

Beyond rhetoric:

scaling up Zambian nutrition through the private sector



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With a goal of addressing Zambia's critical nutrition situation, the Scaling Up Nutrition Business Network (SBN) has partnered with the Ministry of Health, the National Food and Nutrition Commission, and the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) to raise public awareness about the importance of healthy diets. Through this collaboration, SBN Zambia has developed a Healthy Diets Campaign and a Good Food Logo (GFL) with the aim of increasing the consumption of foods that contribute to a healthy diet and help reduce micronutrient deficiencies.

Good nutrition is essential in leading a healthy and productive life. Yet, poor nutrition remains a critical public health concern in Zambia – with stunting rates among children under five years of age averaging 35% nationally.

Despite progress in recent years, chronic malnutrition and micronutrient deficiencies remain widespread, as the country has seen substantial increases in the prevalence of overweight and related non-communicable diseases (NCDs).

SBN in Zambia is working with the Government of the Republic of Zambia to engage the private sector in promoting good nutrition through increased supply and demand for affordable nutritious products. Under its mandate, the 127-member network also supports the creation of a stronger 'ecosystem' for businesses involved in the nutrition value chain.

In Zambia, the SBN is co-convened by the National Food and Nutrition Commission (NFNC) and WFP, which provide overall guidance to network members. This comes in the form of technical assistance, provided to private sector entities working along the food value chain to increase the production, processing, and marketing of nutritious food.

"The Good Food Logo has added impetus to our core value of nutrition education for the local people."

Sylvia Banda, Founder and CEO,
Sylva Food Solutions

Campaigning for better futures

The Healthy Diets Campaign is one of SBN Zambia's flagship initiatives, developed by the Ministry of Health (MoH), NFNC, and WFP. Launched by the Vice President's Office in October 2020, it is a nationwide drive to raise public awareness about the importance of healthy diets, with the aim of increasing the consumption of nutritious foods and tackling the triple burden of malnutrition – undernutrition, micronutrient deficiency, and overweight.

The campaign uses various strategies, including mass media such as TV, radio, billboards, social media, and community engagements to reach the public. Some examples of nutrition messaging include:

- A healthy diet provides all the daily nutrients and energy the body needs to function properly and perform well.
- You can achieve a healthy diet by making smart food choices, like whole grains, fruit and vegetables, and processed foods that have less fat, sugar, and salt.
- Children who do not meet their nutritional needs may stop gaining weight and growing. Feed your child a variety of healthy foods to provide all the vitamins and minerals they require.



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When good becomes great

Another key initiative to help consumers make good nutritional choices at the point of purchase was the development of the GFL – a joint venture between SBN Zambia, the Zambia Bureau of Standards (ZABS), and the NFNC.

This logo is a front-of-pack (FOP) certification given to foods that meet a set of defined nutrition criteria. The product criteria are based upon the World Health Organization's (WHO) international dietary guidelines, which consider the levels of saturated and trans fats, sugar, salt, dietary fibre, energy, and micronutrients in foods and beverages. The Zambian national criteria were adapted to the local nutrition context by a set of technical government experts (MoH, NFNC, Food and Drug Authority, and ZABS).

The GFL is the first scheme of its kind aimed at reducing the consumption of food ingredients that contribute to overnutrition and associated NCDs, as well as encouraging the consumption of essential micronutrients. These forms of malnutrition are driven and compounded by limited knowledge, low consumer demand

for nutritious food, inadequate availability of affordable nutritious products, and the increasing presence of cheap and convenient junk food.

The SBN Zambia team attributes the initial effectiveness of the Healthy Diets Campaign and the GFL roll-out to open communication, well-planned preparatory design meetings, and allocation of responsibilities. For example, while WFP managed the media agency relationship, NFNC and MoH ensured messages developed were in-line with national government nutrition priorities, programmes, and policies, and secured buy-in from the office of the Republican Vice President.

Alignment with the government's agenda and the embedding of these initiatives within government structures was critical to the campaign's long-term sustainability and success. "What was impactful was the team's ability to get higher buy-in, and have the Vice President launch the campaign," explains Ntindah Luembe, SBN Zambia Coordinator. "Political will at the highest level of government is key to creating an enabling regulatory environment that encourages small- and medium-sized enterprises

(SMEs) to grow with nutrition at their centre, and in contributing to national nutrition outcomes.”

Lessons learned from unforeseen challenges

The Healthy Diets Campaign faced a number of challenges in its development. For example, the time required to produce and implement the FOP nutrition label was longer than expected, and often beyond the timeline of donor funding, which posed financing concerns. Those involved in the project learned that sensitisation and re-sensitisation of key collaborating stakeholders is essential as there are high levels of staff turnover, so ensuring everyone is on the same page is vital to maintaining progress. Another difficulty was that many tasks needed to occur simultaneously, which necessitated adequate staffing with sufficient expertise to meet the needs of the programme.

Other challenges related to businesses targeted by the GFL. For example, in some cases, there was a slow uptake of the GFL by businesses, even after certification of products, due to the need for existing packaging materials to be used up before new stock is purchased. This was a long process because many companies

source these from South Africa, so buy in bulk when they place their orders. In future GFL roll-outs, it is suggested that a packaging ‘buy out’ programme be included, to purchase existing packaging stock from SMEs so they can quickly transition to packaging that bears the GFL. Furthermore, there was inconsistent use of the logo among some companies, so clear guidelines on how it should be presented are needed at the time of the roll-out to ensure its correct and consistent usage.

Encouraging healthier prospects for all

SBN Zambia will continue to work with the government through the NFNC and other key partners to engage and enable food system SMEs to expand the production and marketing of nutritious foods. It will also continue supporting national efforts, such as the Healthy Diets Campaign and GFL, to improve consumer decision-making in favour of safe and nutritious foods, steering people away from ultra-processed foods that are high in salt, sugar, and fats. The private sector has a key role to play in supporting consumers to make healthier food choices, and SBN Zambia will continue to facilitate their participation.



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