

The Role of Civil Society in Spotlighting Nutrition

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Abstract Implementation of nutrition interventions and agendas must be accompanied by a good understanding of nutrition among political players, policymakers and the general public. Civil society has a unique role of creating demand and building consciousness towards the importance of nutrition at all levels and among all key stakeholders in nutrition development. Awareness-raising and demand creation are key components of the story of change that has seen public involvement in an issue as important to development as nutrition. As a result, there has been meaningful involvement of the population, especially beneficiaries who are key in determining which interventions should receive most emphasis to bring about lasting improvements in nutrition status. A nutrition-conscious population will always seek for what is best in terms of nutrition, including holding to account duty bearers in the implementation process through effective monitoring mechanisms.

1 Introduction

‘Man is what he eats’ as coined by German philosopher Ludwig Andreas Von Feuerbach in 1864 is perhaps the oldest adage referencing the huge impact of food on our bodies. Apart from identity, food is the fuel that drives our activities and helps nurture our systems, while playing a pivotal role in our daily sustenance (King 2012). Above all else, food is the basis of nutrition and good nutrition is critical to the longevity and quality of life that one lives. Adequate quantity and consistency of nutrients has a huge impact on the growth and development of our physical and cognitive abilities (*ibid.*). A common misconception is that good nutrition only impacts our physical development in terms of how short, tall or weighty we are but studies show that nutrition has a direct impact on cognitive abilities as well (*ibid.*). Therefore, adequate dietary composition impacts the full life potential that comprises both the physical and cognitive development of an individual. In spite of this, however, it is an unfortunate reality to note that nutrition continues to have such a perennially low profile in Zambia.

2 Nutrition in Zambia

In Zambia, the prevalence of stunting is among the highest in the sub-Saharan region, with the latest figures for children under five showing stunting levels of 45 per cent, and 5 per cent being wasted and 15 per cent being underweight (GRZ 2009). Undernutrition, consisting of foetal growth restriction, stunting, wasting and deficiencies of vitamin A and zinc, along with sub-optimum breastfeeding, underlies about 45 per cent of under-five mortality (White 2008).

Following a period of steady economic development, Zambia is now classified as a lower middle-income country. However, Zambia is making insufficient progress towards achieving Millennium Development Goal 1 (te Lintelo *et al.* 2013). Zambia ranks 69th in the 2013 Global Hunger Index, and is facing an ‘alarming’ hunger and undernutrition situation (IFPRI 2013).

The Government of Zambia joined the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) movement in December 2010. It has also committed to improving food and nutrition security by signing the Compact for the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) in January 2011. In April 2012, the government launched the National Food and Nutrition Strategic Plan and the First 1000 Most Critical Days Programme. However, budget analysis of the Zambia Civil Society Scaling Up Nutrition (CSO-SUN) Alliance showed that planned expenditure for nutrition interventions is lagging far behind the requisite spending per child under two for direct nutrition interventions as recommended by the World Bank (CSO-SUN Alliance 2013).

Zambia, much like other countries in sub-Saharan Africa with high levels of malnutrition, has poorly structured formal mechanisms to coordinate nutrition activities among the various stakeholders. Sectoral budgets for nutrition are fragmented and there is no national nutrition line budget (te Lintelo *et al.* 2013). Malnutrition is seen as everyone’s problem but no one’s responsibility, resulting in a failure to take effective collective action (*ibid.*).

At government level, there appears to be a reinforcement of the mono-diet system of feeding, if we examine government spending, particularly in relation to agriculture. Over the past two years (2012–13) the government has increased spending to the Food Reserve Agency (FRA) and Farmer Input Support Programme (FISP), two agencies primarily focused on maize production, by 53 per cent and 47 per cent in 2013, respectively (CSO-SUN Alliance 2013). This, while aimed at boosting the buyer capacity of farmers who supply the maize and the food storage, does little to diversify the diets of people. Nutritional focus has been mostly on avoiding nutritional deficiencies rather than understanding how nutrition in itself is a great preventative tool for fighting malnutrition in its many forms (Namugumya 2011).

One of the underlying causes of the low profile of nutrition at all levels in the country is a lack of knowledge on information about nutrition issues. At the grass-roots level, there is a need to create demand for information and services on nutrition. Citizens need access to information on nutrition interventions so that they can hold decision-makers accountable for their decisions. However, citizens often appear unconcerned about nutritional issues; there is little demand for knowledge about the health of the food we eat. Parents, especially mothers who are usually the decision-makers when it comes to what children eat, must be knowledgeable and aware of what they need to feed their growing children. It is alarming that this lack of knowledge on nutrition is also experienced by decision-makers. This has translated into weak political will to tackle the adverse effects of improper nutrition.

