



## WEBINAR REPORT ON ADVOCATING FOR CONSISTENT ALLOCATION OF RESOURCES FOR NUTRITION SECURITY DURING COVID-19

Prepared by Kgomotso Seko, Graça Machel Trust  
Duduzile Mkhize, Grow Great Campaign

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic is severely burdening the world's health, food, and economic systems. The impact on already vulnerable lower and middle income countries will be even more pronounced due to the pandemic, threatening global spikes in food insecurity and malnutrition, therefore; COVID-19 does not treat us equally.

People who already suffer as a consequence of inequities – including the poor, women and children, those living in fragile or conflict-affected states and the unsheltered – are particularly affected by both the virus and the impact of restrictions. It is essential that they are protected, especially when responses are implemented.<sup>1</sup>

Globally, nearly half of all under-5 child deaths are due to undernutrition. Undernutrition puts children at greater risk of delays in recovery and dying from infectious diseases. High rates of infection and continued social distancing practices will impact agricultural input and yields, leading to more severe food insecurity and malnutrition outcomes in the medium to long term. Health systems; overwhelmed by COVID-19 cases will not be able to respond to malnutrition-related illness. Although there is much that we don't know yet about the effects in high-burden countries.<sup>2</sup>

Pregnant women and young children have been identified as particularly vulnerable groups we need to protect. Children who benefit from school feeding programmes are also particularly vulnerable; where do they get their daily meal from when schools are closed?

It is against this context that the Graça Machel Trust (GMT), in partnership with the Grow Great Campaign and the East and Southern Africa Civil Society Networks (ESA CSN), powered by data from the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) movement, World Health Organisation, Global Nutrition Report 2020; co-convened this webinar on 03 June 2020. GMT is a Pan-African institution whose vision is to nurture caring societies that value social justice; and promote and protect the rights of women and children. The Grow Great Campaign seeks to mobilise South Africa towards a national commitment towards zero stunting by 2030. The ESA CSN was formed to enable civil society networks in the region to share experiences and identify joint advocacy opportunities to accelerate the implementation of national nutrition plans and progress towards key nutrition targets such as the Malabo Declaration, WHA and Sustainable Development Goals.

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<sup>1</sup> According to the WHO "Children, pregnant women, elderly people, malnourished people, and people who are ill or immunocompromised, are particularly vulnerable when a disaster strikes, and take a relatively high share of the disease burden associated with emergencies."  
[https://www.who.int/environmental\\_health\\_emergencies/vulnerable\\_groups/en/](https://www.who.int/environmental_health_emergencies/vulnerable_groups/en/)

<sup>2</sup> WHO: UNICEF/WHO/The World Bank Group joint child malnutrition estimates: levels and trends in child malnutrition: key findings of the 2020 edition  
<https://www.who.int/publications-detail/ime-2020-edition>

## 2. SCOPE OF WEBINAR

The partners have come to the realisation that as the world focuses on the containment of COVID-19, urgent action is needed to prevent the long-term and large-scale impact the pandemic will have on our most vulnerable populations, particularly those at risk of malnutrition or who are malnourished in any form.

The webinar focused on illustrating why good nutrition matters more than ever; how to adapt our advocacy asks in line with the current global climate and lastly; what to advocate for and how the global community can respond.

The speakers also elaborated on possible innovative solutions to support communities with essential necessities.

## 3. SUMMARIES OF PRESENTATIONS

### OVERVIEW AND REGIONAL CONTEXT

**Mr. Mathews Mhuru**, *Chair of SUN CSN and ESA CSN and SUN CSA Coordinator, Zambia*

Mr. Mhuru opened the session by giving an introductory background and our intention for the webinar, a brief summary of SUN and ESA CSN including the member countries, he elaborated on the role of localised/national campaigning to advocate for nutrition during COVID-19 with special focus on joint regional advocacy.

