



© UNICEF / 2022 / Chikondi

unicef   
for every child

## UNICEF EDUCATION

### Education, Health and Nutrition Case Study

#### MALAWI

#### Multi-sectoral programme improves the nutrition of school-aged adolescents

1 December 2022

Poor nutrition in adolescents remains a public health challenge in Malawi: about *22 per cent* of school-age children and younger adolescents are anaemic and *60 per cent* of have zinc deficiency. The situation is even worse among adolescent girls aged 15 to 19 years, of whom *35 per cent* are anaemic and *13 per cent* are underweight. Poor nutrition and anaemia, in particular, negatively impact learning outcomes: [undernourished children](#) are more likely to drop out of school, achieving 1.5 years less education, and *18 per cent* of all grade repetitions are associated with stunting. The COVID-19 pandemic also [compounded](#) lingering issues around unhealthy food consumption and inadequate dietary diversity, with only *17 per cent* of adolescent girls aged 10 to 19 years meeting minimum dietary diversity standards.

In response, the Government of Malawi developed the [National Multi-Sector Nutrition Policy](#) and [National Multi-Sector Nutrition Strategic Plan \(2018-2022\)](#), and various stakeholders such U.N. Agencies, civil society organizations, donors and line ministries also developed a [National Multi-Sector Adolescent Nutrition Strategy \(2019-2023\)](#) that aims to improve the nutritional status of both in- and out-of-school adolescents aged 10 to 19 years. Building from these strategic milestones, the Ministry of Health's Department of Nutrition, HIV and AIDS and the Department of Reproductive Health, with support from UNICEF, piloted two integrated programmes: 1) a weekly iron-folic acid (IFA) supplementation programme in 2019 in six districts, which is now scaled up to 10 districts, targeting girls aged 10-19 years both in and out of school; and 2) and a nutrition sensitive agriculture (NSA) programme in 10 districts.

The IFA programme adopted a participatory approach in schools, involving adolescent girls to maintain their individual compliance cards to record their personal, weekly consumption of IFA tablets and also assist teachers in monitoring the overall rate of IFA consumption in classrooms. Additionally, community volunteers and frontline workers convened adolescent nutrition groups to engage out-of-school girls through nutrition education, counselling,

cooking demonstrations, sporting activities and the establishment of nutrition demonstration gardens.

Through the World Bank and European Union-supported NSA programme, in- and out-of-school adolescents aged 15 to 19 years learned about improved dietary diversification, which is essential for consumption of diversified nutrient rich foods including iron rich foods necessary to reduce anaemia. They also contributed through their household food security through harvested produce from nutrition demonstration plots, which are parcels of land allocated to adolescents by local leaders to facilitate experiential learning around integrated homestead farming, natural resource management, financial skills and food processing and utilisation.

## RESULTS

- In 2019, the IFA programme successfully reached 322,525 young and adolescent girls in 1,788 schools, or 70 *per cent* of all girls in six districts. Currently, the IFA programme has been scaled up to 10 districts, providing 656,947 girls aged 10-19 years with iron folic acid supplementation and nutrition messages on dietary diversity and iron rich foods to reduce their susceptibility to anaemia.
- Since 2020, the NSA programme has benefitted 138,245 in and out-of-school adolescents with cooking demonstrations, training on dietary diversification, integrated homestead farming, livelihood skills and linkages to integrated health services. School mother groups are an integral part of community activities around the programme: they help prepare school meals and spread messaging around diversified diets and healthy agricultural practices that are adopted at the school level.

- To implement the programme in and out of schools, UNICEF helped train 100 technical officers from various line ministries (health, education, agriculture) on integrated adolescent health and nutrition.

## LESSONS LEARNED

- **An integrated, multi-sector approach is essential to improve the nutritional status of adolescents.** Proper nutrition helps students show up to school healthy and prepared to learn.
- **Schools are a location to achieve high coverage of weekly IFA supplementation.** Other platforms such as youth clubs and adolescent nutrition groups can reach out-of-school adolescents through grass roots health care providers.
- **Inclusion of adolescents is key.** Embedding adolescent nutrition groups in these integrated programmes, as well as including sports and cooking demonstrations, serve as incentives that enhance adolescents' participation and buy-in.

## NEXT STEPS

Due to strong collaboration between UNICEF and the Government, the IFA programme recently reached 546 additional schools and the supply chain was integrated within the Ministry of Health and central medical store department system. By the end of 2023, the NSA programme aims to reach 392,559 adolescents across the 10 districts. To adjust programmes to respond to identified needs, UNICEF is also supporting the Government to carry out a landscape analysis of school-age and adolescent nutrition, which will inform plans to scale up integrated school health and nutrition interventions.

**Cost effectiveness:** Between 2018 and 2021, the UNICEF-supported IFA programme in Malawi cost about US \$2.38 per girl per year and benefitted 656,947 young and adolescent girls. In the past 5 years, UNICEF Malawi provided an additional US \$2 million to cover adolescent nutrition work including the NSA programme, which directly reached 138,245 adolescents through adolescent nutrition groups in and out of schools and indirectly reached 523,413 adolescents who benefitted from the broader NSA services such as nutrition education and integrated health services.

For more information, please contact:

UNICEF Malawi Country Office: [lilongwe@unicef.org](mailto:lilongwe@unicef.org)  
© UNICEF December 2022

unicef   
for every child