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TERMS OF REFERENCE

National consultant to synthesize evidence on the food system related to complementary foods and develop a National First Foods Action Plan

CONTRACT MODALITY	Individual Consultancy
DUTY STATION	Freetown-Remote with travel.
DURATION OF CONTRACT	4 Months

Purpose of Assignment

Sierra Leone continues to face persistent and interlinked challenges related to food and nutrition insecurity, climate vulnerability and fragile food systems, and malnutrition remains a major threat to child survival, growth and development. Despite measurable progress in reducing child stunting over the past decade—from 31.3 per cent in 2017 to 26.2 per cent in 2021—the pace of improvement remains insufficient for the country to meet national and global nutrition targets, including the World Health Assembly and Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) commitments by 2030. Wasting remains at 5.2 per cent, while micronutrient deficiencies, particularly anemia among children, adolescents and pregnant women, remain critically high. These nutrition challenges disproportionately affect the poorest households, women, children, adolescents and youth, particularly in rural and hard-to-reach areas.

Food insecurity remains widespread and severe. According to the Food Security Monitoring System (FSMS, July 2025), over 70 per cent of households are affected by food insecurity, driven by structural poverty, high unemployment, heavy dependence on food imports and exposure to price volatility. Inflation, exceeding 30 per cent during 2022–2023, remained high at 28.6 per cent in 2024; although it eased to 7.5 per cent in 2025, it has risen again in 2026, reaching 15.7 per cent in August, driven partly by higher domestic food prices linked to conflict-related supply constraints which have increased fuel prices globally and regionally. These price pressures have further constrained household purchasing power and access to diverse, nutritious foods. Children's diets are also constrained by limited access to affordable nutrient-dense foods, weak dietary diversity, and food-system barriers affecting the availability, safety, affordability and desirability of complementary foods for young children.

National available evidence indicates a serious deterioration in complementary feeding outcomes which ultimately contributes to child malnutrition (stunting, micronutrient deficiencies) as well as compromised cognitive development whose consequences are intergenerational, if not addressed. UNICEF's 2024 Child Food Poverty report identified Sierra Leone among countries with a high prevalence of severe child food poverty, with young children's diets dominated by starchy staples and commonly missing legumes, nuts and pulses, dairy, fruits and vegetables.

UNICEF's Global Nutrition Strategy 2020–2030 and the Global Complementary Feeding Collective: A call to action (2022) and the recent UNICEF-WHO Implementation Guideline on policies and programmes for improving complementary foods (2026) all promote a systems approach to improve diets, services and practices for children. The UNICEF First Foods Africa (2025) initiative further emphasizes climate-resilient and

sustainable food systems that make safe, nutritious, affordable and desirable complementary foods available to young children. This agenda aligns with Sierra Leone's Medium-Term National Development Plan 2024–2030 and the Feed Salone flagship programme as well as UNICEF Sierra Leones Country Programme strategy 2025 – 2030).

Following national consultations and the commitment to establish a National First Foods Coalition in 2024, UNICEF Sierra Leone seeks an individual national consultant to develop a National First Foods Action Plan based on the available evidence. This assignment will be conducted in partnership with the Directorate of Food and Nutrition (DFN), Ministry of Health in collaborattion with Edesia Nutrition who are conducting a situation analyses focusing more on the food environments, CF diets/practices / behaviour / private sector mapping as well as the World Bank-International Finance Corporation (WB-IFC) who soon due to start a review of the policies / regulations influencing the availability of safe and nutritious complementary foods / foods broadly. Therefore, this consultancy will address any of the situation analysis gaps not captured in the Edesia and WB reviews and will consolidate all the available evidence and support onsultations that will lead to the development of a First Foods Action Plan. for children aged 6–23 months in Sierra Leone.

Overall objective

To build on existing evidence and through national consultations to develop a costed, climate-resilient National First Foods Action Plan that improves access to safe, nutritious, affordable and desirable complementary foods for children aged 6–23 months, particularly in the poorest and hardest-to-reach households.

Specific objectives

• Review all available evidence on child diets, dietary quality, nutrition and food-security trends (access, availability and affordability), including geographic and seasonal variation from the various surveys including recent Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS, 2025-2026) – once published, Comprehensive Food Security Vulnerability Assessment (CFSVA), Fill the Nutrient Gap analysis and earlier Demographic Health Surveys or any other available evidence.

• Review the evidence compiled by Edesia Nutrition on available commercialized and noncommercialized complementary foods on the market targeting children aged 6–23 months, including locally produced through micro, small and medium sized enterprises (MSME's) as well as imported products and key market actors.

