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Association position paper

The nature and purpose of the UN Standing Committee on Nutrition



Here follows the position of the World Public Health Nutrition Association (the Association), on the nature and purpose, and the future, of the United Nations System Standing Committee on Nutrition (SCN). We have illustrated it with pictures of obviously happy (well, almost all!) and evidently healthy children from all parts of the world, as a reminder of a prime mission and vision of global nutrition policy. The accompanying editorial includes background on the SCN.

‘As international organisations align themselves, they are functioning within a much broader, more substantive, and novel form of partnership, built around a joint understanding of the issues... and an eagerness to achieve that goes beyond static rigid structures and moves towards empowering and open partnerships, almost social movements’. This statement is made by the UN Secretary-General’s special representative for food security and nutrition. We also perceive this vision.

1 Summary



It is time for the United Nations System Standing Committee on Nutrition (the SCN) to be reshaped, fit for the times in which we live now. Discussions on its reform have been taking place for around five years, and a number of position papers, coming to various and sometimes opposing conclusions, have been prepared. It is now time to act. The Association’s position is summarised here. It is governed and guided by seven principles. These are specified below.

1.1 Nature

The SCN should remain a United Nations body, controlled by the UN, and dedicated to the UN principles that uphold peace, justice, freedom and human rights. Proposals that it approximate to, or in effect become, a 'public-private partnership' are misguided and mistaken.

1.2 Scope

The SCN should address nutrition, and food as this relates to nutrition, as a whole. It should not be confined solely or mainly, in principle or practice, to undernutrition and its prevention, control and relief. A substantial amount of its work should therefore be strategic.

1.3 Scale

We are persuaded that the current staffing and costs of the SCN are about right, pending review. It should make rapidly increased use of electronic networking, notably for the benefit of less resourced members, and also of outsourcing to independent organisations.

1.4 Functions

The SCN has two separate functions, harmonisation and deliberation. The harmonisation governing body is UN business, and all its members, without exception, should be very senior UN agency officials. The deliberative forum and its membership should be multi-actor.

1.5 Membership

UN membership of the SCN should be at Assistant Director-General level. Non-UN membership of the deliberative forum is by personal invitation from the harmonisation governing body, and should be at equivalent senior executive level. Deputies are by permission.

1.6 Representation

All those engaged with the SCN as members or observers need to be, and seen to be, representatives. One exception is independent scholars who are not representatives of any relevant professional entity. Personal views are acceptable when clearly identified as such.

1.7 Conflicts of interest

Industry should engage with the SCN's deliberative forum. Non-conflicted industry representatives should be eligible to be members of the forum. A balanced number of representatives from industries with conflicted interests may be observers, by personal invitation.

2 Conclusions and recommendations



The SCN is unique within the UN system. If it did not exist it would be necessary to invent – or re-invent – it. Since its foundation in 1977, the SCN has taken a number of shapes, and has done remarkable and sometimes crucial work. However, our initial conclusion is that the SCN

in anything like its current shape, has run its course. We therefore also conclude that 'reform' of the SCN amounting only to adjustment of its recent or current shape and nature, cannot rationally be defended.

2.1 Verdict on the SCN as it has been

Some of the most radical criticisms of the SCN are justified. Most of these reflect issues of governance within the UN system itself. Since 2000 it has lost shape and direction. It has suffered periods of hiatus and virtual paralysis. It has been unable to harmonise UN policy. In its recent form it has been unable to give sufficient value for money. Its bilateral and civil society groups have not been representative. Its working parties have been insufficiently focused, relevant or purposeful. It has failed to engage key actors. All this and more is well-known.

Perhaps more importantly, in the last 33 years and indeed the last decade, the world has changed. The current inter-related financial, fuel and food crises, and the consequent crises of food insecurity and undernutrition, demand urgent and potent responses at highest levels. Communication now is and needs to be transnational and electronic.

2.2 The way forward

This does not mean that it is time to degrade or abolish the SCN, or that its name and its 'brand' be abandoned. This is where we disagree with negative critics. Demolition of the SCN would be unwise, short-sighted, and damaging. It would also send out a wrong message at a critical time.

Redefined, clarified and reshaped, with new investment and commitment from the UN system of agencies, and also from UN member states, the SCN will be an essential resource. If it did not exist it would be necessary to invent it.

Further, many knowledgeable, resourceful and influential people, working within governments, and civil society and professional organisations (of which the Association is one) and elsewhere, remain committed to the fundamental principles and purposes both of the UN and of the SCN, and to the cause of world nutrition. These people and their organisations also amount to a resource that the UN family needs, above all now.

Our overall recommendation is that the SCN now becomes leaner, tougher, and more businesslike and economical, appropriately representative, and more focused and purposeful, as indicated above and outlined below. It also needs to work transparently and, within its overall rules as a UN body, to be democratic and accountable.

