

Singing the same song: Nutrition-sensitive agriculture messages in Zambia

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Background

Zambia has experienced more than a decade of robust economic growth and stable maize production, yet food and nutrition security has not improved significantly. Over 40% of children under five are stunted (Central Statistical Office, 2015) and 48% of the population is undernourished (FAO/IFAD/WFP 2015). Growing evidence suggests that this seeming paradox may be associated with an overemphasis on production and consumption of the staple crop, maize: roughly 51% of cultivated land is committed to maize, which constitutes 57% of the national diet.

Nutrition-sensitive agriculture works to maximise agriculture's contribution to improved nutrition and offers promise for improving the dietary diversity of Zambians. Government and donor commitment to the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement has prompted the design of strategies to achieve good nutrition through agriculture. Under the country's first 1,000 Most Critical Days Programme (MCDP); the Ministry of Agriculture (MoA) plays a prominent role in making sufficient, high-quality food available for diversified, healthy diets.

The USAID Integrating Gender and Nutrition within Agricultural Extension Services (INGENAES) project has assisted partner institutions to implement agricultural extension services (AES) that help farmers improve the supply and consumption of nutritious foods. In Zambia, one of eight focus countries, INGENAES worked with partners to prioritise the harmonisation of nutrition messages, collaborating closely with the MoA to develop [nutrition-sensitive agricultural messages](#) for the government's 1,700 camp extension officers (CEOs).

Avoiding mixed messages

INGENAES commenced activities in Zambia by convening stakeholders who identified challenges and opportunities to improving nutrition through AES. Where nutrition messages flow from multiple sources – health clinics, AES and NGOs – information must be consistent to avoid mixed messages that can lead to confusion or inaction; INGENAES and partners found examples where nutrition information available to farming households was inconsistent and contradictory.

For example, one organisation’s nutrition messages borrowed from guidelines developed in Southeast Asia and focused primarily on severe acute malnutrition. Messages neither aligned with national nutrition guidelines nor addressed the most common form of malnutrition among children under two years of age in Zambia: stunting. Some NGOs promoted consumption in terms of three food groups; others spoke of four or six food groups.

Building on initial consultations in 2016, the MoA and INGENAES partnered to convene 37 representatives from the public, private and NGO sectors at a workshop in Lusaka. Participants shared their experiences of integrating nutrition within AES and contributed to group work that identified a pathway toward complementarity in nutrition messaging. Groups identified nutrition messages relevant to agricultural practices and products promoted by the MoA and other ministries: conservation agriculture; government-subsidised seed and input packages; food processing, preservation and storage; and fisheries and small livestock. Each group cited AES as a vehicle for sharing nutrition information with farming households¹.

The workshop served as the foundation for collaboration between INGENAES and MoA Food and Nutrition Section in developing messages that CEOs can convey to farming households. INGENAES ensured alignment with the MoA Food and Nutrition Section Operational Guidelines, which focus on interventions that can maximise the impact of agriculture on household nutrition, including production of diversified and nutritious foods, improved post-harvest practices, and women’s empowerment. INGENAES supported MoA in fine-tuning the messages, revising them to clarify language, and ensuring that their intent was well understood by intermediaries who communicate directly with farming households. Messages were pre-tested with staff from the ministry’s Information and Training Unit.

Following pre-testing, INGENAES and MoA prioritised five core messages, which also align with global recommendations for improving nutrition through agriculture (FAO/IFAD/WF 2015). Each message is accompanied by a statement describing the connection between food, agriculture and nutrition and illustrative small steps that households can take to test practices. Core messages focus on:

1. Production of more diverse, nutritious foods;
2. Protection of natural resources;
3. On-farm processing, preservation and storage practices;
4. Consumption of more diverse and nutritious foods; and
5. Recognition of women’s role in agriculture.

Lessons learnt and next steps

Several challenges were encountered throughout this process. The MCDP promotes a list of priority actions that are essential to achieving better nutrition during the 1,000-day critical window. However, they are not necessarily aligned with the duties of AES. For example, vitamin A supplementation may be better left to health professionals, while diversifying production to address market opportunities and household consumption needs is more closely associated with the responsibilities of AES. As the MCDP enters its next phase it is hoped that inter-ministry coordination will build on each sector’s comparative advantage in addressing the underlying causes of poor nutrition.

A new edition of the *Planning and Resource Guide for Agricultural Extension Officers* (PREGEO) is being given to CEOs working across Zambia in 2017. This is a resource that CEOs turn to for information on agriculture production and participatory extension. The publication helps CEOs plan daily activities and guides supervisors in monitoring and supporting AES. The new edition includes the final nutrition- sensitive AES messages.

INGENAES continues to work with MoA and other stakeholders to identify opportunities to educate CEOs on these nutrition messages. With continued commitment to SUN and the MCDP, INGENAES is hopeful that additional resources will become available to intensify efforts to promote nutrition-sensitive AES in Zambia. These opportunities may include pre-service training to equip future AES staff with basic nutrition knowledge relevant to the context in which they will be working, as well as in-service training opportunities to build the capacity of existing AES providers.

References

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¹For meeting proceedings, see <http://ingenaes.illinois.edu/zambia-nutrition-wksp>.

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