

Action brief

SUN Business Network links public, private sectors for nutrition in Bangladesh

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Country: Bangladesh

Topics: Coordination

Sub-topics: Strengthening capacity to better coordinate with the sectors

Date: 2023



Overview



By integrating with governmental systems and involving a broad range of stakeholders, the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Business Network (SBN) can enjoy a wealth of expertise and perspectives. This inclusive governance structure allows for comprehensive decision-making, informed policy formulation and effective implementation strategies.

In Bangladesh, the SBN benefits from the guidance of a diverse panel of 29 members from various ministries, regulatory authorities, civil society organizations and market leaders, ensuring a comprehensive representation of key stakeholders involved in the small and medium enterprise (SME) sector.

The SBN's strategic positioning within the governmental system helps it achieve sustainability through alignment with other stakeholders in the SME ecosystem – an integrated approach that fosters a conducive environment for longevity and success.



Objectives of the action brief

This brief will explain how the SBN has forged strong relationships with the public sector to ensure its sustainability and include the private sector in nutrition-related decisions.



Period covered

The governance mechanism of the SBN has been in operation since 2019 and has evolved over time. This brief covers 2019 to 2023.



What action was taken?

The SBN in Bangladesh is overseen by the Ministry of Industries and operates under the joint convenorship of the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) and the World Food Programme (WFP), with GAIN serving as the host for the network's secretariat. GAIN and WFP also co-convene the operations committee and provide support to the Ministry of Industries in its SBN activities.

The network has expanded its membership base to include more than 250 SMEs, startups and larger companies from throughout the country. By consistently adding new members, the network maintains its momentum and remains responsive to the evolving needs of small businesses in Bangladesh. This has allowed the network to tap into the expertise and experiences of a broad spectrum of individuals, thereby enriching its knowledge base and enhancing its effectiveness.

The Ministry of Industries, as the regulatory authority responsible for policymaking and oversight of large companies (including those in the food sector), is well positioned to support the strategic objectives of the SBN. The ministry's subsidiary institutions and departments are dedicated to convening SMEs and building their capacity, making the ministry an ideal fit for collaboration with the SBN.

In partnership with the National Association of Small and Cottage Industries, facilitated by the Ministry of Industries, the SBN has brought SMEs from across the country into a unified platform to supply healthier diets in the market. Through this partnership, the SBN has conducted capacity-building initiatives for SMEs focused on nutrition, food safety and business development and has organized challenges to identify innovative businesses and solutions within food systems.

The SBN has worked with the Department of Labour to highlight nutrition in the workplace and emphasize the role of SMEs in promoting employee well-being. The SBN also has facilitated dialogues among policymakers and the private sector that enhance the network's credibility and enable its influence on policy agendas.

The SBN's strong relationships with government ministries – including the Ministry of Food, the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Industries – have enabled it to:

→ Advocate for private sector engagement in bringing about improvements for a sustainable, equitable and resilient food system

- Influence policymaking decisions concerning the private sector
- Support government efforts to revamp the food system and amplify its impacts while securing an important role for the private sector
- Leverage government resources to benefit the private sector, such as arranging workshops for SMEs on food labelling
- Invite government officials to GAIN-organized seminars, round tables and conferences and organize events to help the government connect to the greater audience and disseminate crucial information
- Build a bridge of mutual benefit and cooperation among market actors who otherwise struggle to get access to the government
- Listen to actors in the market; streamline their needs, challenges and pain points; design projects that address these challenges; and work closely with the government to find micro-level solutions





What would the country do differently?

Providing leadership to large companies and associations could threaten the sustainability of the SBN, as entrusting this responsibility to the private sector without adequate preparedness could give rise to conflicts of interest and undermine the network's objectives. Therefore, an alternative governance mechanism is being developed to effectively engage the private sector and ensure the proper consideration of its responsibilities and interests. Through this new mechanism, the SBN aims to provide a structured framework for private sector involvement that proactively mitigates conflicts of interest and fosters an environment conducive to open and transparent collaboration.

Challenges: Smaller players in the Bangladesh food industry (predominantly SMEs and farmers and producers in the informal economy) lacked a consolidated, structured and formal platform that allowed them to connect with other stakeholders, share their struggles and influence policy and advocacy. This hampered their ability to benefit from resources, slowed the dissemination of information and limited capacity development.

Meanwhile, policymakers and industry regulators lacked a seamless way to reach out to these crucial stakeholders.

In fact, the absence of a coherent structure was a barrier for the industry as a whole, leading to inefficient operation, lower output and lesser food quality and quantity in terms of nutrition.

Solutions: The SBN helped organize these players into a platform that helped address the gap and create cohesion among industry players, government, policymakers, regulators and international development organizations.

For example, the SBN connected researchers at the Department of Food Technology and Rural Industries at Bangladesh Agricultural University with SBN members to provide technical assistance on safe and nutrition-sensitive food processing and share capacity-building guidance. This collaboration was made possible by the integrated platform created by GAIN and the SBN.

The SBN also organized a workshop with the Bangladesh Food Safety Authority to help SMEs interact with government officials and policymakers regarding nutrition labelling. Many SMEs personally thanked the SBN for the programme and asked more about the SBN's support system – a testament to the SBN's impact on the SME ecosystem.





What was the role of other parts of the SUN Movement in this good practice?

The SBN received valuable support from the SUN Academia Network and the SUN Civil Society Network to establish a strong presence in the country. The networks

reviewed and approved the specific details and processes of the SBN and engaged in collaborative efforts to pool resources and advance shared goals.



Adaptation and applicability

- **The pursuit of profitability must align with the principles of accountability and transparency and with commitments to improving nutrition and promoting healthier diets. Consequently, heightened caution is warranted to ensure the effective implementation of initiatives and prevent conflicts of interest.**
- **To this end, the SBN secured the participation of the Ministry of Industries and the Association of Small and Cottage Industries Bangladesh, which has an extensive network of SMEs across the country. Ultimately, the SBN has focused on engaging individuals with the necessary connections and influential capabilities.**
- **The development of a governance mechanism draft, if adopted, will ensure the network's long-term sustainability through robust ties with both the government and the private sector.**
- **GAIN's effective advocacy and leadership have granted the SBN significant access to achieve its objectives. For any network, leveraging the resources of the host organization to influence decision-making processes and the private sector is more advantageous than operating independently.**



Next steps

The SBN plans to enhance the capacity of the National Association of Small and Cottage Industries and strengthen network leadership, enabling the expansion of operations in other regions of the country, even in the absence of direct support from the SBN.

Additionally, recognizing the importance of resource mobilization to scale up activities and further engage the private sector, the network aims to secure adequate resources to bolster its efforts and maximize its impact on SMEs. This includes attracting more private sector participation, forging strategic partnerships and exploring innovative approaches to leveraging additional support.



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