

# Reflections from Nigeria-Benin Scaling Up Nutrition Business Network learning exchange

## Key messages

1. Collaboration of Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) networks led by the SUN Focal point, along with strategic advocacy and political will, drives nutrition progress in a country and beyond.
2. Working together with Enterprise Support Organisations (ESOs) helps Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) reach their full potential by pooling knowledge, resources, and networks to address systemic challenges and drive SME growth in local and regional economies.
3. Continuous technical and financial support is vital for SMEs to sustain operations and achieve long-term success.
4. Network success and sustainability is achieved through diverse approaches such as active government and stakeholder engagement, member (SME) involvement, and sustainability strategies like resource mobilization.

## Introduction:

In response to a request from the Benin Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) focal point, following the 2022 Joint Annual Assessment (JAA), the establishment and operation of the SUN Business Network (SBN) began with the support from the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) and CARE through the CASCADE<sup>1</sup> programme. The goal of the programme is to improve food security and reduce malnutrition among at least 5 million women of reproductive age and children under 5 in Benin, Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Mozambique. The establishment of SBN Benin started with the development of a strategic plan for 2024-2030 and mapping of potential members and partners.

The SUN Focal Point, is a government-appointed representative within a relevant ministry such as health or agriculture, acts as the main liaison between the SUN Movement and the national government. This role involves coordinating national efforts to scale up nutrition, ensuring alignment of government policies with SUN principles, facilitating multi-sectoral collaboration among different ministries, SUN networks and stakeholders, and reporting progress and challenges to the SUN Movement Secretariat.

The SBN strategy prioritizes identifying and facilitating south-to-south learning opportunities. Through these opportunities lessons from networks that have made significant progress can be shared, especially with those located in the same geographical region or economic bloc (ECOWAS, EAC) In line with this strategy, the global SBN secretariat is committed to actively build the capacity of national SBNs, to foster south-south networking and learning opportunities between them. The SBN Global Secretariat organized a learning exchange between SBN Benin and SBN Nigeria. The aim was for the Benin team to learn from the experience of Nigeria's SUN networks and other stakeholders, and to utilize this to enrich the ongoing strategy development efforts of SBN Benin. This visit provided an opportunity to engage with various stakeholders in Nigeria, including the SUN focal point, members of Nigeria SBN, SUN Civil Society Nigeria, and Enterprise Support Organizations (ESOs).

Since its founding in 2016, SBN Nigeria has focused on building a community of over 200 businesses dedicated to improving nutrition nationwide. SBN Nigeria identifies, and designs tailored support activities and capacity-strengthening workshops, to address challenges in supplying safe and nutritious foods to the market and fosters dialogue and mutual accountability among SMEs.

<sup>1</sup> The CASCADE (CATalyzing Strengthened policy aCTION for heAlthy Diets and resilience) project, funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of the Netherlands and implemented by a consortium comprising CARE and GAIN, operates across six countries: Benin, Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Mozambique

Additionally, SBN Nigeria provides opportunities for businesses to network and showcase their products at local and international events such as the Sahel Africa Food System Summit, Harvest Plus Nutritious Food Fairs. etc. Each year, SBN Nigeria hosts events bringing together SMEs and stakeholders like the National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC), other SUN movement networks including the Civil Society, Academia, Government, and Enterprise Support Organizations (ESOs) to address issues affecting SMEs in nutrition and celebrate network milestones.

This brief/paper captures the reflections from SBN Benin's coordinator and SBN's Africa Regional Manager, and highlights the key take aways from the learning exchange between SBN Nigeria and SBN Benin.

### Connecting the dots: engaging with SUN Focal point and other SUN networks

The importance of collaboration among SUN networks, guided by the leadership of the SUN Focal point, cannot be overstated. This ensures that networks remain aligned with government priorities while also enhancing their visibility. In Nigeria, the SUN focal point collaborated with the SUN civil society Nigeria (SCNN) to advocate for budget for nutrition at both regional and national levels. In Nigeria, the SUN focal point supported SBN's involvement in the Policy and Innovation Centre Gender Summit, where they participated as a panelist discussing "Improving Child Nutrition through Women Inclusion in the Food Systems".

Nigeria boasts five distinct SUN networks<sup>2</sup> each playing a vital role in advancing nutrition initiatives. With a designated SUN strategy in place, Nigeria has outlined clear objectives and pathways for improving nutrition outcomes. One notable initiative is the incubation of a youth network,



Figure 1: Visit to the Civil Society Scaling Up Nutrition in Nigeria (CS\_SUNN)

demonstrating a commitment to engaging diverse stakeholders in the nutrition agenda.

A key takeaway from Nigeria's experience led by the SUN focal point is the importance of cultivating nutrition champions to drive advocacy efforts.

