



A meeting where men learn easy to follow actions that keep their families healthy. Photo Credit: Dooshima Tsee.

Fostering Social Cohesion for Nutritional Impact: Lessons from a Zambia Case Study

In collaboration with UNICEF, [Catholic Relief Services Zambia \(CRS Zambia\)](#) implemented the [Scaling Up Nutrition II \(SUN II\)](#) program to address nutritional challenges and reduce child stunting levels. This comprehensive initiative aimed to enhance nutritional outcomes within the country by implementing a multi-sector package of nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive interventions. Despite its objectives, the path to effective nutritional outcomes encountered a barrier: a lack of trust and collaboration between government systems and local communities.

Recognizing the pressing need for social cohesion and harmonious collaboration among stakeholders, in 2022, [CRS Zambia](#) embarked on a strategic partnership with [CRS's SCP1: Fostering Just and Cohesive Societies](#) to enhance the SUN II program by addressing core issues of mistrust and limited collaboration. The overarching goal was to establish a cooperative framework among stakeholders, ensuring the enhancement of nutritional outcomes. This case study delves into how the strategic integration of social cohesion principles within the SUN II

program supports nutrition programming and offers insights into how to integrate social cohesion with the nutrition sector.

A Multi-Faceted Integration Approach

Central to the SUN II project intervention was the integration of social cohesion and justice principles and project activities focused on strengthening vertical ties between community and key government stakeholders. This approach encompassed various interconnected steps. The journey began with a baseline survey that assessed the prevailing levels of social cohesion and justice in the targeted SUN-II implementation wards of Chipata and Lundazi districts. This survey provided a benchmark for gauging success indicators and informed the subsequent interventions:

- **Strengthening Vertical Partnerships: Town Hall Meetings for Data Dissemination and Engagement.** The town hall meetings were orchestrated as a pivotal step in disseminating the baseline survey data, strategically designed to elevate awareness and pique

the interest of various stakeholders, including government implementing sectors, the District Nutrition Coordinating Committees (DNCCs), Ward Nutrition Coordinating Committees (WNCCs), and other district stakeholders. These gatherings served as a mechanism to bolster the vertical connections between participants and pertinent SUN II government entities, fostering a collaborative atmosphere for more effective nutritional interventions.

- **Orienting Government Structures for Social Cohesion**

In addition to the town hall meetings, a series of orientation sessions were conducted with key government bodies including the DNCCs, WNCCs, and Zone Nutrition Coordinating Committees (ZNCCs). These sessions were designed to provide these government structures with an in-depth understanding of social cohesion principles and how the integration of such principles can contribute to enhanced nutrition outcomes. The objective was to cultivate a common comprehension of the significance of social cohesion and its potential to positively impact nutritional initiatives.

- **Empowering Communities through Knowledge**

A pivotal aspect of the intervention was raising community awareness regarding the services earmarked for SUN II participants. This activity aimed to empower beneficiaries with knowledge, enabling them to actively participate and engage in the program. Furthermore, the initiative ensured that the voices, concerns, and ideas of beneficiaries were not merely heard but genuinely considered by government structures. This mechanism aimed to streamline the efficient delivery of essential services, aligning with the program's overarching mission of improving nutritional outcomes.

Enhancing Nutrition Outcomes Through Strengthening Social Cohesion

The journey of integrating social cohesion principles into community-government relationships has yielded several recommendations aimed at bolstering nutrition outcomes by addressing social cohesion concerns:

- **Capitalize on existing community resources**, such as traditional structures and community organizations, to enhance social cohesion efforts. These resources can be valuable assets for promoting positive relationships and trust-building.

- **Empower community members to express their opinions, concerns, and suggestions** about the program to foster open dialogue and enable participants to actively contribute to shaping the program's direction and impact.
- **Promote consistent interactions and collaborations** between government structures and community members through regular meetings, workshops, and town hall sessions. These platforms facilitate open dialogue, information sharing, and collective decision-making.
- **Promote equal participation of all community members**, regardless of gender, to help address gender norms that impede engagement and underscore the significance of collective responsibility for nutrition and the well-being of the entire community.
- **Foster a sense of ownership** among both community members and government stakeholders, as this increases active engagement in program implementation and sustains positive impacts.
- **Define distinct roles and responsibilities** for government structures at different levels, reducing misunderstandings and promoting collaboration, which in turn enhances decision-making and program execution.
- **Implement a robust monitoring and evaluation system** to track the progress of social cohesion initiatives, measuring the success of integration efforts and enabling adaptive programming if needed.
- **Promote collaboration and capacity building** across different government sectors to underscore their collective responsibility in adopting a comprehensive approach to community well-being.

An inclusive framework that transcends basic aid distribution to support communities in need while incorporating social cohesion and justice concerns alongside sector-specific activities demonstrates the potential for more sustainable and equitable programming. This integrated approach, which fosters social cohesion through collaboration among community stakeholders, holds promise for better cooperation of key stakeholders and therefore enhancing nutrition outcomes and overall community well-being.