

UNCT Feature: Jennifer Bitonde, WFP

July 2017: Ms. Jennifer Bitonde, Representative and Country Director for the World Food Programme (WFP) in Namibia, has contributed significantly in supporting the Government of the Republic of Namibia to address issues related to food and nutrition security and hunger. She began serving as Officer in Charge for WFP in 2011 and was appointed WFP Representative and Country Director in April 2015.



During her tenure, WFP worked with UNHCR and the government of Namibia to organize and implement the repatriation of more than 4000 refugees back to Angola. Providing a repatriation package comprised of food and other essential items allowed many refugees to return home in dignity. The repatriation of Refugees marked the end of WFP's involvement in direct programme delivery. WFP Namibia shifted its focus from food assistance to technical assistance, to strengthen food security analysis and the national food safety net programmes including the school meals and the national relief programmes. Supporting the government in the areas of policy and strategic guidance, systems strengthening, knowledge generation and management, capacity strengthening, and programme support, the following were achieved;

Policy and Strategic Development:

WFP has supported the development of policies and guidelines for food security monitoring and food assistance management. Notable among the key achievements are the school feeding policy which hopefully will be ratified this year, the Zero Hunger Road Map which was endorsed by Cabinet in 2017, the Food and Nutrition Security Monitoring Plan which guides the implementation of household level food security monitoring activities, and the School Feeding Management guidelines. These policies and guidelines have helped improve the way food security data is collected and analyzed and food assistance is managed and implemented at national and sub-national levels. WFP working in collaboration with NPC launched in July 2017, a five-year strategic plan that aims to support the government to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal 2, to end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture in Namibia.

Enhancement of Institutional Systems:

Effective and sustainable food security programmes require functional monitoring systems to ensure proper allocation and utilization of resources. During her time, WFP supported the government to develop the school feeding management information system and the food and nutrition security monitoring system. These systems have allowed actors to monitor and report on the utilization of resources. The food and nutrition security monitoring system which also acts as an early warning system has allowed the Directorate, Disaster Risk Management (DDRM), track changes in the food security situation of the population and communities that are exposed to shocks and risks associated with natural hazards. This system provides useful information for policy decisions related to emergency response and preparedness. Plans are underway to explore the viability of a Beneficiary Information Management System that could assist institutions responsible for the management of food based safety nets to identify, register and manage beneficiaries so as to minimize duplication errors in provision of assistance.

Knowledge Generation and Management:

WFP recognizes that achieving Zero Hunger would not be possible without evidence and without addressing information gaps. During her tenure, WFP focused on supporting the government to generate evidence to inform decisions and programme design and adjustments. The greatest achievements in this area has been the generation of evidence around food and nutrition security. Twice a year, WFP supports the Office of the Prime Minister to generate household food and nutrition security information through assessments. WFP supported the Zero Hunger Strategic Review which provided a comprehensive analysis of the food and nutrition security situation in Namibia and recommendations of what needs to be done to achieve Zero Hunger in Namibia. Other major studies supported by WFP that have informed policy included the Emergency Food Security Assessment (EFSA), School Feeding Case Study, the School Feeding Transition Study, the School Feeding Cost Analysis, the School Feeding Baseline Survey, the SABER assessment and the Feasibility Study on Linking School Feeding to Smallholder Farmers.

Capacity Strengthening and Programme Support:

Institutional and human resources capacity for the design and implementation of policies and strategies remains the greatest challenges to national efforts to address hunger. WFP has ensured that all its programmes have an inherent capacity strengthening agenda and gender equality is mainstreamed throughout the activities. Training of government staff in food assistance management and food and nutrition security assessment and analysis has been undertaken with more than 4000 actors training in different areas of food security management. Study tours and exchange programmes have been organized and supported for government staff to learn from countries with good practices. Advocacy activities were supported during International school meals day and the African Union School Feeding day. A TV documentary on school feeding was developed to raise awareness about the importance of school feeding. The Zero Hunger Newsletter was launched to keep readers abreast of key development in the food security sector and the intensified engagement with the private sector has led to the development of a Private and Public Sector partnership strategy on school feeding and increased private sector involvement in school feeding activities.

