



Fill the Nutrient Gap

Zambia

Executive Summary

Context

Malnutrition remains a critical public health challenge in Zambia, contributing significantly to child mortality and developmental setbacks. Despite reductions in wasting, Zambia continues to face a triple burden of malnutrition: high rates of stunting among children aged under 5 years, rising levels of overweight and obesity particularly

among women of reproductive age, and micronutrient deficiencies among both groups. The country ranks poorly in the 2024 Global Hunger Index, exacerbated by the worst drought in two decades affecting most districts, leading to severe food shortages and sharp increases in food inflation. Coupled with high poverty levels, these factors have severely limited access to nutritious food for vulnerable populations.



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To address these challenges, the Government of the Republic of Zambia has reaffirmed its commitment through the launch of a revised National Social Protection Policy aimed at promoting a coordinated, life cycle-based approach to reducing poverty, strengthening resilience, and improving nutrition outcomes for vulnerable populations.

WFP is supporting the government to create an enabling policy environment and strengthen the capacity of systems and institutions to prevent and manage malnutrition in the country through several initiatives under its country strategic plan. Building on a 2021 Fill the Nutrient Gap (FNG) analysis, WFP supported an updated 2024 study focused on assessing the cost and affordability of nutritious diets and the effectiveness of existing social protection programmes, such as the Social Cash Transfer (SCT) and Home-Grown School Feeding (HGSF) programmes. The analysis identified impactful, nutrition-specific interventions that can be integrated into social assistance programmes, aiming to make nutritious diets more accessible and affordable for Zambia's most at-risk populations.

Social protection FNG process in Zambia

The FNG analysis was led by the National Food and Nutrition Commission (NFNC) with technical support from WFP Zambia Country Office and the Systems Analysis for Nutrition team at WFP's headquarters in Rome.

An initial virtual workshop was held in July 2023 to sensitize stakeholders from the NFNC, Ministry of Education, and Ministry of Community Development and Social Services to the FNG analysis and its methodology. The NFNC, with support from WFP maintained ongoing engagement with stakeholders to define the scope of the analysis, identify relevant interventions for modelling, and select appropriate data sources. Following completion of the analysis, stakeholders reviewed the findings through a series of virtual workshops, provided feedback, and jointly developed recommendations. The final results were disseminated in 2025.



Methodology

FNG is a multisectoral stakeholder engagement and analytical process which seeks to characterize the obstacles that households face to accessing and consuming nutritious diets, and then prioritizing actions to overcome them. The FNG analysis consists of a secondary literature review and linear programming diet optimization using the Enhance analytical platform to provide a detailed look at availability, cost, and affordability of nutritious diets. The FNG identified barriers to accessing nutritious and healthy diets, platforms for reaching nutritionally vulnerable groups in the population, and opportunities for policy and programme interventions to improve access to nutritious foods within the social protection field in Zambia.

Main findings

1. Zambia faces a triple burden of malnutrition characterized by high rates of stunting among children aged under 5 years, rising levels of overweight and obesity particularly among women of reproductive age, and micronutrient deficiencies among both groups. Socioeconomic status is a significant driver across all three forms of malnutrition.
2. The cost of a nutritious diet increased significantly between 2021 and 2024 to nearly twice as much as an energy only diet, amounting to 61 Zambian Kwacha (ZMW) per day for a five-person household.
3. In Zambia, over half of households cannot afford the cost of a nutritious diet, with the highest non- affordability exceeding 70 percent in Eastern and Western provinces.



4. Gender inequality combined with elevated nutritional requirements put women and girls at higher risk of malnutrition. To address their greater needs, targeted nutrition interventions are needed in tandem with social assistance programmes.
5. Home-grown school meal programmes offer a sustainable model to improve access to nutritious diets for children from economically vulnerable and food insecure households, while simultaneously supporting local economies.
6. Monitoring the cost and affordability of nutritious diets and estimating the impact of shocks, is essential to inform timely and adequate shock- responsive social assistance tailored to address nutritional vulnerabilities across provinces.
7. Interventions are more effective in bringing nutritious diets within reach when implemented in coordination across sectors, which is in line with the government's existing commitment to a multisectoral approach to tackling malnutrition.

Stakeholder recommended priorities

EDUCATION SECTOR

- **Leverage school-based platforms to improve the nutrition, school retention, and well-being of adolescent girls through integrated health and education interventions.**
 - Scale up the provision of IFA supplementation in schools, while also exploring the introduction of MMT where feasible, to address the nutritional needs of adolescent girls more comprehensively.
 - To enhance programme effectiveness and school retention, reinforce the implementation of supportive policies such as the school re- entry policy for girls following pregnancy, and ensure access to adequate sanitation facilities and free sanitary towels. These measures serve not only as enablers for regular school attendance but also as crucial incentives for girls to remain engaged in the education system where they can benefit from ongoing health and nutrition support.



