

What does it take to sustain Scaling Up Nutrition?

01.

Innovate and be bold

A Zambia case study



Queen, 36, waters her vegetable garden. Queen is a participant in Concern's RAIN programme and has received tools, seeds, livestock and training

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1. Introduction

Although Zambia has experienced a decline in the prevalence of stunting since 1990, the number of children stunted has increased due to high population growth¹ and, at 40%, rates are currently one of the worst in Africa. Recognising this, the government developed the National Food and Nutrition Policy Framework (2006), followed by the National Food and Nutrition Strategic Plan (2011-15). Since then, the Zambian government has made promising and ambitious commitments to tackle the issue by joining the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) movement in 2010, launching its first 1,000 Most Critical Days Programme (MCDP) to implement high impact nutrition interventions in 14 districts¹, and by attending the 2013 Nutrition for Growth summit where the then Vice President made ambitious financial and policy commitmentsⁱⁱ. It is now planning the second phase of the MCDP, with likely support from the multi-donor SUN Fund².

The main driving force behind the MCDP is a National Food and Nutrition Commission (NFNC) that sits within the Ministry of Health as a government advisory body for food and nutrition issues. The NFNC has provided the leadership in Zambia to help address the underlying causes of malnutrition, largely through coordinated inter-sectoral action at the national and district level. This coordination in Zambia has been well-documented as an effective way for different line ministries and nutrition actors to work together, pool resources and have greater impact on the lives of the poorest. This case study identifies the achievements, challenges and recipe for success to replicate and scale up this district coordination across Zambia and into other countries.



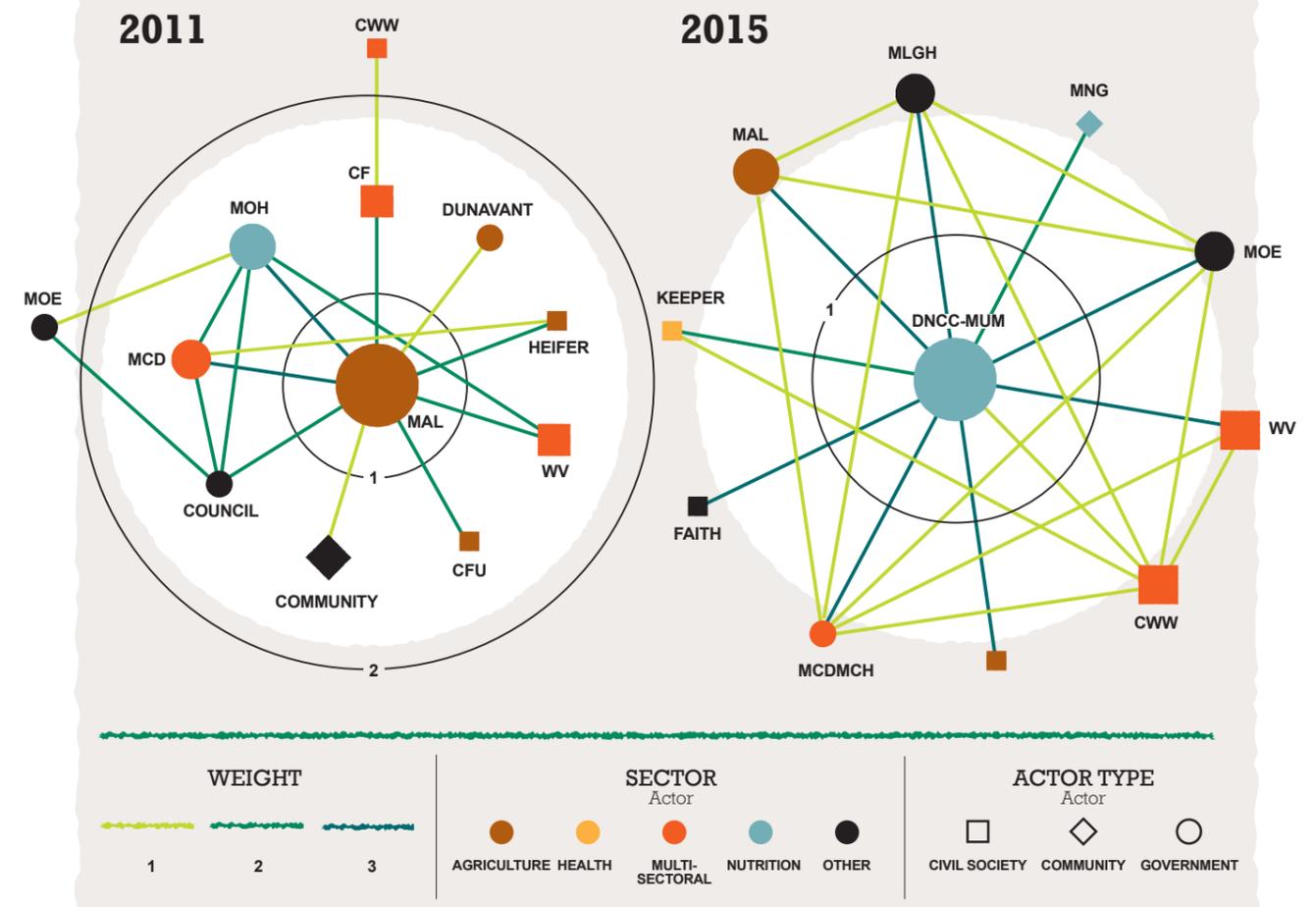
¹ MCDP Phase I districts: Mansa, Samfya, Kaputa, Kasama, Mbala, Chinsali, Lundazi, Chipata, Mwinilunga, Zambezi, Mumbwa, Kalabo, Mongu and Shangombo
² The SUN Fund is a pooled fund in Zambia from DFID, Sida, and Irish Aid. SUN Fund 2.0 is under design. See case study 2 in this series.