Ending hunger has and will remain central to WFP work in Namibia. Through the recently launched WFP Country Strategic Plan (2017-2022), vulnerable populations in Namibia will be enabled to meet their food and nutrition needs throughout the year and government policy dialogue and programme design will be informed by evidence and enhanced knowledge of hunger issues. WFP will continue to provide support to government to enhance efficiency of food-based safety net programmes such as school feeding, an urban safety net programme and emergency response programmes. This will be achieved through enhanced policy, programme design and implementation, capacity strengthening, evidence building and strengthened coordination and advocacy.

It is important to note that these achievements would not have been possible without the leadership and commitment of the government, the UN family and other partners who contributed to the conceptualisation and support the implementation of WFP programmes in Namibia.

In an interview with the UN Namibia Newsletter production team, Bitonde reflected on her time in Namibia. Check it out!

1.) What have you enjoyed about working in Namibia?

I have spent six and a half years in Namibia, instead of the normal duration of assignment of four years. That in itself says a lot about how much I have enjoyed working in Namibia. Before I came here, I had spent years working in several emergency operations in different countries providing life-saving support to populations affected by conflict and natural disasters. Coming to Namibia, presented an opportunity to work in a different setting where food insecurity is linked to structural challenges. This required rethinking WFP's role and approach to Namibia's food security challenges. The strategic shift that WFP made from food assistance to technical assistance was crafted jointly with government and responded to government priorities. The level of engagement and commitment from the government, the dedicated and supportive UN Country Team and the conducive environment to innovate and do things differently made my work in Namibia exciting. Coming from a developing country, I appreciated the fact that government has led and driven its development agenda mostly committing its local resources first and foremost before turning to partners for complementary support. The presence of policy, budgetary and institutional frameworks meant that we could focus our resources in strategic areas to fill in gaps. That is my opinion is what many countries need to put in place to make progress towards Zero Hunger.

On another note, I have enjoyed the hospitality of the Namibian people. I have made friends within different sectors and I have a great team in WFP and the UN as a whole that have made my work really enjoyable.

2.) What are your words of encouragement for your colleagues, partners and stakeholders?

We all made a commitment to work together towards the Sustainable Development Goals. These require us to partner and to do things differently. The SDGs are ambitious but attainable if we all do our share of work diligently. Take the Zero Hunger Goal (SDG2) for instance, countries like Brazil have achieved it and so can we in Namibia in our life time. We can be the "Zero Hunger generation" by starting with making our programmes nutrition sensitive and implementing nutrition specific programmes to end all forms of malnutrition.

By addressing gender inequality, eliminating food waste and food losses, and by pursuing prudent investments in social protection and agriculture with a focus on smallholder producers we can help reach those furthest behind. These are imperative for achieving zero hunger.

3.) What changes do you hope to see in Namibia in the future?

The 2016 Global Hunger Index classified Namibia as having a “serious food problem”, with 42.3% of the population undernourished. The Demographic Health Survey shows child stunting rates of 24% nationally. These statistics are too high in a country that has constantly achieved stable economic growth. In future, I hope to see a Namibia that has improved social indicators where vulnerable populations in Namibia are enabled to meet their food and nutrition needs throughout the year.

I hope to see a Namibia that is self-sufficient in food production and where national programmes utilise food commodities that are locally sourced from smallholder producers. With 70% of rural farmers considered poor, linking them to markets and supporting them to diversify their incomes is the only way to ending poverty and hunger in their households.

4.) How can people help to achieve WFP's goals and objectives in their personal lives?

We can all support Zero Hunger in our own ways every single day. Roughly 795 million people go to bed hungry worldwide in a world of plenty and yet one-third of the food produced goes to waste. Many children have stunted growth, threatening their chances to a bright future. People can help achieve WFP goals by consuming what they need thereby reducing food waste. Pregnant and nursing mothers can help attend educational programme offered by the government to learn about effective child feeding practices. Private sector partners particularly those in the food processing sector can help reduce malnutrition and obesity by producing foods that are healthy and nutritious for the population. Raising awareness about good nutrition is essential and the youth, women and men can use various platforms for learn and educate others about hunger and malnutrition. Civil Society Organisation should continue to work with Government to advocate for strong social protection systems and elect officials that value progress towards SDG2. Even small changes, if taken together, can make a huge impact in ending hunger.