• Assess initiatives and untapped opportunities to produce, process, preserve, store, distribute and market (including demand creation) nutrient-dense first foods, with emphasis on commonly missing food groups (e.g. fruits, vegetables and dairy) through women- and youth-led enterprises / Non- Government Organisations and the private sector.

• Map stakeholders, partnerships, financing opportunities and market linkages across government, UN agencies, civil society, academia, donors and the private sector nationally, regionally and globally.

• Assess social protection and humanitarian entry points that could improve access to safe, nutritious and affordable first foods for the most vulnerable households.

• Based on the findings, develop a National First Foods Action Plan with prioritized actions, responsibilities, timelines and indicative resource needs.

Scope of Work

Scope of Work:

The consultant will work under the supervision of the International Nutrition Specialist (P3) and in consultation with the Ministry of Health, the Scaling Up Nutrition and Food Systems Coordination Unit, and relevant ministries and gencies, UNICEF technical teams, UN agencies, development partners specifically Edesia Nutrition and World Bank -IFC who have situation analysis / reviews ongoing that will feed into the evidence base for this assignment, civil society, academia and private-sector actors. The analysis and action planning will build on and operationalize the existing national dietary guidance and complementary feeding resources.

A. Inception and analytical framework

• Hold an inception meeting with UNICEF and key government counterparts to confirm scope, users of the analysis, stakeholder groups, geographic coverage and validation arrangements.

• Conduct a desk review of any available evidence on the situation of young children's diets, availability of complementary foods nutrition and food security situation including food consumption, micronutrient deficiencies, affordability, accessibility and seasonal or subnational differences.

• Refine the methodology, analytical framework, sampling approach, work plan, stakeholder engagement plan and data-collection tools.

• Prepare an ethical and data-management approach. The assignment is expected to rely primarily on secondary data and stakeholder consultations and not to collect personally identifiable data from children.

B. Situation review of the food system related to complementary foods in Sierra Leone

• Consolidate available evidence on child diets, describe and prioritize diet related health issues; review of evidence, types of complementary foods, availability, affordability and access, barriers, food habits and preferences. This will build on the ongoing situation analysis being conducted by Edesia Nutrition.

• Collect any additional information not being collected by Edesia Nutrition i.e. review of the current and potential production, processing and distribution of nutrient-dense foods, including eggs and other animal-source foods, fish, legumes, nuts, pulses, fruits, vegetables and fortified complementary foods.

• Review the food system related to complementary foods focusing on areas not captured in the Edesia Nutrition assessment;

• Identify promising innovations and opportunities to strengthen safe processing, local value chains, market access and demand for foods that address dietary gaps. Specialized nutritious foods and

therapeutic products may be considered only where relevant to the broader landscape and clearly distinguished from general complementary foods.

C. Stakeholder, partnership and financing landscape

• Map relevant public institutions, UN agencies, NGOs, academia, bilateral and multilateral partners, foundations, development finance institutions, private-sector actors, SMEs, farmer cooperatives and women- and youth-led enterprises.

• Assess roles, incentives, capacities, gaps and opportunities for collaboration, technical assistance, financing, innovation, production, distribution, market linkages and demand creation.

• Identify feasible financing pathways and partnership models for priority First Foods interventions.

D. Policy, regulatory, standards and enabling environment

• Compile the findings from the World Bank review of the policy and regulatory environment of the food system and relate these to complementary foods identifying priority gaps and actions.

E. Social protection and humanitarian entry points

• Review relevant social protection, humanitarian food-security and nutrition programmes and delivery platforms.

• Assess their current or potential contribution to improving access to safe, nutritious and affordable first foods for vulnerable children and households.

• Recommend feasible linkages, targeting approaches and system-strengthening actions.

F. Synthesis, validation and action planning

• Synthesize findings into a concise situation analysis that clearly identifies constraints, opportunities, priority population groups and geographic considerations.

• Facilitate validation of the findings and proposed priorities with UNICEF, government and other stakeholders.

• Develop a National First Foods Action Plan with strategic results, prioritized actions, responsible institutions, partnerships, milestones, indicators, timelines, risks and indicative budgets.

• Prepare a final consultancy report attaching any data sets and implementation tools, incorporating consolidated comments.

