



Adolescents taking the lead in planting fruit trees at their school orchard in Chivi, Zimbabwe

# Promoting youth leadership on nutrition through junior parliamentarians and junior council engagement in Zimbabwe

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health nutrition interventions and capacity building.

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## ZIMBABWE

**What this article is about:** This article covers the role of the junior parliament of Zimbabwe in implementing a youth-led nutrition advocacy initiative in six districts of the country, promoting healthy lifestyles and eating behaviors amongst their peers. The project aims to provide capacity-building and a platform for junior parliamentarians and councillors to identify key adolescent nutrition challenges as well as to develop key advocacy actions and messages to address these challenges within the school environment.

### Key messages:

- A total of 35 schools were reached by the trained advocates and these schools were able to implement 60% of the activities in their nutrition advocacy plans within the first four months.
- Using an already existing government structure, that of the junior parliament, and schools as points of entry enabled the project to leverage already existing personal and institutional relations and ensured stakeholder buy-in.
- Empowering young people to be innovative and champions of change at their schools and amongst peers, in the spirit of 'for young people, by young people', is a powerful tool to improve school environments to enable positive nutrition practices and to influence other adolescents.

### Background

Currently available nutrition data in Zimbabwe has shown that the prevalence of adolescent malnutrition is of public health concern although trends between girls and boys vary. The Zimbabwe Demographic and Health Survey of 2015 indicated a double burden of malnutrition among adolescent girls aged 15-19 years with boys in the same age group mainly affected by undernutrition. While underweight affected more boys (30.7%) (ICF, 2015) compared to girls (12.5%), the prevalence of overweight among girls was 13.3% compared to 1.4% of boys. Micronutrient deficiencies also affect adolescents in Zimbabwe with 26.5% of girls and 20.4% of boys having anaemia. The drivers of adolescent malnutrition are multiple and include limited access to adequate, safe and nutritious food, a lack of nutrition knowledge and poor food choices. This is further exacerbated by the unregulated marketing of unhealthy foods and drinks and food environments that primarily include foods high in fat, sugar and salt.

A focus on adolescent nutrition programming has been lacking in Zimbabwe although recently shifts have been seen because of the development of numerous initiatives including an adolescent nutrition strategy 2022-2026, an ongoing iron-folate supplementation pilot programme and a series of adolescent and youth engagement initiatives<sup>1</sup> focused on promoting the participation of young people in nutrition-related activities. These include co-creation workshops with adolescents as well as capacity-building activities with government ministries and non-governmental organisations to mainstream nutrition as part of

adolescent health, education, agriculture and protection programmes. In addition, the Zimbabwe School Health Policy<sup>2</sup> outlines a reference framework to guide the implementation of several health and nutrition services within the education sector. These services include nutrition screening, immunisation campaigns and nutrition education. The policy also encompasses the Home-Grown School Feeding Program which encourages the provision of nutritious meals to all learners and is used as a teaching tool for the promotion of nutritious diets.

### Role of junior parliament and council in the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) movement

The junior parliament of Zimbabwe is a recognised structure within the government and mirrors the structure of the senior parliament with each constituency having a youth parliamentarian representative. It was established in 1991 as a move by the government to effectively engage children in policy processes. It is the official platform for children to be engaged in matters affecting them and is used to bring the challenges that Zimbabwean children face to the attention of the government and other stakeholders. Housed by the Zimbabwe Youth Council within the Ministry of Youth, the junior parlia-

<sup>1</sup> UNICEF (2018) Zimbabwe harnessing youth driven digital solutions for nutrition. Available at <https://unicef.sharepoint.com/sites/ICON/SitePages/UNICEF-Zimbabwe-harnessing-youth-driven-digital-solutions-for-nutrition--Hack4Nutrition.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> Government of Zimbabwe (2018) Zimbabwe School Health Policy, available at: <http://www.mopse.co.zw/sites/default/files/public/downloads/ZSHPolicy%20final%20signed%20March%202018.pdf>

Adolescent nutrition champions attentively listening to discussions of the day during a parliamentary engagement, Harare, Zimbabwe



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ment consists of a junior senate and national assembly that are comprised of 80 and 210 members respectively. These youth parliamentarians advocate for the rights of children and the inclusion of youth voices in government processes and decision-making.

