, including aspects such as format, content, and level of detail.

### 5.3.2. GESI

- Include sub-sections in technical documents (such as MSNPs) that explicitly describe the integration of GESI in all steps of the programme cycle.

## 5.4. Utilisation of TA

### 5.4.1. Validation, launch and dissemination

- Include 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 level).
  - Proposing a plan to ensure the TA outputs reach relevant platforms (online and offline).

### 5.4.2. Utilisation and uptake

- Support the development of a monitoring plan to support multisectoral plans, including the development of resources and tools for tracking and reporting progress against nutrition objectives.
- Provide resources/guidance linking sector activities with nutrition, and supporting the development of sector-specific implementation plans.
- Support country stakeholders in the next phase of the plan's implementation 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.
  - Foster a multisectoral approach at the sub-national level by developing multi-stakeholder platforms at the regional level. Support can be provided in developing the ToR, the process of mobilising regional stakeholders, and providing sensitisation sessions encouraging participation and buy-in.

## Annex 1 – Abbreviations

CRF	Common Results Framework
CSOs	Civil society organisations
DHS	Demographic and Health Survey
EOI	Expression of interest
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office
FP	Focal Point
GESI	Gender, equity and social inclusion
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit
KII	Key informant interviews
MOHSPP	Ministry of Health and Social Protection of the Population
MQSUN(+)	Maximising the Quality of Scaling Up Nutrition (Plus)
MSNP	Multisectoral Nutrition Plan
NGOs	Non-governmental organisations
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
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
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USAID	US Agency for International Development
WASH	Water, sanitation and hygiene
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization

DEVELOPED BY TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE TO STRENGTHEN CAPABILITIES (TASC)



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