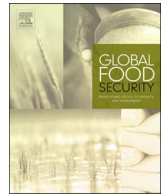




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From coherence towards commitment: Changes and challenges in Zambia's nutrition policy environment

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ABSTRACT

An enabling environment for malnutrition reduction includes creating policy and political momentum, and converting momentum to implementation and impact. We used several qualitative data sources to investigate changes in policy and action over time in Zambia. There now exists coherent policy covering key nutrition issues from several sectors, and multisectoral coordination structures at national level and in pilot districts. However, converting momentum into action faces challenges of limited national political and funding commitment, with increased donor resources currently bridging the gap, and reach into communities is still limited. To sustain recent stunting reductions there are still political challenges to be addressed in Zambia, and citizens and civil society will need to hold government to account for recent commitments on nutrition.

1. Introduction

1.1. Nutrition policy processes

Malnutrition in its multiple forms affects one in three people in the world, in every country on the planet, manifesting among other things as stunted growth, micronutrient deficiencies, and chronic illnesses brought about directly by hunger, poor diets, and disease (IFPRI, 2016). Recent years have seen increased international momentum for nutrition action, and concurrently increased research into how nutrition policy is made and implemented in countries (the policy process), and the particular contexts in which this plays out (Bryce et al., 2008; Gillespie et al., 2013). Both historical changes and future challenges in nutrition policy processes need to be understood if countries are to learn from one another on how to move forward with reducing their malnutrition burden. This paper contributes an exploration of the experience of Zambia, as one of six country case studies under the Stories of Change research project.

Nutrition is often called a ‘cross-cutting issue’, with relevance to and implications from multiple sectors, hence its cross-cutting nature is often cited as a rationale for cross-sectoral coherence in policy and cross-sectoral coordination in action (Benson, 2008; Garrett et al., 2011; Harris and Drimie, 2012). Scholars define policy coherence as different levels of consistency in written policy within or across different sectors (vertical or horizontal), either in terms of actions

promoted or goals aimed for, with the intention of creating synergies or reducing duplication, fragmentation or contradictions between policies (Duraiappah and Bhardwaj, 2007). Similarly, coordination of intersectoral action in implementing policy may be either horizontal or vertical, and has had multiple definitions along a continuum describing levels of formality of intersectoral governance, sharing of responsibility, and pooling of resources (Harris and Drimie, 2012). In order to link coherence in policy with coordination of implementation, the institutions governing nutrition need to commit both attention and resources to an issue, and the importance of sustained commitment of different forms has been recognized in previous nutrition research (Engesveen et al., 2009; Haddad, 2012; Pelletier et al., 2012). In assessing commitment, important distinctions can be made between political attention (often at a high level, such as mention in presidential speeches), political commitment (such as executive directives or setting of targets or policy), and system-wide commitment (such as allocation of the necessary authority and financial and human resources to relevant bodies, and the exercise of oversight and accountability) (Pelletier et al., 2011).

This study looks at the level of policy coherence for nutrition currently found in Zambia, with a view to understanding the synergies that are available and any contradictions that are evident among policies in different sectors. It also looks at intersectoral coordination, and in particular at a pilot project of coordinated implementation that takes a very different form to previous top-down approaches. The study

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assesses how different forms of commitment have played out in Zambia, and the effects these have had on the possibilities for action. Finally, the study comments on how coherence, commitment and coordination in governance have been experienced by communities in practice, and notes some new actions required going forward.

1.2. *Zambian context: nutrition indicators, actors and policies*

Zambia has a level of chronic malnutrition, manifesting as stunted growth, far beyond the limits defined as acceptable; currently standing at 40%, this is almost one in two of its children. Overall, stunting increased in surveys from 1992 to 2001 and then reduced by 12 percentage points from 2002 to 2014 (Central Statistical Office, Ministry of Health et al., 2014). This recent downward change was driven in large part by household ownership of bednets as a proxy for malaria reduction; in part by increased assets as a proxy for wealth (improving in Zambia, albeit highly unequally); and in part by positive and negative changes in water and sanitation (Headey et al., this issue). As well as this decreasing prevalence of stunting in children, Zambia mirrors other lower middle-income countries in having an increasing prevalence of overweight and obesity in women, which has risen from 12% in 2002 to 23% in 2014 (Central Statistical Office, Ministry of Health et al., 2014), and high levels of deficiency in multiple micronutrients (NFNC, 2013), creating a ‘triple burden’ of malnutrition in large parts of the country.

Zambia has come some way over the past years in creating strategies for tackling these different aspects of malnutrition; however, important challenges remain. Nutrition has been part of the national agenda at

least since Zambia became independent from Britain in 1964 (Fig. 1). Early actions for nutrition in the emerging state included the Act of Parliament establishing the National Food and Nutrition Commission (NFNC) as a semi-autonomous entity within the Ministry of Health (MOH) through the National Food and Nutrition Act of 1967. This Act mandates the NFNC to promote food and nutrition activities and to advise the government accordingly. Zambia focused largely on delivery of single micronutrients in national programs from 1972 to 1992; in the late 1970s programs were started for tackling iodine, iron and vitamin A deficiencies, spanning fortification and supplementation initiatives through the private sector and national health system, and these initiatives persist in some form to the present day (Haggblade et al., 2016).