## Youth-led nutrition advocacy project

Since its inception, the junior parliament has been instrumental in highlighting the key challenges that Zimbabwean children and youth face and presenting these to government representatives and other stakeholders. To highlight the importance of nutrition, the Zimbabwe Civil Society Organisations Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Alliance (ZCSOSUNA<sup>3</sup>), with technical and financial support from UNICEF and working closely with the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE) and Ministry of Health and Child Care (MoHCC), utilised the junior parliament platform to implement a youth-led nutrition advocacy initiative in six districts in Zimbabwe.

The project aimed to provide capacity-building and a platform for junior parliamentarians and councillors to identify key adolescent nutrition challenges as well as to develop key advocacy actions and messages to address these challenges within the school environment. By building the capacity of junior parliamentarians to become youth advocates for nutrition, it was hoped that they would take a leading role in creating supportive school environments for healthy food choices as well as promoting healthy lifestyle choices amongst their peers. The project further aimed to use these experiences to engage the Senior Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Primary and Secondary Education to improve school food environments more broadly. The project was implemented from December 2020 to June 2021.

### Project inception and training

The project began with an inception meeting, conducted virtually due to COVID-19 restrictions, with a number of nutrition stakeholders. An inter-sectorial partnership involving the health, education and youth sectors was established to advance the implementation of the project. Partners included the MoPSE, the MoHCC, the Zimbabwe Youth Council, ZCSOSUNA and UNICEF. The inception meeting aimed to discuss the project's objectives, proposed activities and partner obligations to support junior parliamentarians in developing and implementing their advocacy plans. A subsequently developed implementation roadmap clearly outlined the complementary roles and responsibilities of each stakeholder within the project.

Following this, a series of three eight-hour virtual training workshops on nutrition advocacy were held with a total of 55 junior parliamentarians and councillors using the Nutrition Youth Advocacy Toolkit<sup>4</sup> developed by Save the Children. Participating junior parliamentarians were drawn from six districts of the country and selection was based on interest in nutrition and access to information and com-

munications technology services (as the project was launched and mostly implemented through virtual platforms). All 55 participants were between 10-19 years of age and represented 35 schools located across the six districts. The trainings orientated participants on the costs of malnutrition on both human and economic development and provided participants with background information on nutrition-related advocacy. The trainings were designed to allow participants to freely explore and share ideas on how to effectively advocate for changes within the school environment to promote and maintain healthy lifestyles among learners.

### Developing nutrition advocacy plans

After the completion of the training, nutrition advocates were tasked with developing advocacy plans that they could implement in their schools to help to improve the school nutrition environment. Advocacy plans were developed with the help of their respective school health authorities and with technical oversight from ZCSOSUNA. Nutrition advocacy plans included activities to reach school learners to improve their knowledge and decision-making related to healthy eating and the importance of maintaining an active lifestyle. The advocacy plans developed were contextual and examples of these included peer-to-peer education in school health clubs to inspire behavior change, the engagement of vendors and school 'tuck shops' and school development committees to encourage the selling of healthier snacks and foods for improved food environments as well as the establishment of school orchards within school yards to promote access to, and the consumption of, fresh fruits.

To ensure that the plans were feasible, the nutrition advocates worked closely with their relevant school-level stakeholders including school health authorities such as school health coordinators and school development committees. Advocacy strategies used by junior parliamentarians to encourage the participation of their peers included holding health club meetings on nutrition, nutrition-related drama and theatre events by local groups and fundraising 'edutainment' activities involving dance, music and sport competitions where nutrition-related activities were discussed and conducted. In addition to the localised school-based plans, representatives of the trained junior parliamentarians

from the six districts raised a motion engaging the National Senior Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Primary and Secondary Education to commit to improving school food environments. High-level advocacy plans with activities such as engaging senior parliamentarians were funded by the project fund while school-level advocacy plans such as establishing orchards were supported by the advocates' efforts and local school authorities.

### Monitoring and supportive supervision

Following the finalisation and approval of advocacy plans, the trained advocates began to implement the suggested strategies and activities with support and mentorship. The approval process enrolled members of the school's development committee to review plans, determining if they addressed the challenges specific to the school and were both realistic and achievable. A team comprised of ZCSOSUNA, UNICEF, MoHCC and MoPSE conducted monitoring visits to 24 of the advocates to monitor implementation progress. Due to COVID-19 restrictions on public gatherings, schools closed early at the time of the visits which limited the number of parliamentarians who could feasibly complete these monitoring activities to 24 out of 55. Monitoring visits also provided a platform to link advocates with already existing platforms in their constituencies, including District Food and Nutrition Security Committees, to further support the work of the advocates. Senior nutrition youth advocates from the SUN Movement also provided mentorship to these junior parliamentarians and took part in the school-based supportive supervision visits.

