

Working Together for Our Future: What the Office of the President and Vice- President, Parliament, and the Ministry of Finance Can Do to Improve Nutrition

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Although Zambia is considered a middle-income country, today four out of 10 children are malnourished. Malnutrition is preventing the country from reaching its development goals, despite continued investment by the government and donors.¹ Because economic productivity depends on the overall health of a population, a well-nourished and healthy society is needed to achieve this. Malnutrition in Zambia can take many forms, including chronic malnutrition (stunting or low height for age), underweight (low weight for age), acute malnutrition (wasting or low weight for height), anaemia, vitamin A deficiency, iodine deficiency, and low birth weight (< 2.5 kg).¹ The immediate causes of malnutrition in Zambia are repeated infections, poor health, and inadequate dietary intake, but underlying causes include food insecurity, high fertility rates, high rates of adolescent pregnancies, gender inequality, poverty, and lack of safe water, hygiene, and sanitation.

Why does this matter?

- Malnutrition is the underlying cause of up to 45 percent of child deaths in Zambia.^{2,3}
- Malnourished children are more likely to have repeated illnesses and infections.² By 2026, if Zambia does not invest in efforts to improve nutrition, more than 156,000 infants and children will die.³
- Malnutrition leads to reduced immunity, impairing people's ability to fight and recover from illness. This is particularly important in Zambia, where 13 percent of adults (15 percent of women and 11 percent of men) are HIV positive.¹
- Malnutrition in childhood impairs physical growth and cognitive development, decreasing IQ points and undermining human potential. Because of this, malnourished children become adults who earn less than their well-nourished and better-educated peers.^{2,3,4}
- Malnourished children perform worse in school, are more likely to repeat grades, and are more likely to drop out of school than well-nourished children.^{4,5} By 2026, if there is no change in stunting, Zambian children will lose 40.5 million equivalent school years of learning from stunting alone.³
- Malnutrition is hurting Zambia's economic progress. If there is no improvement in nutrition, the country will lose more than 180.768 billion Zambian kwacha (ZMW), or US\$18.315 billion, in economic productivity by 2026.³

Addressing high levels of malnutrition and preventing and treating HIV will help reduce child mortality significantly in Zambia and improve the health, wellbeing, and economic productivity of citizens.

Most Zambian women give birth by 24 years of age, when the risks of HIV and transmission from mother to child are high. Without antiretroviral therapy (ART), 50 percent of HIV-positive children die by their second birthday. Zambia has low coverage of paediatric ART, reaching only 33 percent of at-risk children.⁶ **Nutrition services are a gateway to HIV prevention, care, and treatment. They can help identify malnourished people, who are more vulnerable to HIV.** Referrals of malnourished people for HIV testing, care, and treatment can promote early ART, and nutrition counselling can encourage treatment adherence and retention.

But malnutrition is preventable and treatable. The children of Zambia can be free of malnutrition if we act now.

- Investing in expanding comprehensive, quality nutrition services to communities across the country would:^{2,3,4,5}
 - Reduce child deaths by reducing stunting and wasting.
 - Prevent permanent brain damage in children and increase children's IQ by reducing iodine deficiency.
 - Help children stay in school longer and perform better in school, resulting in higher wages in the future. If stunting is reduced, children 2 years of age in 2026, will gain an average of 2.7 equivalent school years of learning.
 - Increase physical capacity and reduce sick days in adulthood, leading to economic productivity gains of 67.792 billion ZMW (US\$ 6.869 billion) by 2026, related to a reduction in stunting alone.
 - Reduce the risk of overweight and obesity in children and adults.

For a country like Zambia, nutrition is a smart investment: For every US\$1 spent on nutrition, there is a US\$16 return in health and economic benefits.⁷

What can the Office of the President and Vice-President, Parliament, and the Ministry of Finance do to improve nutrition?

- Ensure nutrition is included in the next 5-year national development plan.
- Ensure there is adequate funding for nutrition and provide financial oversight to keep sectors accountable.
- Promote integration of nutrition into annual plans.
- Ensure a budget line for nutrition funding in the national budget.
- Increase the budget ceiling for nutrition.
- Enact and enforce legislation and policies that support nutrition.
- Facilitate information-sharing among sectors to support adequate planning and budgeting for nutrition objectives.



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GOVERNMENT OF ZAMBIA

