

# Stories of Change in Nutrition

A RESEARCH SUMMARY MAY 2016

## Country Brief



USAID

# Zambia

## Background

The Stories of Change research project<sup>1</sup> aims to generate experiential learning for countries with high burdens of malnutrition to start to fill gaps in our understanding of how policies to address nutrition are made and how these policies play out in implementation in particular contexts. Zambia has come some way over the past years in creating coherent strategies for tackling different aspects of malnutrition; however, important challenges remain.

This study assesses trends in the nutrition context over time; determinants of nutrition change; and policy processes for nutrition in Zambia. We aim to try to understand what has driven change in stunting over the past fifteen years, to track the nutrition policy process over time in Zambia and assess how certain issues came to the fore; how issues were acted upon at different levels; who and what drove these processes; and how policy and programme changes were received and experienced by communities. The hope is that understanding these processes more fully – and even just making them more public – will facilitate improving what needs to be improved in Zambia, and sharing best practices with other countries facing similar challenges.

## Key findings

There are some big-picture **contextual factors** that deeply affect nutrition in Zambia. These include large-scale weather patterns such as the current El Niño, droughts, fluctuations in copper prices, inequality, and global food industry forces. These have profound implications for policies and broader action. Within this

macro context, the situation for nutrition in Zambia is changing. On one hand, national programmes in the health sector (predominantly anti-malarial bed-nets) are partially explaining a **fall in stunting** of around one percent per year between 2002 and 2014 (other important drivers were improvements in water and sanitation and increased wealth), though rates are still unacceptably high. On the other, global and regional demographic and food system forces are starting a **'nutrition transition'** away from traditional foods towards more globalised patterns, and increasing overweight and chronic disease. Zambia is therefore experiencing a dual burden of over- and under-nutrition, and its policies and programmes need to respond.

## Coherence in policy and programmes

In late 2010, Zambia became an early signatory to the **SUN movement**, which among other things aimed to bring more coherence to the nutrition sector in the country. While Zambia's **policy environment** is fairly strong, with a sensible cascade of written nutrition policy and programmes and some coherence in key sectoral policy on nutrition, funding and technical constraints have meant that only certain sections of this comprehensive group of policies are being taken forward. **Service coverage** is patchy in health systems in general, and even more so for nutrition where only specific districts and wards have so far been targeted by the pilot phase of implementation of the 1000 days nutrition programme.

Programmes in the health sector are partially explaining a fall in stunting, but demographic and food system forces are starting a nutrition transition.

<sup>1</sup> The Stories of Change (SoC) initiative covers six countries: Bangladesh, Nepal, India (Odisha), Senegal, Zambia and Ethiopia

Within policy and programmes, the issue of **multisectorality** has been embraced in Zambia. There has been clear support for a district-level pilot of **intersectoral coordination** in practice, where important examples of how to address nutrition at ground level have emerged. This experiential learning has altered national government planning and international funding focus, which in turn have influenced a funded implementation model led by inter-sectoral committees in other pilot districts. One issue still to address is how the local-level initiative can be scaled up to cover the whole country without losing the depth that was key to the process.

### Complexities of leadership

Key to coordination and **organisational leadership** is the National Food and Nutrition Commission (NFNC). While NFNC has had influence in multisectoral policy formulation, its influence and capacity to lead are limited, partly due to its placement within the Ministry of Health (MOH) and subsequent lack of convening power, and partly due to lack of capacity. Since 2006, however, NFNC has demonstrated organisational growth characterised by changes in thinking about its form and function, towards a strategising and leadership function and a coordinating mechanism. Less explored in terms of leadership across sectors is the opportune composition of the nutrition profession group the Nutrition Association of Zambia (NAZ), that could be leveraged to bring about improved coordination; NAZ includes among its members nutritionists from across sectors and stakeholders, and is therefore uniquely placed to foster alignment through its own activities involving food and nutrition professionals across the country.

In terms of international leadership, the international Scaling Up Nutrition (**SUN**) movement has had multiple roles in Zambia, but the core functions that have stood out in this research have been in advocacy through the creation and support of the SUN Civil Society Organization (CSOSUN), and in financing through the SUN Fund. A **triad of leadership** on nutrition has emerged that includes government, nutrition professionals and civil society in the form of NFNC, NAZ, and CSOSUN at national level, starting to work more coherently alongside the MOH which leads implementation, and the international community who are supplying funds and technical assistance to each organisation. This is a multi-stakeholder platform in a very real sense: These groups each have a clear role (policy and strategy, professional support, and advocacy, respectively) and have developed both formal and informal collaborative channels. If these key nutrition institutions can strengthen their capacity do undertake and deliberately align these respective roles and continue to secure adequate funds, then together they should be a clear force for nutrition going forward.

