Zambia needs champion to take the lead in tackling hunger and undernutrition

According to new research published by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), the Government of Zambia (GoZ) has been very active and vocal within the global community on the high rates of hunger and undernutrition but needs leadership to bring these issues higher up on domestic political and policy agendas.

The Government of Zambia made an ambitious pledge at the Nutrition for Growth event in London last June, pledging to reduce chronic undernutrition in the country by 50 per cent in the next 10 years-s specifically promising to increase funding to reach the World Bank’s suggested target of US$30 per child by increasing funding by at least 20 per cent annually for the next 10 years.

Launched today, the Hunger and Nutrition Commitment Index (HANCI) 2013 measures political commitment to tackling hunger and undernutrition in 45 developing countries, including Zambia. It is an index comprising high burden countries, showing levels of political commitment to tackle hunger and undernutrition in terms of policies, laws and spending. Lead HANCI researcher at IDS, Dr Dolf te Lintelo said: “HANCI uses the latest available data to assess the political commitment of governments to address hunger and undernutrition. It shines a spotlight on how they prioritise action on hunger and undernutrition, often differently. By showing what governments fail to do, HANCI evidence empowers citizens to hold their politicians to account. More so, by highlighting the important steps they can take to address these challenges, HANCI provides positive stimulus to reinforce such critical efforts on nutrition and hunger.”

Hunger and undernutrition are related but not the same. Hunger, is when a person is not able to consume enough food to live a healthy life, and undernutrition can be caused by a range of factors including poor dietary diversity and lack of access to health care, water and sanitation.

Currently, Zambia ranks 30th on the HANCI out of 45 countries, falling from 17th place in 2012 and has shown significant decline in its commitment to reducing hunger and undernutrition. One of the most detrimental changes over the last year is the sharp drop the coverage of the vitamin A supplementation from 92 per cent to 72 per cent of children. However, Zambia invests substantially in health services helping to allow a very high percentage (94 per cent) of women to be attended at least once during pregnancy by a nurse, doctor or midwife. These dramatic differences highlight the need for coordination across sectors to achieve enhanced nutrition outcomes.

Experts and key stakeholders in Zambia express the dire need for a nutrition champion to foster understanding and drive policy making that will tackle chronic undernutrition. There is recognition that that their government is committed to addressing undernutrition, yet the lack of a systematic and coordinated way of implementing the interventions is preventing progress.

Civil society groups in Zambia are calling for coordinated efforts to tackle undernutrition. Moving the National Food and Nutrition Commission (NFNC) to the office of the vice president would provide it with greater traction and power to implement nutrition programmes to reach across sectors. Additionally, while the government has made strong financial pledges to tackling undernutrition, these are thus far insufficiently reflected in budget allocations.
Zambia Scaling Up Nutrition Alliance (CSO-SUN) said: Now is a time for reflection in terms of what we have committed to do as a country and a call to focus on saving lives. In 2013 our Government and stakeholders worked together across sectors to develop concrete and viable plans to be implemented under the Scaling Up Nutrition Pool Fund – so we know that tackling undernutrition is completely possible. We are calling for renewed commitment going forward in addressing these challenges. Specifically, we expect the GoZ to increase all nutrition budget lines by 20 per cent as they promised. As the HANCI findings for Zambia show, simply making commitments is not enough, people want to see practical action!

To view the full HANCI data and download the report please visit www.hancindex.org. The new HANCI website, also launched on the 25 June, will allow users to explore the index data in depth to analyse and compare how each country has performed.

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For further information on this story, for a copy of the report, or to request an interview, please contact Vivienne Benson on 01273 915653, media@ids.ac.uk or call 07713 110579.

Notes to Editors

1. HANCI has been produced by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) with funding from Irish Aid and the UK’s Department for International Development (DFID) and Transform Nutrition.

2. Transform Nutrition (@TN_NutritionRPC) is a consortium of five international research and development partners funded by the UK’s Department for International Development (DFID). Using research-based evidence they aim to inspire effective action to address undernutrition.

3. Hunger and undernutrition are not the same thing and HANCI measures these separately. Hunger is the result of an empty stomach, and caused by people having insufficient income or social and economic entitlements to access food. Hunger makes people more susceptible to disease and thus leads to increased illness and death. Hunger strongly undermines development. To ‘cope’ with hunger families can be forced to sell vital assets, such as farming tools, often perpetuating their vulnerability to hunger.

Undernutrition results from both a critical lack of nutrients in people’s diets and a weakened immune system. In a vicious cycle, poor nutritional intake can make people more susceptible to infectious diseases whilst exposure to disease can lower people’s appetite and nutrient absorption. Undernutrition in the first 1000 days of a child’s life (from conception until the age of two) has lifelong and largely irreversible impacts because it impairs a child’s physical and mental development.

4. The Institute of Development Studies (IDS) is a leading global charity for international development research, teaching and communications. Our vision is a world in which poverty does not exist, social justice prevails and economic growth is focused on improving human wellbeing. We believe that research knowledge can drive the change that must happen in order for this vision to be realised.

5. HANCI compares 45 countries’ performance on a total of 22 indicators of political commitment to reduce either hunger or undernutrition. These indicators span three areas of government: Policies and programmes designed to tackle undernutrition or hunger; legal frameworks, such as people’s rights to food and social security; and levels of public spending on key areas of agriculture and health.

6. The report bases its findings on two types of data, primary and secondary data. Primary data has come from Expert Perception Survey’s (EPS) and provides an in-depth view of six countries in the larger dataset (Bangladesh, Malawi, Zambia, Nepal, Tanzania and India) and is supplemented by Community Voices work. The secondary data uses global data sets to analyse 45 countries across 22 comparable indicators.