3 Zambia Civil Society Scaling Up Nutrition Alliance

Established in October 2012, the Zambia Civil Society Scaling Up Nutrition (CSO-SUN) Alliance is a movement of national civil society organisations (CSOs) working together to raise the profile of nutrition on the national development agenda, advocate for more funding towards nutrition and to increase the understanding of people on the consequences of undernutrition in early life, focusing on the most critical 1,000 days of a child's life from conception until the child's second birthday.

The 1,000 days is known as a window of opportunity as this is the most crucial period in a child's life through which malnutrition can be fought. Missing this window of opportunity could pose a risk to a child's mental and physical development and put them at a higher risk of being malnourished and being a victim of chronic diseases.

The Zambia Alliance is part of the global Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) movement founded on the principle that all people have a right to food and good nutrition. It unites people from different sectors such as governments, the United Nations, donors, the private sector, civil society and researchers, all in an effort to scale up nutrition interventions. The Zambia Alliance is working towards a Zambia where every child is assured of sufficient nutrition through strengthened policy, financial commitment and adequate programme implementation.¹

Our goal is to increase coverage of effective and integrated nutrition programmes by ensuring political commitment to tackle undernutrition, increasing financial resources and ensuring accountability by government for nutrition. In order to achieve this, we aim to raise public awareness and national consensus about the problem and solutions of malnutrition through contributing to policy, legal and budgetary frameworks that address the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable. Furthermore, we wish to strengthen in-country accountability for progress in tackling undernutrition and, through networks, enhance learning between organisations and between countries and to maximise the effectiveness of their efforts.

Raising the profile of nutrition in Zambia requires the commitment of CSOs, political leaders and all other key decision-makers who are likely to be influential in

reducing the prevalence of malnutrition. This is being done through advocacy, so far most effectively through liaising with the media, conducting research and lobbying members of parliament.

4 The role of civil society in scaling up nutrition

The international momentum for action on nutrition recognised the need for strong leadership and the role of civil society in generating demand, securing political commitment and ensuring accountability for nutrition results. CSOs in Zambia are trying to raise awareness about nutrition but many of their efforts lack the necessary support from the general population, political players and policymakers because they have no direct experience and no personal understanding of nutrition issues. Hence the need to have a unified voice on issues of nutrition – the primary reason for establishing the Alliance. By collating the attitudes of various CSOs on nutrition and presenting them as one creates an enabling environment for nutrition.

An enabling environment can be defined as political and policy processes that build and sustain movement for the effective implementation of actions that reduce undernutrition (Gillespie *et al.* 2013). A review published in *The Lancet* series (2013) clearly shows that a political momentum can be developed and sustained through deliberate actions, but it needs the deliberate alignment of several factors and processes. The CSO-SUN Alliance plays an important role in creating and sustaining the momentum of improving nutrition through:

- (1) dissemination of evidence/awareness-raising;
- (2) advocacy – including communications and political mobilisation;
- (3) monitoring and evaluation/accountability; and
- (4) supporting government efforts, including mainstreaming nutrition across CSO programmes and complementing efforts/service delivery.

4.1 Dissemination of evidence/awareness-raising

The key roles and principles of civil society in the provision of knowledge and evidence is around global and national advocacy, framing and packaging of information to galvanise commitment, pushing nutrition up the development agenda and generating data showing the severity and distribution of malnutrition (Gillespie *et al.* 2013). The Zambia CSO-SUN Alliance has used various mechanisms to increase awareness of nutrition for the general public, but also has been advocating at national level to prioritise nutrition.

There is an overwhelming need to create national understanding of the problem of malnutrition in Zambia. For this reason, civil society has championed the campaign to raise awareness and create demand for knowledge on nutrition.

4.2 The ten 'asks'

In order to guide the advocacy strategy of the CSO-SUN Alliance, a list of ten recommendations was developed, designed to improve current plans and accelerate progress towards a Zambia where all children can see their rights to adequate nutrition, and full life potential, fulfilled, no matter where they were born or where they live (see Box 1).

Box 1 The ten key ‘asks’: key recommendations to guide advocacy of the CSO-SUN Alliance**1 Build political will to tackle undernutrition**

Studies on the governance of nutrition in different countries have highlighted the political will given to tackling malnutrition as one of the most critical factors for success in these efforts. Countries that have achieved more progress – such as Brazil and Peru, had high-level political champions clearly identified with the issue and pushing for progress, usually at the highest political level and for a sustained period of time.