The role of **individual leadership** is also crucial. Over several years, certain organisations have moved ahead with nutrition work in spite of lack of funds, where others do not progress, and this pro-active action has been linked to strong leadership. An important tension however, which has emerged through this work, is between a reticence to single out individuals publicly

### Illustration of policy cascades in key sectors

| International<br>↓ | Millennium Development Goals, 2000                 |  |  |   |                                  |   |
|--------------------|--|--|--|---|----------------------------------|---|
|                    | Zambia Vision 2030, GRZ 2006                       |  |  |   |                                  |   |
|                    | Zambia Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper, IMF 2007  |  |  |   |                                  |   |
|                    | Zambia Sixth National Development Plan, GRZ 2011   |  |  |   |                                  |   |
|                    | Nutrition  | Agriculture                                    | Health                                 | Education   | Social protection                | Water and sanitation                              |
| National<br>↓      | SUN Framework for Action 2010                      | CAADP agreement                                | Worth Health Assembly agreement        |   |                                  |   |
|                    | National Food and Nutrition Policy 2006            | National Agriculture Policy 2004–15            | National Health Policy 1992            | National School Health and Nutrition Policy 2006      |                                  |   |
|                    | National Food and Nutrition Strategic Plan 2011–15 | MAL Strategic Plan 2013–16 (“Budget Strategy”) | National Health Strategic Plan 2011–16 |   | Social Protection Framework 2013 | WASH Framework 2006                               |
|                    | 1000 Most Critical Days Programme 2013–15          | Agriculture Sector Implementation Plan         | Micronutrient Policy 2005–2011         | School Health and Nutrition Programme Guidelines 2008 |                                  | National Water and Sanitation Supplies Programmes |
|                    |  | National Agriculture Investment Plan 2014      |  |   |                                  |   |
| District<br>↓      | Multisectoral District Plan                        | Agriculture Ministry Workplan                  | MCDMCH-DOH Workplan                    | Education Ministry Workplan                           | MCDMCH-DCW/DSP Workplan          | Local Government Ministry Workplan                |

for either praise or blame, and recent public calls globally on the need for nutrition champions. Zambian sentiment tends more towards recognising the organisation to which an individual belongs, rather than recognising key individuals themselves. This tendency may be an important barrier to recognition and cultivation of strong leadership in Zambia.

### Commitment and accountability

It is important to distinguish between different parts of government when talking about **commitment**. Technical parts of government within different key line ministries are working on a range of different initiatives to improve nutrition. However, the financial and executive arms are not always forthright in supporting these efforts. High-level public servants are beginning to engage with the nutrition agenda under the Special Committee of Permanent Secretaries on Nutrition, and this is important as these individuals reflect the interface between the political direction of the country and the bureaucrats charged with implementing the resultant policy.

This engagement is still in its infancy however, and in concrete terms the amount of national **budget allocation** remains limited compared to what is coming from development partners. Funding for nutrition has increased exponentially through international donors but not through government. Most big international health priorities are primarily externally funded in Zambia, while government funds keep the basic health system running. It is clear that finances are tight for the Zambian Government, with revenues dependent on international copper markets which are currently low. However, the **“investment returns” on funding nutrition** for government cannot be

A triad of leadership has emerged that includes government, nutrition professionals and civil society; in deliberately aligning these roles they can be a clear force for nutrition.

overstated; nutrition is a sensible investment for long-term development. Government can help in other ways as well, in particular by making sure that the policy environment affecting nutrition is coherent and up to date, including with modern nutrition research, and that basic services are functioning.

Beyond commitment, **accountability** is still an issue in Zambia. Recent work by CSO-SUN has suggested that election manifesto commitments would be more binding than international pledges, and recent achievements in multi-party manifesto commitments for nutrition have been secured to leverage accountability at high level. The organisations in positions of national nutrition leadership have accountability to both the international community and national government, and so are pulled in multiple directions but with limited staff and time to respond. At the community level, accountability is a well-understood but less formally defined concept: In general, communities seem to have low expectations of government services and comparatively higher expectations of the NGO sector. Community knowledge of where to make complaints or how to claim accountability is variable, so strengthening communities' understanding of their rights and of commitments made would make their voice for demanding accountability more powerful.

### Whose agendas to advocate

The **international community** of donors, NGOs and the UN have played a big part in agenda setting, strategic leadership, and funding in Zambia. An implication of the high involvement of the international community has been that nutrition **agendas** have largely been set along the lines of international priorities. The Zambia case study is one that reflects an international agenda in the shape of SUN, which arrived at an opportune time to be taken advantage of by a country that was already awakening to multi-sectoral agendas. While there is harmony among a majority of issues that national and international institutions would prioritise, this research has identified some points of disjuncture. In particular, the international focus on child undernutrition does not leave room for the interest of many national players who would like to get ahead of the looming overnutrition and chronic disease crisis that is emerging in Zambia. Similar actions need to be undertaken (in food systems and health promotion) for remedying both under- and over-nutrition. Linking the under- and over-nutrition agendas might be a useful way to gain traction that is lacking on undernutrition, while heading off an impending overnutrition crisis. This would require forward thinking from the international community who provide a majority of nutrition funding, and from all those organisations which play a strong role in setting strategic direction.