Relevant stakeholders: Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education (responsible); NFNC (supporting).

- **Improve the nutritional quality of school meals by integrating diverse, nutrient-dense foods, including fortified, biofortified, and animal- source foods.**
 - Revise the procurement strategy of the HGSF to prioritize the inclusion of nutrient-rich foods such as animal-source foods, fortified staples, and biofortified crops.
 - Strengthen standards and guidelines for school meal composition and build the capacity of local suppliers to meet nutritional and safety standards.

Relevant stakeholders: Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock, Ministry of Education (responsible); NFNC (supporting).

- **Strengthen local food systems to enhance the supply of nutritious foods for school meals.**
 - Provide targeted support to smallholder farmers producing animal-source foods and nutrient-rich or biofortified crops through providing grants, equipment, post-harvest support, and training.

- Facilitate stronger institutional procurement linkages between smallholder farmers and HGSF and ensure school feeding programmes contribute to both child nutrition and local livelihoods.

Relevant stakeholders: Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock, Ministry of Education (responsible); NFNC (supporting).

- **Integrate nutrition focused social and behaviour change interventions into school meal programme.**

- Raise awareness to promote the consumption of diverse and nutritious foods such as fortified products, animal-source foods, and biofortified crops among students and within households.
- Align social and behaviour change communication strategies and supply-side efforts with the school feeding programme to shift food preferences to healthier dietary habits.

Relevant stakeholders: Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock (responsible); Ministry of Education, NFNC (supporting).



HEALTH SECTOR

- **Strengthen micronutrient supplementation systems through policy, planning, and product optimization.**
 - Advocate for national policy and allocate budget resources to support transition from IFA supplementation to MMT for adolescent girls and pregnant and breastfeeding women, based on global evidence and local nutritional needs.
 - Improve supply chain system of MMS and zinc supplementation including commodity forecasting and planning to ensure consistent availability of MMT. Zinc, among other essential nutrients, can be delivered more efficiently through MMT avoiding the complexity and cost of separate supplementation channels.

Relevant stakeholders: Ministry of Health, NFNC (responsible).

- **Accelerate the implementation of nutrition-sensitive food-based strategies to improve population-wide access to, and consumption of, diverse and nutritious diets.**
 - Finalize and implement the national food fortification strategy to expand access to micronutrients at scale. Fortification, combined with improved food systems and targeted education efforts, can help reduce micronutrient deficiencies and support long-term dietary improvement.
 - Promote diet quality and diversity through policy and behaviour change initiatives that increase availability, affordability, and desirability of healthy foods

Relevant stakeholders: Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock, NFNC (responsible); Ministry of Health (supporting).

SOCIAL PROTECTION SECTOR

- **Enhance the nutrition sensitivity of social protection programmes by targeting the first 1,000 days and supporting improved access to nutritious and healthy diets.**
 - Roll out the revised SCT guidelines that prioritize targeting of pregnant and breastfeeding women and young children, advocating for flexible eligibility criteria to capture beneficiaries within this window of opportunity.
 - Increase transfer amounts guided by the cost of a nutritious diet.
 - Integrate social and behaviour change activities within the SCT programme to improve dietary diversity and drive positive nutrition practices among beneficiaries.

Relevant stakeholders: Ministry of Community Development and Social Services, NFNC (responsible).

- **Institutionalize cost of diet monitoring and integrate it into early warning and programme decision making systems for evidence-based planning and resource allocation.**
 - Leverage the existing food price data monitoring (as part of consumer price index) by the Zambia Statistics Agency to monitor the cost of a nutritious diet at subnational levels.
 - Incorporate this data into early warning systems and programme decision making. This would enable the government and partners to respond to shocks such as economic shocks, supply disruption, food price inflation or climate related disruptions in a timely manner by adjusting transfer values and accurate geographic targeting.

Relevant stakeholders: Disaster Management and Mitigation Unit (responsible), NFNC (supporting).

- **Strengthen delivery of nutrition-sensitive programme through nutritious in-kind support, referrals, and coordinated services.**

- Promote the use of fortified and biofortified foods within in-kind food assistance schemes to improve the micronutrient quality of food baskets provided to vulnerable households.

- Strengthen multisectoral referral systems such as through the Social Welfare Information system and social registries to ensure beneficiaries are linked to complementary services across health, nutrition, and livelihoods. Improving coordination and integration will help maximize the effectiveness of assistance and support more sustainable improvements in food security and nutrition outcomes.

Relevant stakeholders: NFNC, Ministry of Community Development and Social Services, Ministry of Agriculture (responsible).



Photo page 1: WFP/Nkole Mwape
Photo page 2: WFP/Nkole Mwape
Photo page 3: WFP/Joseph Kaluba
Photo page 4: WFP/Nkole Mwape
Photo page 5: WFP/Joseph Kaluba
Photo page 7: WFP/Nkole Mwape

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