2. District coordination

A Mumbwa case study

The need for stronger coordination was recognised in 2010 when Concern Worldwide and the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) designed a project, Realigning Agriculture to Improve Nutrition (RAIN)ⁱⁱⁱ in Mumbwa District Central Province, to tackle the underlying causes of hunger and malnutrition by integrating agriculture, health, nutrition and gender interventions. As part of RAIN, Concern encouraged inter-sectoral working from the different line ministries and nutrition actors working at the district level. The Mumbwa District Nutrition Coordinating Committee (DNCC) was established by the District Commissioner in 2012. The aim of the DNCC was to create a space for line ministries and civil society organisations to convene and align their nutrition interventions through robust planning and coordination. Figure 1^{iv} demonstrates the changes in coordination in Mumbwa before (2011) and after (2015) the DNCC was established.

FIGURE 1 Changes in coordination in Mumbwa district, 2011 - 2015.



SOURCE: HARRIS ET AL. 2017

As is evident from Figure 1, prior to the RAIN project, coordination was unclear; most line ministries worked in silo and would implement activities under separate budgets and mandates. In 2011, the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock was perceived as central to the issue of nutrition with a mandate to ensure the population was food secure through the largescale production of maize and the treatment of malnutrition was mandated under the Ministry of Health. This dichotomy in understanding and action is key given both ministries were working on nutrition from different angles in a completely uncoordinated way. Resolving this, Concern brought ministries together – the Ministry of Education, Agriculture and Livestock, Health, Local Government, Lands, Chiefs and Traditional Affairs, and Community Development, Mother and Child Health – and designed and created the DNCC. Since working together through the DNCC and through support from SUN, it is acknowledged by the members that malnutrition is a crosscutting issue and requires a multisectoral approach to tackle it.

The initial set up of the DNCC structure required careful and planned support with strong and skilful facilitation to build trust and create working norms. In Mumbwa, learning journeys were developed early on to ensure ministry staff better understood the multiple determinants of stunting and why it was important to work together. In addition, nutrition work plan assessments were developed to identify overlap across line ministries to avoid duplication, Ward Nutrition Coordination Committees (WNCCs) were established to facilitate coordination at the community level, and a multisectoral district nutrition plan was created to enhance coordination, promote integrated high-impact nutrition interventions, increase capacity and enhance advocacy and communications³. Under the MCDP, the DNCC model from Mumbwa became a nationally adopted structure with additional layers at the Province, Ward and Zone levels to ensure there are strong links with the community.

FIGURE 2

District Nutrition Coordinating Committee structure in Mumbwa

NATIONAL FOOD & NUTRITION COUNCIL & NATIONAL LEVEL MINISTRIES



Achievements and challenges in Mumbwa

Although the focus on stunting reduction remains the same across all districts in Zambia, activities under the MCDP differ, depending on local contexts and needs. The Mumbwa model therefore does not offer a universal model, but a blueprint for the structure of district level coordination, with lessons learned from both successes and challenges. Across all districts however, there are significant benefits of inter-sectoral working for line ministries, at the implementation level, as well as for the community.