The early 1990s saw several events that sent shocks through the country, including significant changes in governance through the introduction of multi-party politics in 1991; significant reductions in social spending through internationally-imposed economic reforms; a devastating HIV epidemic; and a severe drought and subsequent poor harvests. In the wake of these events, two key nutrition organizations were launched: the Program Against Malnutrition (PAM- a domestic NGO) was mandated to tackle the hunger and undernutrition sparked by the drought and economic reforms; and the Nutrition Association of Zambia (NAZ- a professionals group) convened to provide leadership from within the nutrition profession. At the same time, in 1992, a large international conference on nutrition (ICN1) endorsed a world plan of action on nutrition, and called for all countries to have a nutrition strategy in place (FAO and WHO, 1992). Zambia subsequently wrote a national plan of action on nutrition, though this was rejected by

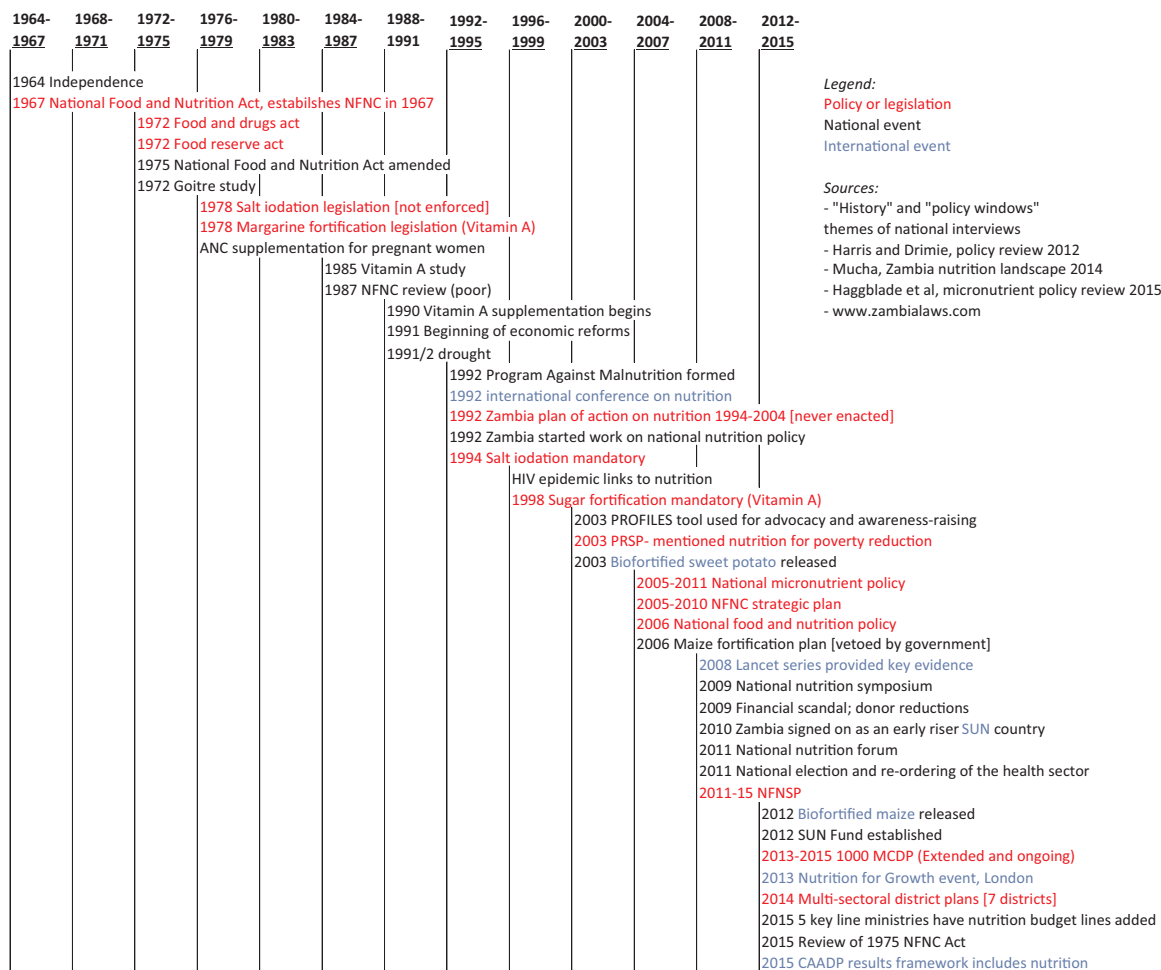


Fig. 1. Nutrition policy in Zambia since independence (Mucha 2014).

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