Mr. Mhuru highlighted some of the reasons why it's important to invest in nutrition, some the actions that have been taken with regards to advocacy for nutrition in the various fora that he is part of, gave a scenario of the state of nutrition in the East and Southern Africa region as well a country example including why it's imperative to keep advocating for nutrition resources.

He concluded his opening remarks by giving an introduction of all the speakers and handed over to Dr. Kopano; setting the scene with her question.

### LOCAL SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

**Dr. Kopano Matlwa Mabaso**, *Executive Director, Grow Great Campaign, South Africa*

Dr. Kopano's discussion was aimed at sharing best practice and opportunities for change in the South African context and she gave this background information to provide a clear picture for the audience.

South Africa went into COVID 19 lockdown on 26 March 2020, as it is the most affected country in Africa. Necessary as the intervention was, it left many South Africans who already exist without nutritional reserves on the verge of hunger.

Before lockdown, 6.4 million children lived below the Statistics SA food poverty line, and 27% of children under five were stunted. In the absence of adequate income and food relief for poor households, the lockdown and economic recession will increase these already concerning poverty and stunting levels. The national school nutrition programme has been disrupted, effectively denying guaranteed meals to 9 million children.

Two months into the lockdown one third of South Africans are reported to be going hungry during COVID 19 lockdown. Many families are not getting state assistance during this time and some of those that need it the most; such as pregnant women do not qualify for it or those that qualify are encumbered by administration delays.

Analysts predict that a surge in child malnutrition cases in the coming months is inevitable.

Dr. Kopano's scope addressed these questions; what is the overall state of nutrition in South Africa now? Which groups are the most vulnerable and will likely experience long-term effects of malnutrition? What role can big food retailers play in making sure that South African continue to access nutritious meals during this time? What is the long-term malnutrition impact that South Africa is likely to face due to COVID 19 lock down. What would be the best way for the South African government to invest in nutrition right now? Dr. Kopano also gave one of the most successful approaches embarked on by the Grow Great Campaign and its partners; digital vouchers sent via cell phone to provide to provide social relief of distress without the costs and infection risk associated with the distribution of food parcels.<sup>3</sup> The voucher idea and distribution form garnered numerous questions and comments from the audience.

## **GLOBAL CONTEXT**

**Ms. Abigail Perry**, *Co-Chair Global Nutrition Report Representative (GNR) Stakeholder Group*  
Ms. Perry spoke on the status of global Nutrition before COVID-19; stunting, wasting, obesity and anemia.

She followed this with a global overview of the GNR2020 report findings, highlights and the thread of inequality and the effects of COVID-19 on already overburdened countries/communities due to lack of access to resources. Which regions and countries are on or off-track to meet WHA and SDG targets.

One of the key elements which Ms. Perry elaborated including a questions from the audience is the iniquity of how Covid-19 affects us; globally. Undernourished people have weaker immune systems, and may be at greater risk of severe illness due to the virus. At the same time, poor metabolic health, including obesity and diabetes, is strongly linked to worse Covid-19 outcomes, including risk of hospitalisation and death.

People who already suffer as a consequence of inequities – including the poor, women and children, those living in fragile or conflict-affected states, minorities, refugees and the unsheltered – are particularly affected by both the virus and the impact of containment measures. It is essential that they are protected, especially when responses are implemented.<sup>4</sup>

Financing for nutrition intervention should also be motivated from the domestic contexts, advocating for national governments to allocating sufficient budget to nutritional programmes, over and above the health ministry and agriculture funds.

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<sup>3</sup> DGMT Food vouchers for social relief of distress <https://dgmt.co.za/food-vouchers/>

<sup>4</sup> GNR2020 <https://bit.ly/37iBr9G>

Domestic funding by country governments is crucial to ensure sustained improvements. At the same time, the international donor community has a duty to step up where governments lack the resources to respond effectively.

The best possible advocacy tool which CSOs, NGOs and other development actors can use or identify opportunities and challenges presented by COVID 19? Generally speaking, investments have focused on addressing undernutrition. There has been, as rates of stunting are gradually decreasing over time. In contrast, overweight and obesity are rapidly increasing.