In general our conclusions and recommendations are harmonious with those of the current chair of the SCN, as supported by the current executive secretary. However, with respect, the most recent SCN reform plan does not, as we read it, address some fundamental issues concerning the nature, value and purpose of the SCN. It also is not reader-friendly, except perhaps to those within the UN system. We believe that to succeed, the SCN and its products need to be understood by and to inspire all professionals and others committed to nutrition and public health.

2.3 *The SCN has two functions*

We see the SCN as having two unique functions, neither of which is duplicated elsewhere. One is harmonisation, the other is deliberation. These are separate and should be separated. We think that part of the systemic problem with the SCN in the last ten years and more, has been an inevitably failed attempt to merge these two separate functions.

2.3.1 The harmonisation governing body

Harmonisation of the nutrition policies of the UN, including its policies that bear on nutrition, notably in the areas of food, health, and care, is obviously solely the business of the UN System. Correspondingly, the SCN governing body, to fulfil this function, should be solely made up of senior executives of relevant UN agencies, with two of them elected chair and alternate chair. We think that the number of UN agencies fully represented on the governing body should increase. Obvious candidates include UNDP, ILO, IFAD, UN CBD, and UN Habitat. Membership of this governing body should be open to all UN agencies with a stated direct or indirect involvement in nutrition. The practice of making membership on the governing body depend on ability and willingness to pay the highest dues should cease.

Observers could include the World Bank (which we do not see in this context as a UN agency), the International Food Policy Research Institute, and some others. The governing body will invite whoever it chooses as individual expert advisors, balanced as between the actors listed below, with temporary or ongoing observer status.

An important initial and ongoing responsibility of the harmonisation governing body, managed by the SCN secretariat, is to initiate and monitor the work of the deliberative forum (see below). This includes ensuring that members and observers of the forum from actors outside the UN family are personally invited, that overall they are properly representative within and across constituencies, and that deputies attend only on request and after personal invitation.

The whole process should be transparent, with reports of meetings, those present, and decisions taken, published on the SCN website.

2.3.2 The deliberative forum

The second purpose of the SCN is as a deliberative forum, on all issues concerning nutrition, which involves food, health, and care, including those seen as controversial or needing revision. The scope of the forum should be broad, and include the underlying and basic social, economic and environmental as well as the biological and behavioural aspects of nutrition. Formally this forum reports to the harmonisation governing body, but can expect its recommendations to be taken very seriously. (It is recognised that individual UN agencies have their own deliberative bodies, such as the WHO Nutrition Guidance Advisory Group)

The forum should have a permanent majority of members from the UN agencies, and powers delegated to it from the governing body. Members should also include representatives from formally constituted actors outside the UN system. These should include UN member states, civil society organisations in formal relations with a UN agency or that are qualified to be so, foundations, and non-conflicted industry (private sector). Membership of the forum should be by invitation only. As with the harmonisation function, the forum is free to invite individual expert advisors with observer status, balanced as between the actors.

The chair of the forum should be a member of the UN harmonisation governing body. We suggest this person not be the chair of the harmonising body. Two vice-chairs should come from the other actors.

The forum will commission task forces on selected important or urgent issues, tasked to come to conclusions and recommendations within time limits. These will replace the existing SCN working groups. The task force convenors should be balanced as between the various actors. The status of these task forces will be advisory. Most of their work should be done electronically. This process should be equivalently transparent.

2.3.3 Relationship between the two functions

The deliberative forum committee has a permanent majority of UN members, and formally reports to, as well as advising, the harmonisation governing body. The governing body makes the initial choices of membership of the deliberative forum, following principles agreed after a consultative process that includes non-UN actors. Once set up, the deliberative forum, while formally subject to the governing body, should set and follow its own agenda.

3 Process



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3.1 Nature

The SCN should have a higher profile. Its products should all be of high professional standard. These should include a prospectus, and annual reports and accounts, and other products, available to the specialist media, and designed to inform and also to raise funds, as well as its current products. If legally possible it should have a trading arm, and where appropriate sell its products.

3.2 Personnel

The structure and working methods of the SCN should be much as they are now, except inasmuch as its dual function requires revisions to be made. We recognise that the servicing of two related while separate SCN bodies will involve more work than now.

All members of the governing body and of the forum will either fulfil their responsibilities as part of their work for the UN, or else pay their own way.

The secretariat should be retained probably at roughly its present level. The status of the executive secretary, whether from the UN system or an outside organisation, could be as a secondment. One or two staff could also be seconded. Interns can be engaged, although their brief term makes their value limited, Some work now done by staff can be outsourced. A staff review should be carried out, taking into account work that has been done and also work now agreed to be valuable.

