

Seizing the Opportunity to Sustain Economic Growth by Investing in Undernutrition in Zambia

It is to the credit of the Zambian leadership and the development community that a great deal of momentum for nutrition has been built in the past few years. The level of undernutrition in Zambia is high and persistent, with almost one in every two children stunted for their age. In June 2013 the Zambian Government pledged to cut this rate by half over the next ten years. The challenge now is to turn that momentum into increased, and more equitable, programme coverage, improved quality of service delivery and a wider set of nutrition-sensitive interventions that support nutrition. While government buy-in and effort are necessary, they are not sufficient; undernutrition reduction requires a concerted cross-sectoral effort, including civil society, researchers, the private sector, the media and international development partners. The current strong economic growth in Zambia can be used as a positive driver to improve nutrition and therefore improve long-term human development and economic productivity.

Keeping the focus

The growing attention given to nutrition from Zambian stakeholders is both a reflection and a driver of increased international focus given to the issue, largely spearheaded by the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) movement. The combination of commitment from the Government combined with an active civil society, strong economic growth, and supportive development partners has generated the very real possibility that undernutrition reduction can be accelerated. However, if this commitment is to be turned into results, additional financial, organisational, human and knowledge resources will need to be mobilised. If they can be mobilised, driven by country stakeholders and supported by partners then the ultimate goal of accelerating undernutrition reduction for the long term can be achieved.

Recent initiatives

Several programmes and strategies have been introduced that are key to reducing undernutrition in Zambia:

1. **First 1000 Most Critical Days Programme (MCDP).** The programme aims to bring coherent action on nutrition from all sectors, to address all of the determinants of undernutrition.
2. **Strategies designed to address vitamin and mineral deficiencies.** National surveys suggest that micronutrient deficiencies have reduced since the introduction of food fortification and

supplementation programmes, and trials of multiple-nutrient interventions are underway.

3. Positive steps in sectors outside of health.

- **Agriculture:** The Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock (MAL) supports a food-based approach to improve nutrition, and is encouraged to work towards a diversification of agricultural production for diversified consumption of foods in the diet.
- **Education:** Zambia has witnessed the convergence of two parallel school feeding programmes in creating the Home Grown Feeding Program (HGFP).
- **Social protection:** There has been a major policy shift by the Zambian government to expand the Social Protection Programme, with efforts underway to make these cash transfers more nutrition sensitive.

These initiatives are full of promise, but evidence from other countries shows that they will take some time to yield results. **The commitment to undernutrition reduction needs to be unwavering, as does the commitment to measuring results.** Good impact evaluations need to be undertaken so it is clear what is working and why.

The capacity to seize the opportunity has never been greater, the enabling environment never more favourable. Investing tax revenues in undernutrition-reducing efforts is a sure fire way for Zambia to turn the current rapid economic growth into meaningful long term growth for its economy and for its people.

Policy recommendations

Zambia is potentially on the cusp of a great economic transformation. How can gains in economic growth from temporary mineral resources be translated into gains in child growth which reduce mortality and suffering, but also serve to power further economic growth in a sustainable way? The Government of Zambia and stakeholders should consider the following:

- **Staple food production is not enough.** Improvement in food productivity is vital, it produces more food for household consumption, more income for farmers, and lowers food prices in markets for all. But the types of foods produced, and their nutritional value, also need attention. Therefore achieving productivity gains in animal sources food, pulses, fruits and vegetables is essential.
- **Water, sanitation and health services matter greatly,** as lack of coverage in these programmes will undermine any other initiatives taken to tackle undernutrition. Therefore, continued efforts of nutrition stakeholders to improve health, and engage other sectors outside, are important.
- **Empowerment of women.** Women need to have the ability to control nutrition related decisions such as food purchases, work choices, fertility choices and assets. Women need to be able to control more assets, be recognised for their investments in care, and have more say in decisions that affect them and their families and communities.
- **Tracking and coordination of human and financial resources across ministries.** This is a struggle for all countries, but as other countries such as Guatemala and Peru have shown, such tracking and coordination can be done with focused and determined leadership.
- **Addressing the current capacity gaps.** Nutrition workforce vacancies need to be filled, nutrition implementers trained and incentivised; and higher education needs to do more to build the next generation of nutrition practitioners, researchers and policymakers. The first nutrition workforce plan is one of a promising set of plans looking at where Zambia is and where it wants to be to scale up nutrition.
- **Channelling increased tax revenues into nutrition.** National tax revenues have the potential to increase rapidly in the next few years due to the boom in mineral wealth, and part of this should be used to improve nutrition programmes in the medium to long term. A 2014 World Bank analysis shows that the returns of nutrition investments in Zambia are very substantial, but that there is an annual financing gap for nutrition-specific interventions of US\$20 to US\$24 million.
- **Using evidence to justify the increase in resources to undernutrition reduction.** Closing the current evidence gaps in data, diagnoses and evaluations is imperative to ensure that nutrition resources are allocated in the most effective way. Evidence needs to answer the following questions:
 - In the context of high income inequality, how can the most nutritionally deprived groups be reached?
 - What are the direct nutrition interventions that will yield the largest impact in the Zambian context? How should they be sequenced and prioritised?
 - How to ensure quality community-based service delivery at scale within existing human resource shortages?
 - How to prioritise and make interventions in health, agriculture, social protection and education more nutrition sensitive?

Further reading

Harris, Jody; Haddad, Lawrence and Seco Grütz, Silke (2014) *Turning Rapid Growth into Meaningful Growth: Sustaining the Commitment to Nutrition in Zambia*, Brighton: IDS

Credits

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