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## Sustainability of nutrition interventions to improve dietary diversity one year after project completion in Zimbabwe

REBECCA HORVATH<sup>1</sup>, ESTERY MADAVO<sup>2</sup>, STEFANIE GRIEBEL<sup>3</sup>, RONALD TIRIVAVI<sup>4</sup>, THAMSANQA KHANYE<sup>4</sup>, REGINA FEINDT<sup>5</sup>, GUDRUN STALLKAMP<sup>6</sup>, GUDRUN B. KEDING<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Justus Liebig University Giessen, Dept. of Nutritional Sciences, International Food and Nutrition Security, Germany*

<sup>2</sup>*Deutsche Welthungerhilfe e.V., Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning, Zimbabwe*

<sup>3</sup>*Deutsche Welthungerhilfe e.V., Sector Strategy, Knowledge & Learning Unit, Germany*

<sup>4</sup>*Community Technology Development Organisation (CTDO), Livelihoods, Food Security and Nutrition Department, Zimbabwe*

<sup>5</sup>*Deutsche Welthungerhilfe e.V., Country Office, Zimbabwe*

<sup>6</sup>*Deutsche Welthungerhilfe e.V., Regional Nutrition Advisor, East and Southern Africa, Zimbabwe*

### Abstract

Nutrition-sensitive interventions that incorporate behaviour change strategies are widely acknowledged for enhancing dietary diversity in vulnerable populations. While interventions implemented during structured projects often yield strong outcomes, their long-term impact frequently diminishes once external donor support ends. In Zimbabwe's Tsholotsho District, the Multisectoral Approach towards Nutrition Adaptation (MANA) project conducted by Welthungerhilfe and Community Technology Development Organisation (CTDO), and funded by BMZ applied such an approach to strengthen local nutrition outcomes. Despite strong short-term outcomes, this study assessed whether impacts persisted one year post-project.

The primary objective was to evaluate the extent to which the MANA project sustained improvements in dietary diversity among women of reproductive age (15–49 years) and children under two years. Specific indicators assessed included Minimum Dietary Diversity for Women (MDD-W), Minimum Acceptable Diet (MAD) among children, retention of Maternal, Infant and Young Child Nutrition (MIYCN) knowledge, and continued functionality of Care Groups, Community Nutrition Gardens (CNGs), and Community Seed Banks.

A mixed-methods approach was applied. Quantitative data were collected through structured surveys ( $n=346$ ), complemented by qualitative data from Focus Group Discussions ( $n=7$ ) and Key Informant Interviews ( $n=4$ ) in Zimbabwe, Tsholotsho district.

MDD-W decreased from 67 % at the end of the MANA project to 15 % one year later, and MAD dropped from 22 % to 1 %. Conversely, MIYCN knowledge improved significantly (e.g., anaemia prevention knowledge rose from 20 % to 58 %). Care Groups remained active and well-received, with continued use of training materials, though no new members had joined post-project. CNGs faced sustainability challenges, partly due to environmental shocks – particularly the El Niño-induced drought, climate change, insufficiently adapted agriculture/environmental practices and water management which severely affected water availability. These issues were compounded by limited solar irrigation capacity and

unexecuted sustainability plans. Community Seed Banks, though supported with annual training, experienced reduced seed storage due to drought, limited extension engagement, and long distances that hindered access.

Although knowledge gains were retained or improved, practical application in dietary practices and food system resilience declined. These findings highlight the need for sustainable project strategies that promote infrastructure support, local engagement, and community ownership for a long-term dietary diversity.

**Keywords:** Dietary diversity, food security, social and behaviour change, sustainability, Zimbabwe