

## Ending malnutrition for every last child in Sierra Leone

### What's the problem?

Sierra Leone has made significant gains in nutrition since 2010. In 2014, the country recorded an underweight prevalence of 12.9% in children from six months to five years old.<sup>i</sup> The prevalence of wasting<sup>1</sup> also improved, to 4.7%, and stunting<sup>2</sup> decreased by 15.5% from 2010 to 28.8%, enabling Sierra Leone to join a group of developing countries in the sub-Saharan region with moderate levels of stunting.<sup>ii</sup>

Despite this progress, certain groups are at risk of being left behind from nutrition progress in Sierra Leone. Women and children (boys and girls), including those living in certain districts, are such a group and the focus of this case study.

The SMART Survey conducted in 2014,<sup>iii</sup> revealed that boys seem to be more vulnerable as figures show that they are more stunted, malnourished and underweight than girls. There are no obvious reasons why this happens to be the case. Further research is required.

Teenage mothers were also identified as vulnerable. 15% of pregnant women are teenagers. Risks associated with pregnancy at a young age make them vulnerable.

Another group identified as vulnerable are those living in some districts in the north (Port Loko, Kambia, Bombali) and a few in the east (Pujehun, Kenema). More research is needed to determine why. For Kambia, FOCUS 1000 (Facilitating and Organising Communities to Unite for Sustainable development)<sup>iv</sup> and SLRC (Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium)<sup>v</sup> conducted research on malnutrition which found that some socio-cultural issues impacted on nutrition.<sup>vi</sup> For example, household decision-making is gendered. According to the research, women may know about good practices in infant young child feeding however the decision to act on this knowledge is not always up to them. In terms of food distribution in the household, young women are often at the bottom of the hierarchy, while their husbands and parents-in-law receive the largest and best meal portions.

The most vulnerable women and children are in the districts mentioned above. Further research is needed to determine why they are furthest behind. The research conducted in Kambia by SLRC<sup>vii</sup> is a good reference point for this district alone, as issues and complexities vary district by district.

Key barriers emerging from the Kambia research include household hierarchical and gender structures which affect decision making around nutrition. Mechanisms for food security were also found to be poor, leaving most households vulnerable during the lean season. Although 50% of the women earned money, through small-scale farming, fishing and petty trading, they were expected to hand their earnings over to their husbands and their income does not buy them any decision-making power. During the rainy season (June to September) some communities had limited coping strategies and often took loans from market traders, which they had to repay after harvest, with interest of up to 100% in some cases, creating a longer cycle of debt and food insecurity.<sup>viii</sup>

In a country where 70% of the rural population's livelihood is based on agriculture, 60% of the farmers are women. However their access to land is limited. This continues to be an area of debate, since it has implications for nutrition and national development.<sup>ix</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Wasting refers to a child who is too thin for his or her height. Wasting is the result of sudden or acute malnutrition, where the child is not getting enough calories from food and faces an immediate risk of death.

<sup>2</sup> Stunting refers to a child who is too short for his or her age. Stunting is the failure to grow both physically and cognitively and is the result of chronic or recurrent malnutrition. The effects of stunting often last a lifetime.

## Our response

### Right to Food in Sierra Leone

In 2015 the Civil Society Platform in Sierra Leone embarked on getting the right to food included in the National Constitution.

#### Why?

The National Constitution was under review and we considered this the best opportunity to secure recognition of the right to food as an important component of the eradication of poverty and hunger in Sierra Leone. Although studies had shown gains in nutrition, we felt it was timely to build on these gains through policy change for better nutrition outcomes for women and children.

The Scaling Up Nutrition and Immunisation Civil Society Alliance (SUNI-CSA) has promoted an inclusive approach to addressing malnutrition by advocating for the inclusion of the right to food in the National Constitution. The rationale is that this would enable civil society to push for equitable policies that would address hunger and malnutrition for all vulnerable groups.

#### Arguments for the right to food in Sierra Leone

**Impact of malnutrition on maternal and child health:** the vicious circle of malnutrition for women and children is likely to impact on national development outcomes if not addressed.

**Gender and poverty:** evidence shows that gender discrimination has a significant impact on household, community and national nutrition and food insecurity, perpetuating the cycle of poverty.

**Access to land:** existing land policies are not favourable to government plans to eradicate hunger and malnutrition. Small areas of land are used for subsistence farming while large areas are being acquired by multinationals, with little benefit to Sierra Leoneans.

