

Civil Society

An essential partner for improved nutrition

William Chilufya

Civil Society Advocate for Good Nutrition

Mwandwe Chileshe

Program Officer, Zambia Civil Society

Scaling Up Nutrition

The need for urgent measures to tackle undernutrition

Malnutrition is estimated to contribute to more than one third of child deaths globally.¹ Malnutrition can take several forms, including hunger, undernutrition, overnutrition, and micronutrient deficiencies. Chronic undernutrition in children under the age of five results in stunting, which leads to cognitive impairment, with adverse effects all the way from household to national level. In Zambia alone, 40% of children under five are stunted, while every year 42% of deaths in children under five can be attributed to undernutrition.² The short- and long-term economic and social implications of these statistics pose a problem requiring urgent attention.

Exploring the roles that various stakeholders can play here is important, as the best chance of success in addressing the problem is by approaching it from a multisectoral perspective that leverages the core competencies of each party. Among these, civil society organizations (CSOs) have a key role to play, especially in countries that are already resource-challenged.

The role of civil society

The role of civil society involves more than merely generating demand for nutrition. It extends to include securing political commitment to nutrition and ensuring accountability for nutrition results. Civil society therefore plays a key role in any efforts aimed at improving nutrition. It has an important task to perform in making visible the problem of malnutrition and in raising awareness of it among political players, policy-makers and implementers.

“Civil society has to secure political commitment and ensure accountability for nutrition results”

Across a range of countries and settings, civil society organizations have helped improve the policy environment for addressing the many challenges surrounding nutrition. This has been achieved through advocacy, building consensus among other civil society actors and policy advocates, and working to shape policy solutions and recommendations for improved nutrition. At the global level, civil society has helped build support for the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement among donor governments, while at the country level, civil society organizations have an important role to play in strengthening the political will, engaging in policy development and reform, designing and implementing programs, and monitoring progress against agreed targets.

The strategic position of CSOs, especially those based in communities affected by malnutrition, further promotes greater understanding of the causes of undernutrition. For this reason, national strategies to achieve improved nutrition require the support and involvement of CSOs, as they play a role quite different from that played by other stakeholders. First and foremost, they are there to hold government to account for its actions. Secondly, CSOs represent important segments of the population in a manner distinct from government, as they directly reflect, and respond to, the needs of a broad range of communities. Moreover, they have developed integrated solutions, as they are used to working across different sectors.

We need everyone working within the nutrition space – from governments through implementers to donors – to add their voices to the call for increased attention to the essential issue of nutrition. It is vital to do this in a coordinated manner that supports global nutrition priorities and helps improve nutrition.

“We need everyone in the nutrition space to add their voices to the call for increased attention to nutrition”

Making the case for nutrition

While governments continue to make commitments at various national, regional, and global forums, effective follow-through is often lacking. Governments need to start walking the talk;



Chief Mwansakombe Samfya speaks during the CSO-SUN Alliance Global Day of Action

however, the onus cannot be on governments alone. It falls to all of us to ensure that governments prioritize nutrition. CSOs have an important role to play in building understanding of the importance of nutrition among citizens, so that these can demand better nutrition and hold their leaders to account for their commitments.

Experiences from Zambia

Since 2011, CSOs in Zambia have helped position the issue of maternal and child nutrition as a national priority. In 2012, the Zambia Civil Society Scaling Up Nutrition Alliance (CSO-SUN) was established, bringing together a group of diverse actors tasked with raising understanding of nutrition and of the services required to support improved nutrition. Working as a part of the Global SUN Movement, the CSO-SUN was founded on the principle that all people have the right to food and good nutrition. CSO-SUN is the first and only nutrition advocacy platform for Civil Society in Zambia. It has managed to engage 75 members of local and international NGOs and civil society groups, making it one of the most influential civil society organizations working in any arena in Zambia. This alliance has raised awareness of the impact of chronic maternal and child malnutrition on Zambia's development.

The work of the Zambia CSO-SUN has been necessitated by the fact that there has been little support from the general population, political players and policy-makers, who often have no direct experience or personal understanding of nutrition issues. The CSO-SUN has used both conventional and creative ways of raising the profile of nutrition in Zambia.³ The means have included, but not been limited to, the following.