2 Ensure effective high-level national coordination

Currently, the responsibility for coordinating efforts to tackle malnutrition in Zambia is assigned to the National Food and Nutrition Commission (NFNC), an organ of the Ministry of Health. However, despite its efforts, the NFNC has limited powers and capacities to convene and coordinate among the different actors who need to work together to ensure adequate progress in tackling undernutrition. Malnutrition is a multi-faceted problem, it requires coordinated action from multiple sectors of government, including the Ministry of Health (for treating those with acute malnutrition), the Ministry of Community Development, Mother and Child Health (for promoting healthy behaviours), the Ministry of Agriculture (for food security and production of nutritious foods), the Ministry of Local Government and Housing (for ensuring adequate water and sanitation services, to avoid frequent illnesses that reduce children’s abilities to absorb nutrients), not to mention the Ministry of Finance (to ensure adequate funding of nutrition programmes) and the Disaster Mitigation and Management Unit in the Vice President’s Office (to ensure planning for and mitigation of the impact of emergencies on food and nutritional security).

3 Increase spending to address the nutrition crisis

Government financial resource allocation to nutrition must increase. There is a need to look for innovative sources of financing to bridge the funding gap which would be in addition to aid from traditional bilateral and multilateral donors. It is important also that Zambia increases the domestic resources available to finance nutrition programmes.

4 Address the serious gaps to ensure adequate human resources at all levels

Zambia cannot realistically expect to address the crisis of undernutrition without urgently increasing the availability of qualified nutritionists. The crisis of malnutrition is complex. Addressing it requires technical competence across sectors. Zambia has limited numbers of trained nutritionists and dieticians to provide the necessary guidance in addressing the challenge, both at policy and programme levels (either for preventative or curative interventions). In health facilities, there are no trained dieticians or clinical nutritionists to guide the therapeutic management of conditions and diseases. Zambia’s critical deficit in nutrition human resources is highlighted in estimates of evidence provided by the University of Zambia (NFNC and CSO 2009).

5 Create transparent financial mechanisms to protect nutrition funding

Addressing the crisis of undernutrition in Zambia will require the allocation of sustained and significant resources over the long term. Zambia must find ample, innovative and (ultimately) Zambian sources of →

4.3 Nutrition champions

Using nutrition champions has proven to be essential in advancing the nutrition agenda in the context of fragmentation and competing interests between and within various groups of stakeholders (Gillespie *et al.* 2013). Nutrition advocacy champions, with both political and technical backgrounds, are needed at all levels to create effective political demand for better nutrition. Furthermore, there is a need to identify and work with legislative champions that are sufficiently knowledgeable, committed and capable of influencing policymaking to ensure a proper debate and consultation about new legislation, funding and organisational reforms (*ibid.*). This is one of the primary goals that the CSO-SUN Alliance is engaged in. The Alliance is working closely with a selected number of members of parliament (MPs), champions of nutrition, who have been trained in the importance of nutrition for development. The MPs have been advocating for more resources to be allocated to nutrition, for example during the budget estimate committees. It is proven that civil society engagement with high-level individual champions have raised the profile of nutrition in various policy forums in countries

like Peru and Brazil. Such champions are able to deliver advocacy messages on the impact of malnutrition in an easy and innovative manner that is understood by non-professionals.

4.4 Raising awareness through the media

The Alliance has used different mediums to raise awareness and understanding among citizens and policymakers, sharing information on the importance of nutrition and its impact on human and national development. Overall, engaging with the media has proved a highly successful tool in raising awareness. So far, the Alliance has published over 50 online and press articles. In addition to these, the Alliance has participated in many high-level radio and television discussions on national development matters that border on nutrition-sensitive and specific interventions. The Alliance has also collaborated to make a documentary on malnutrition called *The Silent Story* which can be viewed via YouTube. The Alliance is disseminating information to reach as many audiences as possible – from rural to urban areas. Communication tools employed include television shows, radio, online media, print media, traditional media,

Box 1 Ten key recommendations to guide advocacy of the CSO-SUN Alliance; the ten key 'asks' (cont.)

funding to address this critical issue, or child undernutrition will fall back into the scale of a national crisis, and all progress towards addressing it will be lost. The presence of alternative sources of funding from extractive industries or private sector investments has the potential to enhance the targeting and effective allocation of nutrition funding over the long term. In Zambia, the adoption of a 1 per cent medical levy suggests that there is potential for channelling tax revenue from mining companies to fund nutrition strategies in the long term.