**Food quality:** substantial amounts of imported food are substandard. Sierra Leone lacks the institutional capacity to test for quality and regulate the influx of poor quality foods.

#### Messages recommended by civil society for inclusion in the Constitution

Civil society called for recognition of the right to food as a human right in the following sections of the Constitution:

- Chapter 3 section 15, 'Fundamental human rights and freedoms of the individual', as an additional right: "protection from hunger and malnutrition through equitable access at all times to adequate food or means for its procurement".
- Chapter 2 section 7, 'Economic objective': "place proper and adequate emphasis on access to land for women to encourage equitable access to economic participation to ensure self-sufficiency in food production".
- Chapter 2 section 8, 'Social objective': "the Government shall have and maintain the right to food for every man, woman and child alone or in community as a human right; enabling access at all times to adequate food or means for its procurement".



The Draft Constitutional Review Committee Report, published in February 2016, includes the right to food under two sections:

- Human Rights and Freedoms of the Individual (Section 15)  
*The people of Sierra Leone recognise that citizens and persons lawfully present within its territory whatever their race, tribe, place of origin, political opinion, colour, creed or sex, but subject to respect for the rights and freedoms of others and for the public interest, are entitled to the following inalienable rights.*

*Life, liberty, security of person, the enjoyment of property, the protection of the law, the protection of the environment, education, health, food, dignity and shelter.*

- Protection of Socio-economic Rights (new section)  
*Every person has the right to have food of acceptable quality.*

## Other government and civil society initiatives

Government programmes are trying to address inequity in food security. For example, the National Commission for Social Action (NACSA) is running a scheme through which rural women are given loans for small businesses to improve their economic capacity.

The Directorate of Food and Nutrition, in partnership with other implementers, have promoted and ensured the establishment of mother-to-mother support groups across the country. Trained in infant and young child feeding, these community support groups promote exclusive breastfeeding, complimentary feeding from six months, and key hygiene practices as well as positive health-seeking behaviours.

The government needs to conduct studies into inequalities in malnutrition, particularly since existing research show that the north and some areas in the east are more vulnerable than other districts. What are the causes for this inequality and what needs to be done to address them? Are the existing policies adequate or do they need to be revised to ensure that these issues are properly addressed?

To support much of the mobilisation and advocacy conducted by the civil society platform, we have engaged the Sierra Leone Market Women's Association. With more than 100,000 members across the country, this has been a trusted network that has been able to mobilise their communities and facilitate policy change in the country. Through our work with them, we have been able to promote key nutrition messages during the Ebola crisis as well as remind communities of the key practices to minimise the risk of transmission. As women that are in regular everyday contact with mothers and caregivers, as well as having experience of some of the issues we discuss, such as malnutrition and teenage pregnancy, they know how to reach the most vulnerable and how to convey messages to these groups.

## Lessons learned

Malnutrition, as we say in Sierra Leone, is everybody's business. Everyone has a role to play to end hunger and malnutrition. By working in partnership with government, implementing partners, community-based organisations such as the Sierra Leone Market Women's Association, we can influence policy change and mobilise communities for social change to ensure that together we can achieve our goal to end hunger and improve the nutrition status of all Sierra Leoneans (especially our women and children).

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<sup>i</sup> National SMART Survey, 2014. Sierra Leone

<sup>ii</sup> National SMART Survey, 2014. Sierra Leone

<sup>iii</sup> National SMART Survey, 2014. Sierra Leone

<sup>iv</sup> Focus 1000 is a Sierra Leone NGO which focuses on the first 1000 days with interventions ranging from water, sanitation and hygiene to agriculture. They currently host the Health and Nutrition Sierra Leone Civil Society Platform, part of the scaling up nutrition civil society network.

<sup>v</sup> Further information about the SLRC can be found here: <http://www.securelivelihoods.org/>

<sup>vi</sup> Richard Mallett and Denney, L. (2014). Sierra Leone: Getting beyond nutrition as “a women’s issue”. Briefing paper 15 Sept 2014 Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium

<sup>vii</sup> SLRC 2014. *Sierra Leone: Getting beyond nutrition as “a women’s issue”*. Briefing paper 5 Sept 2014

<sup>viii</sup> SLRC 2014. *Sierra Leone: Getting beyond nutrition as “a women’s issue”*. Briefing paper 5 Sept 2014

<sup>ix</sup> WFP and Partners, 2015 Emergency Food Security Assessment (Sierra Leone)