For civil society, there is a need to examine investments in nutrition through an equity lens. Investments must respond to need, and volumes of financing should be proportionate to the burden. Together with other sectors; the task is to proactively develop/conceptualise new financing mechanisms that can complement existing sources.

## **YOUTH CONTEXT**

**Ms. Jane Napais**, *Youth Leaders for Nutrition (YLN), Kenya*

Youth voices and influencers in nutrition operate in an increasingly digital space. Ms. Napais covered advocacy asks on nutrition by youth, what could work, how best to communicate with the youth and include their voices from inception and not simply as an afterthought when all plans and decade agendas have been made for them.

Ms. Napais began addressing the participation or lack thereof youth in nutrition advocacy not being as huge as other agendas such access to data, free education and SRHR. Most youth find nutrition concerns as secondary to their immediate issues. Youth focus on food security rather than healthy eating. Some of the underlying causes to this shift in focus include; unemployment, most young people in Africa and other developing countries face different forms of unemployment making it difficult for them to put food on their tables and they would opt to address this immediate need before nutritional concerns.

Gender disparities; gender biases affect most youth groups, particularly in securing job opportunities. In some cultures, certain opportunities or jobs are believed to belong to a specific gender. Again, the youth consider addressing this issue as a priority. Political instabilities; most political systems in Africa are bureaucratic in nature making the voices of youth irrelevant or less important.

Ms. Napais felt that even if these problems are perceived as of larger concern for advocacy, the nutrition agenda should not be placed as secondary. Healthy and balanced eating is key for a better life and the rise of a thriving African generation.

Food diversification without cultural restrictions or harmful traditional practices can be a solution to food insecurity across various communities. Youth voices should be on the forefront to advocate for indigenous crops and food diversification as a path towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

Ms. Napais included some of the creative ways in which to make the nutrition agenda appeal to youth activists; photo-sharing on social media such as Instagram to make nutrition asks more appealing. Physical and virtual displays to demonstrate good food preparation and serving. Media campaigns which use famous role models and influencers as nutrition champions on the importance of exercise and a healthy diet; i.e. Global Citizen campaigns on digital platforms and socials such as Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp.

And lastly using targeted communications approaches designed to support adolescents and youth in general for behaviour change in their nutrition practices.

#### 4. OUTCOMES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

##### 3 KEY NUTRITION ADVOCACY ASKS

- i) **Continued investment in nutrition;** Domestic funding by country governments is crucial to ensure *sustained improvements* with the assistance of the international donor community where there are gaps in resources
- ii) **Integrated approach;** COVID-19 response and recovery initiatives should integrate nutrition through a multi-sectoral approach with special focus on infant and child nutrition, food security, WASH, and social protection
- iii) **Social protection;** Protect the most vulnerable population groups as well and women who play key roles in the household, health care services and essential services delivery and support children who no longer have access to school meals

##### 3 RECOMMENDATIONS

- i) Multisectoral partnerships; Nutrition and food security, Climate change, Water & Sanitation (WASH), Agriculture, Health to advance the agenda further and utilise scarce financial resources
- ii) Strengthen nutrition sensitive social protection systems; Distribute cash or vouchers as in the case of (DGMT and Grow Great Campaign) for the purchase of essential and nutritious food items
- iii) Protect the most vulnerable population groups as well and women who play key roles in the household, health care services and essential services delivery and support children who no longer have access to school meals.

##### Useful links for related content to the discussion:

1. Live chat of the webinar <https://bit.ly/36WU5nrrn>
2. Global Nutrition Report 2020, download here <https://bit.ly/37jBr9G>
3. Grow Great calls on food manufacturers, wholesalers & retailers to ramp up the affordability of a “Solidarity Basket” of nutritious foods <https://bit.ly/2XGQ7fO>
3. DGMT Food vouchers for social relief of distress <https://dgmt.co.za/food-vouchers/>