6 Reform existing programmes to increase their effect on nutrition

In addressing the malnutrition crisis, it is important to realise the emphasis placed on the various sources of nutrients in the Zambian diet. The role of maize in the promotion of optimal health for the Zambian population is an area of contention. The 'agriculture policy' in relation to the 'maize debate' in Zambia has been pursued without due consideration to nutrition and development.

7 Provide clear public data and information on emerging evidence and strategy

Ensure data on progress made in tackling child malnutrition, funds spent (by province) and actions that will be taken to address future problems is made available publicly. Frequent data observations on nutrition outcomes to monitor progress are preferable to the development of detailed nutrition indicators.

8 Ensure effective decentralised coordination at provincial and district level

Delivering nutrition services at the local level tends to work better in countries that have adequate decentralised structures. Some factors that facilitate service delivery include donor or government capacity to provide technical support at all levels and the availability of reliable nutrition data and performance indicators. Effective decentralised structures can also contribute to improved capacity of government offices at the provincial and local levels through training programmes, as well as professional incentives and salary rewards.

9 Provide financial incentives to engage the private sector to tackle undernutrition

A number of items are currently exempt or zero-rated under the value-added tax (VAT) scheme. We support this policy and we further urge government to exempt or zero-rate nutritious food (a range of products that could be used to prevent stunting) traditionally purchased by poor individuals, especially poor women. To that end, it is fair for government to give incentives to companies producing highly nutritious foods so that they are more affordable to the poor communities.

10 Engage civil society as a partner in the fight against undernutrition

Civil society has the potential to make malnutrition problems visible and improve the scope and quality of service delivery through research and advocacy. Civil society groups have actively campaigned on nutrition issues in Brazil and India. In Brazil, however, CSOs have influenced and shaped nutrition policies more effectively because they directly engage with political parties, government ministers and local governments, to turn nutrition campaigns into government policies.

meetings and events, social media (Facebook, Twitter), phone-in contests and competitions (Maseko 2013).

In Zambia, radio has extremely wide coverage compared to any other form of communication and is a lot more accessible to the majority of the population. Interactive phone-in programmes are being used to help to raise the profile of nutrition as they are one of the best ways to engage the listener: learning becomes easier when people are given the freedom to ask questions about things they do not understand then hearing the answers immediately.

Pre-recorded programmes are being used to complement live phone-in programmes. The Alliance encourages radio stations to re-broadcast programmes on nutrition, particularly those that involve expert discussions. For rural communities that do not receive a radio signal from the national broadcaster, community radio is being used to reach such areas to ensure that no one is excluded.

Television is also essential for raising the profile of nutrition. Talk shows with influential political leaders as guests focusing on nutritional issues have been aired to

help people to understand the underlying causes of malnutrition. Television has been used to show the impact of undernutrition and has consequently educated its audience. In the same way, articles in newspapers are used to target people who gather their information by reading.

4.5 Nutrition awards

In 2013, the first nutrition awards went to the Vice President and the First Lady of Zambia for their efforts to improve nutrition. MPs who have been actively engaged with the CSO-SUN Alliance and have lobbied at parliament for the prioritisation of nutrition, and NGOs and CBOs which are active in the field of nutrition were also awarded. Media houses and journalists who had good coverage of nutrition-related news and articles also received awards in recognition of their efforts in raising awareness on nutrition and as a motivation to continue their good work.

4.6 Political economy of stakeholders, ideas and interests

An important role of civil society is to keep government and other stakeholders accountable for coverage, quality and equity of actions to reduce undernutrition and to

contribute to multi-stakeholder platforms for decision-making, in-country support to the SUN movement, but also to strengthen the voice of communities, women and children (Gillespie *et al.* 2013).

4.7 Budget tracking and analysis

Another way in which the Alliance embarks on influencing policy is through budget tracking and analysis. The Alliance provided training on budget tracking at both national and district levels to CBOs, NGOs and local government in order to increase capacity to hold the government accountable for the expenditure on nutrition as planned. Budget tracking and analysis is done by analysing the official budget document of the Republic of Zambia (national and district level) and using the analysis as an advocacy tool to lobby for more investment in nutrition within the five key line ministries. This process helps in giving direction on how much the government is spending on nutrition-related interventions and to track whether it is keeping to its commitments. The national budget analysis showed that although there are various budget lines dedicated to nutrition within the various line ministries, the level of funding for both nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive interventions is very low. Based on budget lines which are clearly linked to nutrition, the government will spend a total of only 3 kwacha on nutrition interventions per child under the age of two years. This is far below the government's commitment and World Bank-recommended spending of 170 kwacha (approx. US\$30) per child under two years old (CSO-SUN Alliance 2013).