Despite a broadly strong bond between nutrition actors in Zambia, there are many **unfulfilled expectations** in the Zambian nutrition community. These include tensions between expectations of the NFNC's role, and what their own reading of their mandate is, for instance, or between expectations of district-level ministries' financial capacity and the administrative procedures of the SUN Fund. These tensions also need to be acknowledged and discussed if they are to be resolved.

### Bringing in communities

At the **community** level, the invisible nature of stunting is reflected in community responses to discussions of malnutrition, where the information discussed generally refers to acute malnutrition. But the invisibility of nutrition goes further than that. The truth is that many of the big picture policy process issues described above simply do not readily translate into daily experience at the community level, where change is really only perceived when there are sharp shifts in implementation modality. If the activity at the national and district level does not express itself through positive and perceivable implementation shifts, then changes will remain stalled at the discussion stage.

Key to accountability will be generating demand for nutrition in communities; the drive must ultimately come from Zambians.

### Conclusions: Commitment, coordination, community and beyond

Overall, there are positive stories of change in Zambia, in particular a decrease in stunting that has been sustained over fifteen years, and a momentum for nutrition policy processes and planning. Zambia has drawn on international evidence and best practice for its policy, but has also generated and shared its own experiential learning, particularly around national advocacy, and working across sectors at district level. A strong group of organisational leadership is emerging in Lusaka, and Zambia benefits from some strong and passionate nutrition champions and actors. Zambia has made a robust start on its story of change in nutrition. If its organisational challenges can continue to be addressed in an open and inclusive manner, and its big picture challenges factored in systematically, Zambia has a good chance of continuing to see declines in stunting and heading off the worst of dietary change in the nutrition transition. Key to this will be generating demand for improved nutrition in communities, from the urban middle class to the poorest villages; if government commitment and accountability are limiting factors, the drive for these must ultimately come from Zambians rather than from the international community if positive changes are to be sustained.

#### 7 key stories mapped to context and policy process framework



## Recommendations for the **Zambian nutrition community**

- Working with organisations identified as boundary spanners to increase their capacity, their influence, and their ability to leverage their complex roles is clearly one important intervention for moving nutrition policy and practice forward.
- If the three key nutrition institutions – NFNC, NAZ, and CSOSUN – can strengthen their capacity to undertake and deliberately align their respective roles – strategy, professional support, and advocacy – then together they will be a clear force for nutrition going forward.
- It will be important to explore the opportune placement of NAZ, including membership from across sectors and stakeholders, to foster inter-sectoral alignment.
- An important tension is between a reticence to single out individuals publicly for either praise or blame, and recent public calls for nutrition champions to be identified. This tendency may be an important barrier to recognition and cultivation of strong leadership, and will be an important point for the Zambian nutrition community to bring to the fore of future discussions
- There are many unfulfilled expectations in the Zambian nutrition community, tensions between expectations and capacity. These tensions need to be acknowledged and discussed if they are to be resolved.
- Datasets do not exist to fully assess drivers of nutrition change. Important in future data collection will be combining health and agricultural factors in datasets, and collecting dietary data from different sections of the population.
- It is important to distinguish between different parts of government when talking about commitment. Technical parts of government are working on a range of different initiatives to improve nutrition, but the financial and executive arms must be encouraged in supporting these efforts with political attentions and funds.
- Many of the big successes underpinning nutrition changes have been externally funded. The international community should see the focus on nutrition as a long-term commitment to building systems and engagement- but in creating sustainability must be flexible in its approach to defining objectives and disbursing funds.
- The financial arms of government can contribute by exploring mechanisms that would promote targeted resource mobilisation for nutrition, as part of commitments to nutrition made during election time
- Government can help in other ways as well, in particular by making sure that the policy environment affecting nutrition is coherent and up to date, and that basic services are functioning
- Strengthening communities' understanding of their rights and of commitments made would make their voice more powerful, leading to awareness creation at community level to improve demand for better nutrition, but also to demand accountability from the relevant officials. Clarity is needed on which advocacy roles fall to which organisations if advocacy is to be coherent. Smaller civil society organisations closer to communities should be supported to make clear advocacy plans if grassroots demand for nutrition is to be generated

### Credits

This summary is taken from the forthcoming research by Jody Harris, Scott Drimie, Terry Roopnaraine, Seollee Park, Derek Headey and Namukolo Covic

### Further reading

[www.transformnutrition.org/stories\\_of\\_change](http://www.transformnutrition.org/stories_of_change)

<http://nourishingmillions.ifpri.info>



*Stories of Change in Nutrition* are a series of structured case studies in 6 countries: Bangladesh, Nepal, Odisha (India), Ethiopia, Senegal and Zambia. These 'stories' aim to improve our understanding of what drives impact in reducing undernutrition, and how enabling environments and pro-nutrition policy and implementation processes can be cultivated and sustained.

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