



ZIMBABWE ZRBF: DISTRICT LEVEL ACTIONS TO STRENGTHEN RESILIENCE

Children watering bean plants at Shirichena Primary School. © UNICEF/UNI106370/Brazier

Malnutrition in Zimbabwe

Since 2007, the prevalence of chronic malnutrition (stunting) in Zimbabwe has decreased. However, due to high population growth the number of stunted children remains the same as in 1994. An estimated 23.5% of children under 5 years are stunted, with devastating economic and social costs, and 28.8% of women of childbearing age are anaemic. Increasingly households consume a poor quality diet, and the rates of adult obesity, particularly amongst women, is increasing in urban areas. Poverty remains high: 61% of households are poor (85% in rural areas) and extreme poverty rose from 23% in 2011/12 to 38% in April-May 2019¹, so households experience regular food shortages, whose unpredictability is increasing due to climate change. Zimbabwe has been undergoing a protracted economic crisis, in recent years aggravated by a severe drought², which in combination with the impact of COVID-19 threatens to undermine gains made in improving nutrition³.

The ZRBF (2015–2022)

The Zimbabwe Resilience Building Fund (ZRBF) is a multi-sectoral and -level initiative supporting 18 districts to strengthen their resilience to severe economic, environmental, climatic and social stressors and shocks. The fund promotes dietary diversification to contribute to prevention of both acute and chronic malnutrition. It operates on the principle of joint programming, aligning with nationally-owned and -determined priorities. Donor contributions from the European Union (EUR 40.1 million), UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), Swedish Development Agency (SIDA) and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)

are channelled through one fund managed by the UNDP. By improving coordination among all stakeholders, the ZRBF provides a forum for policy dialogue, programme coordination and harmonization. Three pillars underpin the ZRBF:

- to increase effective evidence-based institutional, legislative and policy resilience frameworks at national and subnational levels;
- to increase the absorptive, adaptive and transformative capacities of vulnerable communities frequently exposed to multiple hazards, reaching approximately 800 000 people;
- to support a risk financing mechanism ('crisis modifier') that enables early response to early crisis warnings and reduces the impact of climate-induced and other shocks.

Effects of COVID-19

To contain the spread of the COVID-19 outbreak, the Government of Zimbabwe implemented a nationwide lockdown on 30 March 2021⁴. The lockdown measures caused market disruptions, increases in food prices and compromised food and nutrition security, particularly amongst vulnerable low-income households. COVID-19 exposed existing and new vulnerabilities in food systems, including farmers facing agricultural input shortages and inability to market production, stemming from logistical restrictions, and traders and consumers facing difficulties in accessing food markets. Job losses and overall declines in purchasing power affected households' ability to access services and basic commodities, including food.

1 Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency, Zimref and World Bank, [Zimbabwe Poverty Update 2017-2019](#). Joint report ZIMSTAT and World Bank.

2 FEWS NET Southern Africa Special Report January 2021.

3 The European Commission Zimbabwe Nutrition Country Profile 2021 (in press), is the main source on nutrition, based on data from the UNICEF/WHO/ World Bank Joint Child Malnutrition Estimates, and the Global Nutrition Report.

4 The lockdown was downgraded from level 4 to level 2 on 10 September 2021.



The ZRBF districts, particularly those bordering South Africa, saw infections increase at an alarming rate. In response, the ZRBF developed a contingency plan and implemented actions for at-risk communities to prevent, detect early, respond to and recover from the outbreak. Immediate measures included the provision of personal protective equipment using cash/ voucher assistance and the rollout of COVID-19 awareness campaigns in line with government protocols to 1.4 million people. Boreholes were rehabilitated to improve water access. Digital platforms were introduced to market and sell food products, and safe physical markets were introduced when feasible. A high-frequency monitoring system allowed ZRBF to map and foresee impending shocks and stressors, allowing for rapid programme adaptation. The crisis-modifier mechanism was quickly activated to provide additional financial support to protect and maintain development

gains. Collectively these measures mitigated the impact of COVID-19 in the ZRBF communities.

Tangible results in the lives of women and children

The ZRBF had managed to establish a critical level of resilience and nutrition security, in particular of women and children, when COVID-19 emerged. Key results from the Zimbabwe Vulnerability Assessment Committee's 2020 Rural Livelihoods Assessment National Survey indicated that, despite the overall worsened food security during the COVID-19 pandemic in Zimbabwe, participants in the 18 ZRBF districts were more food secure compared to non-ZRBF households. Households with increased resilience capacities had a lower probability of experiencing hunger.

	Food insecurity prevalence	Percentage of households with an acceptable dietary diversity score
ZRBF districts	39%	74.7%
Non-ZRBF districts	58%	19.7%

The ZRBF supported the Department of Civil Protection at the subnational level to review and update district and ward Disaster Risk Management (DRM) plans. The participatory review of plans empowered communities to develop their own resilience strategies, particularly during COVID-19. DRM plans included a component on nutrition, including, for example, the promotion of vegetable gardens, nutrition education and introduction of labour-saving technologies for women (for example, fuel efficient stoves, organic matter digesters to produce gas for cooking or solar pumped boreholes). Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) played a pivotal role in sustaining household income during the pandemic. To address micronutrient deficiencies in pregnant women and children under five, the ZRBF promoted the scaling up of Okashana pearl millet, biofortified beans and groundnuts through training and seed provision⁵.

Realising human potential

The ZRBF recognises that good nutrition is the foundation for human development. It continues to progress the nutrition agenda in the time of COVID-19. Through the high-frequency monitoring system, periodic bulletins and engagement with government at various levels, ZRBF has

triggered an interest to include nutrition in DRM policy, programme and coordination frameworks. The fund has also provided a link between nutrition-sensitive agriculture interventions and social protection measures to positively improve nutrition. The ZRBF supports a gender transformative approach, and dialogue platforms held in two districts have resulted in a reduction in cases of gender-based violence during COVID-19⁶.

Tackling climate and environmental challenges

In order to enhance people's resilience and to achieve better food and nutrition security, the ZRBF communities are encouraged to create more diverse, adaptive and stable means of livelihood as well as build an increased ability to adapt to climate change. The ZRBF strengthens the capacity of agricultural extension staff to institutionalise and scale up Resilient and Sustainable Agriculture (RSA). RSA practices include soil fertility management, water harvesting, pest management, post-harvest handling and food processing. Producers are encouraged to diversify their crops using drought-tolerant varieties and to apply livestock protection strategies such as stockpiling of livestock feed for use during lean periods.

⁵ UNDP, 2020. Zimbabwe Resilience Building Fund. 2020 annual report.

⁶ UNDP, 2021. Improving nutrition resilience in Zimbabwe by empowering and transforming lives.