

# CONCERN WORLDWIDE: LINKING AGRICULTURE AND NUTRITION



## Overview

Concern Worldwide has worked in Malawi since 2002, implementing and scaling up innovative approaches to tackling poverty. We currently work in 4 districts: Lilongwe, Mchinji, Nkhonkhotakota, and Nsanje. Our focus is on ensuring that the poorest and most vulnerable households have access to the basic assets they need for a dignified, healthy life.

Concern has a reputation for high quality, innovative programming and for strong technical leadership in the areas of health, nutrition, livelihoods and gender-based violence. The Concern Malawi strategic plan (2014-2018) includes a solid emphasis on food and nutrition security as critical pillars of development and wellbeing.

Concern is a member of the global African Climate Smart Agriculture Alliance, and co-chair of the Malawi Civil Society Organization Nutrition Alliance.

## Our approach

Agricultural interventions do not automatically translate into better nutrition, and in fact, globally, many projects have had no impact on household nutrition, despite increased crop production and diversification. Evidence is slowly growing around ways that agriculture programmes can become “nutrition-sensitive”, but this remains an emerging area in need of more evidence. Through Concern’s flagship Realigning Agriculture into Nutrition (RAIN) programme in Zambia, we are contributing to research and evidence on how to reduce stunting through agriculture programming, in partnership with the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI). Concern recently won the “Harvesting Nutrition” award for our work in Zambia through the RAIN project.

Concern recognizes that the first 1,000 days of a child’s life present a critical window for promoting nutrition and development and we specifically target households with young children in our agriculture and nutrition programming. Our approach is based on social and behavior change principles, and an understanding of the pathways through which agriculture can influence nutrition – particularly through food production, income generation, and empowering women.



## Increasing agriculture production through climate smart agriculture

Concern has been supporting very poor, rural farmers in Malawi since 2006. On average, these households produce only enough to meet 4-6 months’ worth of their food requirements. Concern has supported more than 16,000 farmers across three districts to adopt Conservation Agriculture (CA) farming in order to improve yields and protect against dry spells. Studies from Malawi and across Africa have shown benefits of CA in terms of improved soil quality, and improved resistance to drought.

After only one year of implementing CA, yields of legumes and maize increased significantly for many farmers, and areas affected by dry spells achieved much better harvests than those where conventional agriculture was practiced. Through partnership with the African Climate Smart Agriculture Alliance, Concern aims to scale up CA to six million farmers worldwide.

## Improving incomes and livelihoods

While the majority of households in Malawi grow their own food, most of these also rely on purchase of food for a significant amount of their food needs. Concern’s livelihoods programmes work to increase the returns that poor farmers can earn through the sale of produce by connecting farmers with private sector actors, and through supporting the formation of cooperatives and farmers groups to collectively negotiate better prices.

Since 2012, 3,386 farmers have been linked with new markets through private sector contract farming arrangements. In 2013, Concern facilitated 162 members of a smallholder farmer’s group in Nkhonkhotakota (99 of them female) to engage with Auction Holdings Commodity Exchange – a private auction holdings firm in Lilongwe – for the sale of groundnuts. By working as a group to sell their produce through the auction service, the farmers earned an additional 1,159,618 Malawi Kwacha (\$2,635 dollars) – amounting to a 35% value addition on what they would have normally earned.

Agriculture		Nutrition
Food production	➔	Food consumption
Increased income	➔	Food /health purchases
Women’s workload	➔	Time for feeding and caring
Women’s control of income	➔	Allocation of household resources for nutrition

## Diversifying food availability

Concern supports farmers to grow a range of crops, emphasizing highly nutritious varieties like soybean, groundnut, and orange-fleshed sweet potato. Through our programmes, more than 5,600 women have planted kitchen gardens near their homes, using a selection of plant varieties chosen based on their nutritional value.

We monitor the nutritional impact of our programmes through small household surveys conducted four times a year. The results have been astounding. From September 2013 to the end of 2014, children's dietary diversity increased from an average of 1.22 foods a day to 2.87.



Percentage of children aged 6-23 months who ate 4 or more food groups in the last 24 hours



## Empowering women

Addressing gender inequality is critical to ensuring that agricultural programmes effectively address nutrition. Concern targets women in a variety of ways. Village Savings and Loans groups have reached 10,000 women, helping these women to save, and to develop businesses. In 2014, 96% of these female VS&L members reported having sole or joint decision-making power in the home.

Conservation Agriculture reduced women's labor demand by an average of 34 days compared to conventional agriculture

Our approach to agriculture also emphasizes labor-saving technologies to reduce women's work requirements. A study done in 2012 found that Conservation Agriculture resulted in a reduction of women's workload by an average of 34 days per year, primarily through reduced time spent weeding and creating ridges – traditionally women's practices in Malawi.

In Mchinji District we have scaled up the Care Group approach among women with young children. Through the Care Group model, groups of 10-15 mothers meet with a promoter who trains the women on a new topic each month. These mothers then share what they have learned with another 10 women in their community, allowing us to reach huge numbers of mothers at low cost. We are now linking our Care Groups in Mchinji with agriculture activities, training mothers on nutrition, kitchen gardens, and how to cook what they have grown. So far, 212 Care Groups are actively promoting nutrition.

## Behavior change for nutrition

To maximize the nutrition impact of agriculture programmes the inclusion of nutrition education is essential. Concern Worldwide uses an evidence-based approach to behavior change, and has conducted formative research throughout our areas of operation to identify the barriers that households face when adopting a new behavior, such as Conservation Agriculture or better infant feeding practices. The results of these "barrier analysis" surveys form the basis for nutrition messages and activities.

Concern also employs a Food and Nutrition Security Advisor who is responsible for developing and rolling out activities to improve production, utilization and consumption of a range of healthy foods, so that households get the best possible nutrition from the foods that they grow.

Cooking demonstrations have proved a popular approach among communities, with both men and women actively participating in cooking and trying out healthy recipes. Concern is in the process of rolling out cooking demonstrations in all its areas of operations, using foods such as sweet potato and soya to encourage better diets among the farmers we work with.

## Using data effectively

Concern has invested heavily in rolling out the most up-to-date approaches for monitoring and evaluating our work. Through a unique beneficiary management system, we can track the diets, agricultural practices, and crop yields of every single farmer that we work with, using tablets to collect sex-disaggregated data and run automatic reports each month.