3.3 Products

These will or should include *SCN News*, the *World Nutrition Situation* reports, reports on the findings and conclusions of task forces when their work is complete, the website, all secretariat functions, and also annual meetings. We think the *SCN News*, the *World Nutrition Situation* reports, and now the website, are all basically satisfactory, and we congratulate the SCN executive secretary and staff for recent work done in difficult circumstances. We recommend that the electronic products be developed rapidly, notably to serve nutrition and public health professionals in less resourced parts of the world. If legally possible (see

above) all publications and other products should carry a price and where appropriate be sold.

3.4 *The annual meetings*

Since 2001, the annual meetings have reflected the confusion of trying to merge the harmonisation and deliberative functions. They have been excellent occasions to meet and exchange views, but have not been sufficiently purposeful.

In our view they are needed and should work well, given what is proposed above and below. Three days should be adequate as long as allowance is made for pre-meeting informal sessions in the two previous days. They should be occasions to advance the SCN's harmonisation and deliberative work, and should not resemble conferences. As a rule they should not be held on the occasion of meetings of other bodies. If held at the invitation of a national government, with facilities donated by that government, and as occasions to agree important initiatives with that government, so much the better. The number of people physically present should be relatively small – say, 200 maximum, including hosts. Most people participating should be virtually present, using what are now standard methods of electronic access and interchange.

3.5 *Cost*

Given secondments, interns, outsourcing and thus some relief from paying at UN rates, but also given the additional work of servicing two functions, and the steadily increased use of electronic networking including social media, we are persuaded that the current budget levels are about right. They should be reviewed a year after institution of the new arrangements.

3.6 *Reserves*

At any time the SCN should have reserves sufficient to operate for two years, as is normal. We consider this is essential for its security. It is also essential as an act of clear commitment to the future of the SCN.

3.7 *The actors*

The actors and groups outside the UN system, to be members of the deliberative forum, need to be overall properly representative of their constituencies, and members need to be genuine representatives of appropriate and qualified organisations or entities. Each group should be set up as self-sufficient, paying its own way, with its own accounts. The groups need to have a democratic and accountable structure, including elections for the position of chair, alternates, and steering group. The chair and alternates must speak for the group as a whole, not for the organisation or entity they come from. Any voting should be on the basis of one organisation or entity (not one person), one vote.

Formally the actors outside the UN are collectively in a minority on the deliberative forum, and also are responsive to its chair. The chair has the right to advise the chairs of non-UN actors and, if satisfied that there are issues of competence or representation that are not being addressed, to ask for new arrangements to be made.

3.7.1 Governments

Being representative here means that members have a mandate from their national governments, or supranational bodies such as the EU, directly or through relevant department departments or agencies, including but not confined to those responsible for bilateral aid.

3.7.2 Civil society

This means representatives of civil society organisations, and not individuals. There are at least three groupings within this broad constituency: public interest organisations, aid organisations, and scientific/research/academic organisations. There is a case to separate them. The case to keep them together is stronger, not least because differences of view need to be revealed, discussed and resolved internally. The chair and two alternates should between them usually come from all three groups.

It may be impractical to expect scientists, researchers, academics and other scholars always to represent an organisation. They may or may not be able to represent their institution. In practice most probably are senior within a professional organisation, in which case they should represent it.

But some are not. We think this is not a great problem, as long as exceptions are transparent.

3.7.3 Foundations

As with the other groups, care needs to be taken to balance representation from the bigger philanthropies whose main work is concerned with aid and undernutrition, with smaller foundations concerned with other aspects of nutrition and public health.

All foundations, other grant-giving bodies, charities, not-for-profit organisations and other such-like bodies most of whose core funding comes from the food, drink and associated industries, are eligible to be observers not in this but in the private sector group.

3.7.4 Private sector

This group is of industry as a whole, including businesses such as insurance, banking, building, and transport, that have, or may have, an interest in nutrition and public health. It also includes industries and organisations that are part of food systems, including producers, manufacturers, distributors, retailers and caterers. Representatives of industry sectors and of firms whose products are beneficial to public health or are harmless, are eligible to be members. That part of the food and drink and associated industries whose commercial success depends or can reasonably be seen to depend on products which, consumed in feasible quantities, are unhealthy, and thus who have a conflict, may participate, as with other groups by personal and usually non-transferable invitation, with observer status. All organisations of any type most of whose core funding comes from conflicted industry, are included in this category.

4 The role of the Association



As the professional body for public health nutrition worldwide, the mandate of the Association includes the formulation of evidence-based policy, and professional capacity development. A large number of our members are or have been associated with the SCN, or are or have been UN advisors. We are prepared to nominate our representative to the CSO group of the proposed SCN deliberative forum. We stand ready to work with and to support a rejuvenated SCN.

on behalf of the Association Council and membership

Barrie Margetts

President, World Public Health Nutrition Association

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Acknowledgements and request

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