One of the biggest achievements from Mumbwa was the recognition of the DNCC within the district structure (figure 2). The DNCC falls under the District Development Coordinating Committee (DDCC), which is chaired by the District Commissioner. It encourages feedback to ministries, and recognises that building and accepting local coordinating structures into existing government systems is a key ingredient for sustainability.

From discussions with the DNCC in Mumbwa, the following advantages were identified:

- 1. Stronger coordination:** Ministries at the district level are implementing activities and sharing information in a way that was never done before, such as making agriculture activities more nutrition-sensitive and encouraging nutrition education in schools.
- 2. Pooled resources:** Vehicles are shared when visiting communities to implement activities and gather data for reporting. Sharing vehicles has significantly improved the DNCC's ability to reach more Wards and communities.
- 3. Sharing Intel:** Ideas, challenges and solutions are regularly shared and discussed amongst DNCC members during monthly meetings. Those working at the Ward level also attend the meeting where they discuss issues they face on the ground.
- 4. Convergence³:** Coordination of inter-sectoral activities at the community level through existing groups, such as women's groups, has strengthened through the establishment of Ward Nutrition Coordinating Committees (WNCCs) and Zone Nutrition Coordinating Committees (ZNCCs).

It has now been five years since the Mumbwa DNCC was established - a reasonable amount of time to understand what the bottlenecks are and learn from a breadth of experience. In many districts, the workforce is there, but it takes time and resources to help organise, plan, mobilise and coordinate well. Knowledge of the benefits of cross-pollinating ideas and pooling of resources is spreading across Zambia, creating demand for DNCC structures from other districts. There is better understanding now that the benefits of coordination of line ministries at the district, ward and zone level significantly outweigh the more traditional siloed way of working. For this reason, it is largely agreed that now is the right time to scale up the MCDP to 16 more districts and to put provisional plans in place to scale up the DNCCs to all 106 districts in Zambia.

As well as leading on coordination and alignment at the national level, the NFNC has an important role to in ensuring districts can communicate to share successes, ideas and stories and to create an open space for continued dialogue on the challenges experienced at a structural and individual level. This should continue to happen through annual NFNC planning workshops with District Nutrition Support Coordinators (DNSCs) as well as encouraging more frequent communication and exchange visits.

Whilst scaling up the MCDP to more districts was mostly welcomed, there were some words of caution to consider before and during scale up:

- 1. Quality over quantity:** Scaling up is important but so is pace and there should be caution over scaling up too quickly. The 14 districts were working at 50% coverage of wards and hope to expand to over 80% in the second phase of MCDP; will the model be as effective at such a large scale? The vital facilitation and training early on in Mumbwa was key; is this going to be achievable across all new districts in MCDP II?
- 2. Cross-learning:** regular stories of success to share amongst districts both in MCDP II/SUN districts and beyond is essential. These stories will most likely change and develop with time, so the information and guidance should be in a place that allows for that, and is accessible for all people at the national and district level.
- 3. Staff turnover:** Staff turnover is inevitable but can be too recurrent in the districts. The Mumbwa DNCC has been able to cope with new leadership as there is a shared understanding of the work and a strong sense of responsibility for the success of the DNCC. This culture has been built up through investments in initial support and facilitation. The NFNC should ensure mentoring and coaching is in place for people taking a leadership role in the DNCCs.

³ The idea that each sectoral intervention (changed nutrition behaviours, better access to clean water, availability and affordability of nutritious foods, growth monitoring and promotion etc) must be available to a household (or in the same place) at the same time in order to ensure the maximum impact on malnutrition. Convergence requires effective planning and coordinated implementation at the lowest levels.

3. A minimum package for successful DNCCs

10 - point plan

Successful coordination at the district level doesn't require substantially more resources and funding to what districts may already have. The 14 districts under MCDP have received funding and support from the SUN Fund as well as NGOs - such as through Concern's RAIN programme in Mumbwa. However, the government's ambition to have the DNCCs structure in all 106 districts in Zambia means that reliance on the SUN Fund is not sustainable. The key is to have a plan for initial facilitation, learning opportunities from other districts and a strong secretariat function that can drive and coordinate the DNCC to develop a multisectoral district nutrition plan. But this alone is not enough. What else will it take to sustain the existing DNCCs and what can the government learn from the 14 before scaling up across the country?