While progress may not happen overnight, sustained political will is crucial. In Nigeria, the elevation of the nutrition department to standalone status in 2023, coupled with the Vice President's oversight, underscores the significance of high-level visibility and resource allocation for nutrition initiatives.

Effective advocacy also entails aligning interventions with government priorities and fostering sustainable solutions. By institutionalizing engagement with legislators and establishing scorecards for regional governors, Nigeria has taken proactive steps to hold SBN, CSNN and stakeholders accountable and drive progress at all levels of governance.

### Unlocking Potential: collaborative opportunities with other organisations

<sup>2</sup> Government Network, United Nations (UN) Nutrition, Civil Society Alliance (CSA), SUN Business Network (SBN), and Academic & Research Network.

Engaging with Enterprise Support Organizations (ESOs) presents opportunities at national, regional, and international levels. These collaborations provide SMEs with access to resources and support as they navigate market complexities, financial access, and technological advancements. ESOs recognize the challenges of supporting SMEs independently, citing resource-intensive efforts with limited returns. They increasingly collaborate with program sponsors offering comprehensive support, including market access, financial assistance, and technology adoption.

By partnering with ESOs, SBN Nigeria has gained access to expertise and support, enabling members to access and benefit from the ESOs services and expertise. However, strategic mapping of these ESOs is crucial, to fully leverage the potential and to identify complementary strengths and synergies. An example of a collaboration with an ESO in Nigeria is the work done with FATE Foundation. The diverse needs of SMEs were recognized and together with the ESO, pitch competitions were organized with the aim of providing technical expertise and tailored support that continues beyond competition phases.

**The 2023 Business Model Research (BMR) Pitch Competition** was aimed at businesses helping low-income earners access nutritious foods. It was organized in collaboration with the FATE Foundation.

**The Process:** This began with a call for applications. Ten participants were selected through a competitive process. These participants underwent a rigorous 5-day boot camp where they received necessary resources, tools, and materials to develop their business ideas and pitches. Following the boot camp, the ten participants competed in a final pitch competition, from which three emerged as winners.

**The Winners:**

**1<sup>st</sup>** - The winning business processes chicken viscera traditionally considered waste, and sells it to local food processors, street vendors, and households in low-income areas, operating on a waste-to-wealth model, receiving **NGN 5,000,000**.

**2<sup>nd</sup>** - The first runner-up created an innovative product named Spiced Dry Fish Powder, a blend of crushed catfish and spices, targeting adolescents and young, receiving **NGN 3,000,000**.

**3<sup>rd</sup>** - The second runner-up emphasizes affordability and community involvement by producing G-Corn Flour, an affordable, nutrient-fortified cereal made from local grains, targeting women and children, and received **NGN 2,000,000**.

Similarly, opportunities exist both for SBN Nigeria and Benin for partnerships with organizations like the Pan African Association of Small Industries (PAOSMI) operating on a continental scale. PAOSMI supports SMEs in aligning with governmental policies, particularly within the Africa Continental Free Trade Area, fostering value addition and policy harmonization across borders.

Exploring collaborations with entities like the Directorate of Economics ECOWAS and the ECOWAS Small Business Coalition could enhance regional integration efforts.

*"To stay competitive and relevant we don't compete with our organization members. Instead, we work together with them."* **Sunday Okoronkwo, SUN Civil Society Nigeria**

## Charting the Course: mapping key stakeholders for effective engagement

The development process of the SBN Benin strategy underscores the critical role of stakeholder mapping. Through this approach potential SBN members, Entrepreneur Support Organizations (ESOs), and government departments that align with the SBN's overarching vision and objectives are identified. As recognized by SBN Nigeria, stakeholder mapping should be an ongoing effort to answer to the ever-evolving needs and priorities of the network members. Through a comprehensive

understanding of the stakeholder landscape, the SBN Benin can adeptly pinpoint potential members and partners. This ensures that support mechanisms are tailored to meet the specific requirements of SMEs and networks within the SUN ecosystem.

### Empowering entrepreneurs: supporting SMEs for business growth.

Visiting SMEs offers important insights. Through feedback gathered from SBN Nigeria, it became apparent what drives these businesses forward and the consequences when SMEs lack support and visibility.

One entrepreneur highlighted the support received through SBN, emphasizing how it helped with networking, exposure, product development, and getting investment ready. However, when support waned, the business struggled to maintain essential processes like ensuring food safety. Eventually, the business had to scale down operations, raising doubts about its continuity.

This experience underscores the importance of continuous engagement and support particularly for the micro enterprises. SUN Business Networks need to ensure sustained support, either through partners or peer support, until businesses reach a level of sustainability where they can thrive independently. This way, SMEs can grow and succeed without constantly relying on external help, ensuring their long-term viability, and meeting their nutrition commitments.

