



## IMPROVING CHILD NUTRITION AND DEVELOPMENT THROUGH COMMUNITY BASED CHILD CARE CENTRES IN MALAWI

Save the Children, Malawi

### The Challenge

Malawi has one of the highest rates of chronic malnutrition. Among children aged 6-59 months, 37% are stunted.<sup>1</sup> Studies show that early childhood development (ECD) programmes are efficient and cost-effective methods in improving children's survival, growth and development when compared to other schooling interventions. Providing services to children directly and involving parents can make them even more effective. In Malawi, the government provides ECD through community-based childcare centres (CBCC), which cover 32% of children aged 3 to 5 years.<sup>2</sup>



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### The Intervention

Save the Children implemented an integrated package of nutrition and agriculture interventions through CBCCs to improve the diets, feeding and nutrition knowledge and practices in rural households in Malawi. The package included the promotion of optimal feeding and caring practices during parenting groups and community engagement in planning and preparing meals for children at the CBCC. Additionally, the programme used community gardens at the CBCC as a learning site to teach community members about good agricultural practices and diet diversification. Village savings and loans also helped communities save and access funds to maintain gardens.

### The Evaluation

This cluster-randomised trial was conducted over one year in partnership with IFPRI in 60 rural communities with CBCCs in Zomba district, Malawi. Thirty communities formed the treatment group (received integrated ag/nutrition package) and thirty communities formed the control group (received only the ECD intervention). The study aim was to provide evidence on

the effectiveness and costs of delivering an integrated agriculture and nutrition intervention through CBCCs and parenting groups. The target population were children aged 3 to 6 years attending CBCCs and their siblings and caregivers. The outcomes of interest were preschool enrolment and attendance, child diets and household diet diversity, child nutritional status, child caring practices, and agricultural production.

### The Results

The results demonstrated that the intervention increased knowledge for caregivers on feeding practices in infants and young children and increased the knowledge of food groups and the role of different food groups in a balanced diet. CBCCs in the intervention group provided nutritious meals one more day over a 5-day period than the control CBCCs. The intervention also demonstrated an improvement in child dietary intake and dietary diversity. Intervention children consumed more food (846 grams vs. 720 grams) that were significantly more diverse and were more likely to contain sufficient levels of protein, iron, zinc, vitamin C and

vitamin B. The results for agriculture showed an improvement of household production in the range and output of multiple nutritious foods, such as soybeans (1.73 kg vs. 0.08 kg). There was no impact of the intervention on child growth for pre-schoolers, though improvements were found in the linear growth of their younger siblings, including stunting prevalence. The analysis indicated that intervention costs were USD\$131 per household, with 46% of the costs coming from agricultural inputs.

### The Lessons Learnt

Despite many positive outcomes attributed to the intervention, many households noted certain constraints to adhering to programme activities on dietary diversity, including failed harvests, limited access during certain seasons and lack of financial means to purchase supplemental food. These constraints should be considered in future programming. During the intervention, Malawi experienced historic weather patterns, including periods of severe flooding and then drought. This may have impacted some of the agricultural outputs in the intervention. It is critical that future programmes understand the risk of such occurrences and develop a mitigation plan to minimise their effect on agriculture and nutrition.

### Looking Ahead

This study provides additional evidence that preschools can serve as an effective platform for implementing nutrition and agricultural interventions, and that this programme had a protective effect on food insecurity for households in Malawi. This package may be a cost-effective option for the Malawian government to scale up at other CBCCs to provide the basis for long-term, sustainable impacts on food security in targeted communities.

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## References

<sup>1</sup> National Statistical Office (NSO) [Malawi] and ICF. *Malawi Demographic and Health Survey (DHS), 2015-16*. Zomba, Malawi, and Rockville, Maryland, USA: NSO and ICF; 2017. Available at <https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR319/FR319.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Neuman, M. J., McConnell, C., & Kholowa, F. From Early Childhood Development Policy to Sustainability: The Fragility of Community-Based Childcare Services in Malawi. *International Journal of Early Childhood*. 2014;46(1):81–99. doi:10.1007/s13158-014-0101-1.

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