Overview of CSO-SUN's advocacy efforts

Working with members of parliament

CSO-SUN has found that working closely with parliamentarians has been effective in raising the profile of nutrition in Zambia. This approach has had the double benefit of making nutrition a priority in parliamentary discussions as well as helping create champions for nutrition. This partnership has seen CSO-SUN being regularly invited to make submissions and appear before various committees of the Zambian Parliament. It has also helped parliament to make better informed decisions on issues that affect nutrition. As a part of this, CSO-SUN facilitated the formation of the All-Party Parliamentary Caucus on Food and Nutrition (APPCON) – a committee of MPs dedicated to food and nutrition development – thereby prioritizing policy and financial issues through parliamentary debate.

Working with the media – The Nutrition Media Awards

Awards and public recognition have proved a sure-fire way of strengthening engagement with the media. Recognizing media professionals who have gone out of their way to advance nutrition helps ensure their continued commitment. Additionally, journalists and media broadcasters help stimulate the interest of previously oblivious media personnel. CSO-SUN has also engaged the media in efforts to create demand around the sector, through initiatives such as nutrition training workshops for media producers and editors. These workshops were an avenue to bring together representatives of national- and district-based media institutes, who received training on nutrition issues that affect the face of development in the country. The workshops have also been an opportunity for CSO-SUN to extend its awareness-

raising campaign to other provinces through the community radio stations that participate in the trainings. They have paved the way for increased coverage of nutrition through community radio stations in the provinces and also at national level.

The Vote Nutrition Campaign

CSO-SUN has taken the opportunity presented by recent elections to educate voters to choose candidates on the basis of their campaign promises. In 2014, which saw a presidential by-election, and subsequently for the full election in 2016, the CSO-SUN ran the “Vote Nutrition Campaign.” In 2016, in recognition that every political party is potentially a government-in-waiting, CSO-SUN targeted political parties with messages that would secure their commitment to nutrition should they come to form a government. In making nutrition an election issue and asking all political parties to make nutrition policy pledges, CSO-SUN has a basis on which to hold the political parties to account if elected.

Making nutrition affordable through other advocacy efforts

Creating awareness of nutrition, and gaining the commitment of decision-makers, is essential for influencing policies and practices. The economic costs of not investing in nutrition are significant and have an enormous bearing on the state of food and nutrition security in the country. It is therefore a priority for civil society to influence government and other stakeholders with the aim of ensuring better-funded, effective, large-scale programs to tackle undernutrition. Targeting high-level decision-makers is key.

Encouraging nutrition champions – people with a public profile and a passion for nutrition – has proved essential in ad-

vancing the nutrition agenda in the context of the competing interests both between and within various groups of stakeholders. Nutrition advocacy champions with both political and technical backgrounds are needed at all levels to create effective political demand for better nutrition. This has been a primary goal of the CSO-SUN Alliance.

Work still to do

Despite the positive efforts of civil society to date, much remains to be done to articulate an evidence-based case for advancing the nutrition agenda. CSOs should seize every possible opportunity to document their experiences in the communities where they are working.

Civil society should also take advantage of community engagement by further accelerating efforts to combat undernutrition and at the same time to work against the current rise in overnutrition. CSOs will need funding, as they often draw their staff from these communities and work close to the ground.

Above all, civil society needs to harness the current positive momentum supporting nutrition, and must explore every means of pushing the envelope even further to drive changes in the global and local nutrition landscape. While many positive changes have occurred over the past few years, there are still many opportunities to accelerate positive change. Civil society has played an important role in gearing up action on nutrition, and this newfound focus must be sustained.

.....
“Civil society needs to harness the current positive momentum supporting nutrition”

Correspondence: *William Chilufya,* former country co-ordinator, CSO-SUN Zambia, 1341, New Kaseba Kafue Town, Zambia **Email:** *wchilufya@gmail.com*

References

- 01. WHO. Global health risks: mortality and burden of disease attributable to selected major risks. Geneva: World Health Organization, 2009.
- 02. Central Statistical Office (CSO) [Zambia], Ministry of Health (MOH) [Zambia], and ICF International. Zambia Demographic and Health Survey 2013–14. Rockville, MD, USA: Central Statistical Office, Ministry of Health, and ICF International, 2014.
- 03. Please visit www.csosun.org for additional documents, the Ten Key Asks.



The CSO-SUN Community Sensitization Chongwe Drama Group in action