- 1. Leadership:** The success of DNCCs depends on how strong the facilitation is early on, and how much leadership is demonstrated by the district coordinator and chair of the DNCC. Someone has to drive the nutrition agenda forward by providing vision and foresight for the various line ministries and nutrition actors involved. The initial success from Mumbwa was largely down to the DNCC team who were mentored through leadership retreats. It is important to have opportunities for a mentoring programme for more than one individual from each Ministry to keep good staff in these key positions.
- 2. Capacity:** Strategic capacity of the DNCC to coordinate, develop and implement multisectoral nutrition plans is essential. To be effective, DNCCs must have the strategic and technical capacity and mandate to undertake mapping and gap analysis, timely reporting for funding and resources, and conduct regular monitoring and evaluation.
- 3. Funding:** Funding is necessary to support a secretariat or facilitation function. This could be external, as the support Concern provided for Mumbwa, or within the district structure, such as employing District Nutrition Support Coordinators (DNSCs). Although members of the DNCC are likely to understand the benefits of meeting for programme delivery and overall nutrition impact, funding could help to support the coordination of monthly meetings, support WNCC coordinators to attend meetings, and increase the number of vehicles needed to implement activities and reporting.
- 4. Government buy-in:** Government must scale up resources and budget for nutrition at the national level to ensure effective delivery at the district level. The more integrated nutrition is within the budget and ministry mandates in the short-term, the more likely they will remain post-SUN and MCDP. District level departments need to support the DNCC representative and ensure they have the authority and backing to plan and realise coordinated and aligned actions.
- 5. Membership:** Cross sector membership offers an opportunity to include other active nutrition actors, outside of government, such as civil society organisations and the private sector to take advantage of aligning limited resources. Buy-in and appetite from ministries and individuals to help drive the DNCC agenda forward is vital. Once members have joined, the DNCC should agree on a joint vision, objectives and responsibilities, for example signing a Terms of Reference.
- 6. Recognition:** Obtaining formal recognition from the DDCC to become a permanent structure within the national system is beneficial to gain legitimacy from line ministries. As this process could take time, working from the agreed objectives mentioned above and sharing plans and progress with the DDCC would be important and useful.



Deli, three, holds one of the chicks that has been produced by the chicken her mother, Monica, received as part of the RAIN programme in Zambia
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- 7. Structure:** The DNCCs in Zambia currently sit under the DDCC which is the formal local development structure under the office of a District Commissioner. As decentralisation progresses it is important that the DNCC function realigns with local administration. Fiscal decentralisation will be a great opportunity to coordinate nutrition funding and would be an important step for sustainability post-SUN Fund, making scale up across the country more manageable.
- 8. Monitoring and Evaluation:** It is essential to have indicators to assess and track progress against coordination and nutrition impact, plus guidance on how, how often and by whom this will be collected. It is advised that these indicators are very few and the assessment could largely be done as part of the DNCCs routine work. Any evidence from this reporting, particularly for the districts which lag behind, should be shared widely, particularly to line ministries, on a regular basis.
- 9. Community:** It is important to continue to strengthen the means to coordinate and deliver nutrition interventions at the lowest level, working below the ward level and involving the community through existing structures, such as women's groups and farmers groups. This will give the community a representative voice through the WNCCs and ZNCCs, and greater access to development funding opportunities.
- 10. Delivering on commitments:** Government should be involved in the planning and implementation of any donor funded project at the district level. It should ensure that it becomes mandatory for food and nutrition security projects to address the multiple causes of undernutrition through multi-sectoral approaches. The Zambian government, for example, has made an array of national and global commitments but despite this ambition, its rank has fallen on the Hunger and Nutrition Commitment Index (HANCI) and is low compared to other countries^{vi}. To improve on this, the government, donors, NGOs and the UN must recognise the need for inter-sectoral working at the district and local level to implement high-impact nutrition interventions and deliver on national and international targets.

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Acknowledgments:

The author would like to thank all who in one way or another contributed to the completion of Part One of the Zambia case study. Particular thanks goes to Robinah Mulenga and Freddie Mubanga of NFNC; Charles Hampende, Hope Kavuka and the members of the Mumbwa District Nutrition Coordination Committee; Dr Christopher Dube, former Chairman of Mumbwa DNCC; Fiona Quinn and Milimo Mwiba of Irish Aid; Audrey Mwendapole of Sida; Ruth Siyandi of UNICEF; Marion Michaud of the European Union; Richard Mwape of Concern Worldwide; and Marjolein Mwanamwenge formerly of Concern and CSO-SUN. The author would also like to acknowledge the input and support of Danny Harvey of Concern Worldwide; Oliver Wakelin, Dorothy Namuchimba, Mary Chibambula and Reginald Ntomba of CARE; and Jody Harris of the Institute of Development Studies.

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