Work Assignments Overview	**Deliverables/Outputs**	**Delivery deadline to complete the deliverable**
Conduct desk review and develop the inception report, methodology, analytical framework, stakeholder engagement plan, tools and detailed work plan.	Approved inception report including methodology and consultation approach, analytical framework with data-collection tools and a detailed consultancy work plan.	7th December 2026
Review existing data on diets and their impact on healthrelated issues; review of evidence, food habits / and socio-cultural preferences, dietary diversity, breastfeeding practices among other factors affecting children's diets. Conduct a targeted food system analysis including stakeholder consultations to assess factors that affect food access and availability	Synthesized findings into a Draft situation analysis report, with executive summary and annexes of consultations, initiative mappings and case studies; and priority actions to improve complementary feeding in Sierra Leone.	14th January 2027

(seasonality and affordability), food safety, local food production / imports/ food safety/ food environments, role of WASH, gender and climate change. Role of food environments and consumer behavior. Identify effective interventions or opportunities for improving complementary feeding; review of successful global / regional / national nterventions, innovations, pilots both in the health system and other systems (agriculture / educ / social protection / humanitarian), if any.		
Facilitate stakeholder workshop to share and validate findings and prioritize actions identified from the situation analysis	Stakeholder workshop report including presentation of findings Approved situation analysis report	28st January 2027
Develop a first draft of the National First Foods Action Plan with strategic results, prioritized actions, responsible institutions, partnerships, indicators, milestones, implementation timeline, risks and indicative budgets; accompanied by a stakeholder presentation.	First draft of a National First Foods Action Plan	19th February 2027
Facilitate a validation workshop for the National First Foods Action Plan and incorporate validation findings	Revised and final draft of the First Foods Action Plan	5th March 2027

Payment Schedule:
Payment will be made on submission and acceptance of deliverables. UNICEF reserves the right to withhold payment in case the deliverables submitted are not up to the required standard or in case of delays in submitting the deliverables on the part of the consultant.

Important Notes

- Individuals engaged under a consultancy or individual contract will not be considered "staff members" under the Staff Regulations and Rules of the United Nations and UNICEF's policies and procedures and will not be entitled to benefits provided therein (such as leave entitlements and medical insurance coverage). Their conditions of service will be governed by their contract and the General Conditions of Contracts for the Services of Consultants and Individual Contractors. Consultants and individual contractors are responsible for determining their tax liabilities and for the payment of any taxes and/or duties, in accordance with local or other applicable laws.
- Contracts are conditional upon the selected candidate's willingness to comply with any current or future vaccination requirements that may be established by UNICEF, where applicable. Failure to comply with applicable vaccination requirements, where required and without an approved medical exemption by UNICEF, may result in the withdrawal of the consultancy offer or termination of the contract in accordance with the General Terms and Conditions of Contract.
- UNICEF offers reasonable accommodation for consultants with disabilities. This may include, for example, accessible software, travel assistance for missions or personal attendants. We encourage you to disclose your disability during your application in case you need reasonable accommodation during the selection process and afterwards in your assignment.

QUALIFICATIONS / SPECIALIZED KNOWLEDGE / EXPERIENCE/ COMPETENCIES (CORE/TECHNICAL/FUNCTIONAL) / LANGUAGE SKILLS REQUIRED FOR THE ASSIGNMENT

Minimum Qualifications required:Masters. Advanced university degree in food science, food technology, agriculture, agricultural economics, nutrition, public health nutrition, economics, social sciences, public policy or another relevant field

Years of Experience/ Knowledge/Expertise/Skills required:

Work Experience: At least 10 years of relevant professional experience in food systems, agriculture, nutrition policy, research or implementation, including at least 5 years focused on nutritionsensitive food systems and nutrient-dense foods for young children.

Language Requirements:English and knowledge of the local languages.

Knowledge/Expertise/Skills:Expertise in nutrition specific and nutrition sensitive programming with emphasis on food based approaches including private-sector engagement, Small and Medium Size Enterprises or producer analysis, food systems, agricultural value chains, markets or foodindustry development. Experience related to specialized nutritious foods, food-product development or food technology, and pathways for safe scale-up, is an asset. Proven experience in developing strategies, action plans, implementation tools, investment cases or knowledge products.

Desirables:

•Experience related to specialized nutritious foods, foodproduct development or food technology, and pathways for safe scale-up, is an asset.
• Experience working in Africa or other low- and middle-income countries, including fragile or humanitarian contexts.
• Experience in multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder collaboration involving government, UN agencies, academia, civil society and the private sector.
• Excellent analytical, facilitation and written communication skills in English.
• Knowledge of Sierra Leone's food and nutrition context is an asset.
Technical proposal requirement: Applicants are requested to submit one writing sample (max 10 pages) demonstrating relevant experience in the development of technical and analytical documents. The sample should meet the following criteria: be (co)-authored by the applicant, be relevant to the assignment such as public finance management, align with the deliverables such as technical guidance, analysis or policy-oriented document.