The findings of the national budget analysis were presented to the Parliamentary Expanded Committee on estimates and are used as an advocacy tool to increase spending in nutrition.

4.8 Raising awareness through creating synergies

The Alliance is also playing a key role in raising the profile of nutrition within Zambia's political leadership and ensuring that national plans and strategies include nutrition priorities. They have been making deliberate moves to invite key political leaders to nutrition-related events, meeting and workshops.

Held by the Alliance, the Nutrition Champions Meeting on 1 May 2013 greatly increased political commitment, as it involved MPs. Its aim was to improve their knowledge on nutrition issues in order to accelerate nutrition development on the long-standing poor state of nutrition among children.²

4.9 In-country support to the SUN movement

The CSO-SUN Alliance and its members provide support and technical assistance to the SUN programme/First 1000 Most Critical Days Programme implemented by the government. The Alliance works closely with its members at national level and also at district level, supporting the development and implementation of the district nutrition multi-sectoral plans, which are part of the First 1000 Most Critical Days Programme.

4.10 Strengthening the voice of communities, women and children by working at district level

The CSO-SUN Alliance is working in three districts in Zambia where the government will implement the First

1000 Most Critical Days Programme: Mumbwa, Lundazi and Samfya. The main objective is to increase awareness about nutrition and utilise existing groups – such as women's groups, nutrition groups, farmers' associations and neighbouring health committees – for local advocacy at district level. These groups have received training in budget tracking in order to hold local government accountable for the implementation of the First 1000 Most Critical Days Programme.

4.11 Capacity (individual, organisational, systemic) and financial resources

Gillespie *et al.* (2013) describes the role of civil society in the domain of capacity building as the ability to raise financial resources through effective public campaigning and to increase capacity to deliver services and reach marginalised communities.

4.12 Capacity building

Because the CSO-SUN Alliance realised that the levels of understanding about malnutrition among MPs, CSOs and media are low, it has provided training sessions to better understand the multi-sectoral causes of malnutrition, its consequences for human development and the First 1000 Most Critical Days Programme. Trainings were also provided at district level for the CSOs.

4.13 Raising financial resources

The Government of Zambia has pledged during the Nutrition for Growth Summit to increase the nutrition budget by 25 per cent. This is in part due to successful lobbying by the Alliance and other stakeholders.

5 Conclusion

Although important steps have been made in increasing awareness of nutrition among policymakers, there is a need for increased efforts by Zambia's political leaders to ensure that nutritional interventions are well funded. The 2014 budget analysis shows that the amount of money budgeted for nutrition-specific and sensitive interventions is inadequate by far to bring about change in the prevalence of stunting in Zambia.

CSOs have an important role to play in ensuring that nutrition is considered as high priority in political and development agendas. There is need for collaborative work among different government agencies, civil societies, development partners and the private sector which has a great potential but is usually ignored. Nutrition policy agendas cannot be properly funded if nutrition is only seen as an output and not as an input to growth and development (Meerman 2008). Therefore, the CSO-SUN Alliance will continue to build commitment of policymakers and to encourage them to prioritise nutrition in order to accelerate progress in improving the nutritional status of children and their mothers in Zambia.

6 Lessons learnt

Many lessons have been learnt from being part of the global SUN civil society network (SUN CSN). These include:

- a Easy access to shared information especially from the global civil society SUN secretariat. The global SUN CSN has enabled the sharing of information between

- and among countries, which includes pairing member countries. For instance, we have been paired with Malawi to facilitate cross-learning, especially as we are neighbouring countries facing similar challenges.
- b Since the SUN movement has adopted a multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder approach to nutrition issues it has been easier for civil society networks to penetrate government departments and sectors, the cooperating partners, the media, MPs and the private sector, among others, thereby making it easier to achieve advocacy objectives.
 - c Membership to SUN CSN is also cardinal for having a unified voice in delivering the advocacy message. The chances of influencing policy are much higher with such an international backing.
 - d Furthermore, belonging to SUN CSN assists in the alignment of our strategies, programmes and resources with Zambia's plans for scaling up nutrition. This has helped the Alliance to continue to be relevant around issues of Scaling Up Nutrition.

Notes

1 Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) <http://scalingupnutrition.org/about> (accessed 15 November 2013).

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