For members of SBN to grow their businesses and meet their nutrition goals, they need financing. However, traditional access to finance mechanisms often don't understand sectors like agriculture and nutrition well enough, making it hard for SMEs to get support. But there are other options like grants, cooperatives, or specialized funds focusing on areas like nutrition and food systems. Learning from both these examples, it's important for networks like SBN to explore different financing sources and strategies that align with SMEs financing needs.

*"Conventional funding often fails to understand the intricacies of SMEs within food systems. These SMEs have unique challenges, and there's no silver bullet or one-size-fits-all solution. It's important that we direct them towards the appropriate funding instruments. Otherwise, they may resort to unconventional avenues that are ill-suited to their needs."* **Edward Esene, Lead Consultant, Plus Incubation Hub**

### Fueling progress: mobilising resources for nutrition Initiatives

The SUN Civil Society Network in Nigeria has shown how having a clear structure and mobilizing resources can help sustain its programs. They've managed to get resources for various programs and operations, including from their members' subscriptions. They have managed to raise funds from their members through annual subscriptions and used it for various activities like setting up regional chapters and organizing meetings. This shows that for networks like theirs, sustainability and smart fundraising methods are key.

*"When approaching funders, don't just present budgets. Offer a solution or value proposition that highlights the benefits for them, making sure they see their visibility in it."* **Dr. Kemji Ajoki, Special Advisor, PAOSMI**

### Sharing Wisdom: The role of learning exchanges in network coordination

1. The exchange between Benin and Nigeria highlighted the importance of learning from each other's experiences. For instance, SBN Benin recognized the value of adapting approaches from Nigeria to their own context, including engaging with the government on nutrition financing,



establishing visibility with high-level offices, and organizing competitions to foster innovation. This underscores the significance of cross-country collaboration in sharing best practices and strategies.

2. Diverse business models and opportunities for entrepreneurship were explored during the exchange, particularly through pitching competitions. Participants delved into fundraising techniques and emphasized the crucial role of sustainability for networks.
3. Regular engagement with network members through periodic and strategic meetings emerged as a vital aspect of network coordination. Participants stressed the importance of feedback mechanisms and continuous support to strengthen network leadership. Utilizing member data to identify gaps and provide targeted support was highlighted as a best practice.
4. In fundraising efforts, aligning with government priorities was deemed crucial to fostering trust and collaboration. This emphasizes the importance of building partnerships with government entities to achieve common goals rather than adopting confrontational approaches.
5. Grassroots-level chapters were identified as essential for sustainability and community engagement. Drawing from experiences in Nigeria, the establishment of regional chapters was seen as a key factor in ensuring sustainability and effective leadership within networks.



Figure 2 SBN Benin and Nigeria team with Nigeria SUN Focal Point – Mrs L.K Bako and Federal Ministry of Health, department of Nutrition h team

#### **SBN Nigeria sub national chapters.**

To enhance SBN's ability to serve members effectively and coordinate with other service departments across various states, SBN Nigeria has initiated sub-national chapters. These chapters consist of states or groups of states from the same region.

In this context, SBN Sub-National Chapters play a pivotal role in aligning SME development with state systems. They catalyze the formulation of SME policies at the state level, tailored to local needs. Such policies delineate how the institutional and regulatory framework aligns with the governance structure of each state. Each region comprises a regional hub lead, assisted by a deputy and a secretary. These individuals volunteer their time to engage with businesses in their regions, encouraging them to join the network and providing valuable advice on the technical aspects of agribusiness. At the SBN Nigeria annual members convening in 2022, 13 members were inaugurated as subnational chapters leads, through a democratic process. This

involved the careful selection and nomination of network members with over three years of membership and business operations, who have demonstrated outstanding commitment and leadership experience to support the coordination of the network at both sub-regional and sub-national levels.

### Sharing Wisdom: Voices from SBN Benin

1. Understanding the diverse growth stages and capacities of network members is important to enable for effectively involving them in activities that promote healthier, safer, and more nutritious food choices. This comprehension has empowered SBN Benin, to customize engagement strategies, addressing individual SME needs while fostering collective growth.
2. Create win-win partnerships. Work with businesses, potential donors, and the government in Benin's SUN network to put the private sector in a central role for improving nutrition and transforming food systems.
3. Contribute to changing the way things are done by getting businesses involved as allies in the fight against malnutrition in Benin. Engage them in producing healthier and more affordable food options, as well as financing nutrition activities, advocating for nutrition, and influencing policies.



Figure 3: SBN Benin and Nigeria Team with PAN African Association of Small & Medium Industries Team



Figure 4: SBN Benin team at the NutriPitch Competition