### Results

In the 35 schools where youth advocates conducted group nutrition education sessions during school assemblies at least once a week, at least 300 learners attended each session. Approximately 15,000 adolescent learners were reached within the six months of project implementation.

<sup>3</sup> ZCSOSUNA is an alliance of civil-society organisations including local and International NGOs implementing nutrition-related programs at any level of the country. It acts as the secretariat and advocacy arm of the SUN Movement civil society network.

<sup>4</sup> <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/15313/pdf/yln-nutritional-toolkit.pdf>



Trained youth advocates finalising their advocacy plans with support from a national official, Chivi, Zimbabwe

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tainability of this effort and to engage young people both in and out of schools. Prior to this project, the youth nutrition network consisted of 14 trained youth advocates with the main aim of amplifying youth voices in relation to nutrition. Members of the network are involved in the design, implementation and monitoring of nutrition interventions within the civil society network. Moving forwards, this group will represent youths in their constituencies on all matters related to nutrition during the consultation and design of interventions. Plans are underway to ensure that they are members of the Food and Nutrition Security Committees at various levels, ensuring that energy, expertise and youth leadership is equally distributed to usher in continuous development.

## Successes, challenges and lessons learned

### Successes

The partnership between UNICEF, ZCSO SUNA, MoHCC and MoPSE played a critical role in the successful implementation of the project. The project's implementation manual clearly outlined the complementary roles and responsibilities of each stake holder and that ensured smooth operation and no duplication of effort within the project cycle.

The project was able to reach a large number of adolescents within schools and helped to raise the youth voice within nutrition programmes at school level. The use of peer adolescents as agents of change encouraged the participation of other adolescents.

Using an already existing government structure, that of the junior parliament, and schools as points of entry enabled the project to leverage already existing personal and institutional relations and ensured stakeholder buy-in. Given the role and the mandate of the junior parliament, the project was able to easily engage and influence senior parliamentarians.

Youth advocates were able to formulate their own plans on how they could improve their own school food environments. This enabled a contextualised approach where advocates were empowered to be innovative and to identify solutions relevant to their settings. This also empowered youths to be 'agents of change' as the responsibility to implement their action plans largely relied on them.

Sensitisation and the involvement of key stakeholders from national to district level enabled the acceleration of project implementation and ensured those at district level were involved and able to build strong working relationships with the nutrition advocates.

### Challenges

Unfortunately, schools had to close as part of the COVID-19 public health measures before notable change had occurred and the activities were fully implemented. Due to restrictions because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the project implementation modalities had to shift leading to inception meetings and trainings being con-

ducted online. Intermittent internet connectivity affected the participation of some learners and meant that some youth advocates struggled to fully participate in the trainings. Furthermore, the lockdowns meant a ban on public gatherings and delays to the reopening of schools upon which the successful implementation and completion of the project depended. Subsequently, there was a limited time to implement the nutrition advocacy plans.

### Lessons learned

One of the biggest learnings from this project was the need to be flexible, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 related travel restrictions made in person meetings challenging and at times impossible. However, other platforms such as WhatsApp were successfully utilised to connect with advocates and to monitor progress.

Sufficiently capacitating youth advocates on nutrition topics helped to ensure young people understood nutrition, why it is important and the implications of poor nutrition on health. This helped to build interest amongst the youth and enabled them to create plans to best support their constituencies and peers.

Future similar projects should consider a longer period of implementation as the six months of implementation for this project was deemed too short to have a true impact on adolescent nutrition. Future projects also need to tailor project activities to measure the behavior change of learners in schools.

In addition to individual campaigns targeting specific schools, national-level campaigns would be valuable to complement or emphasise the efforts that are being conducted at school-level.

### Conclusion

Empowering young people to be champions of change at their schools and amongst peers, in the spirit of 'for young people, by young people', is a powerful tool to improve school environments to enable positive nutrition practices and to influence other adolescents. It is hoped that the continuous use of such mechanisms and platforms will lead to broader policy reforms in Zimbabwe. The established SUN Movement will continue to mobilise resources to support youth advocates to contribute towards the transformation of school food environments and for better nutrition in the country. This project demonstrated the successful fostering of partnerships between the health, education and youth sectors in mainstreaming nutrition for adolescents. Such a model will be scaled up as part of the ongoing adolescent nutrition programming efforts to improve national legislation around food and to improve the food systems in and around school environments.

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### References

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