M31 RESEARCH | POLICY BRIEF

Sustaining Zambia's Home-Grown School Meals Programme

Locally sourced meals are lifting attendance and nutrition. Keeping them running beyond donor funding is the test.

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KEY MESSAGES *evidence from Monze, Mazabuka & Chisamba districts*

- Zambia's Home-Grown School Meals programme reaches about 1 million learners across 39 districts and is widely credited with higher enrolment, better attendance and sharper concentration in class.
- The effect is immediate and reversible. Schools reported dropouts and falling attendance whenever meals were interrupted, and the meals themselves remain nutritionally narrow, dominated by maize and legumes.
- Sustainability is the binding constraint. Donor dependence, weak storage and thin community ownership have already stalled the programme in places such as Mazabuka, making stable financing, local food production and training the priorities.

01 BACKGROUND

School-age nutrition is a decisive but often neglected driver of children's health and learning. Zambia has cut under-five stunting from 53% in 2001 to 35% in 2018, yet the burden remains high and uneven, reaching 45% in Luapula and Northern provinces, with rural children more affected than their urban peers. Against this backdrop, the Home-Grown School Meals (HGSM) programme has become a cornerstone of government social protection.

Anchored in the National Strategy on Home-Grown School Meals (2020 to 2024), the programme provides locally sourced meals to roughly 1 million pre- and primary learners across 39 districts in all ten provinces, while aiming to raise smallholder incomes by buying from local farmers. This brief draws on qualitative research in Monze, Mazabuka and Chisamba districts to examine how well the programme works and whether it can last.

Why it matters

The programme tackles two problems at once: childhood hunger and weak rural markets. Whether it can be sustained beyond donor and central government funding will decide whether those gains endure.

02 KEY FINDINGS

Across interviews with district education officials, head teachers, farmers and national bodies, the programme's benefits were clear and consistent. So were the threats to its continuity.

- Attendance and retention rose where meals were served and fell visibly when supplies stopped; head teachers in Monze and Mazabuka linked meal interruptions directly to dropouts.
- Teachers reported better concentration, energy and performance, with learners staying alert even in afternoon classes once they had eaten.
- Diets are too narrow, leaning on maize, legumes and oil, while supply delays, inadequate quantities and poor storage further undermine reliable delivery.

Figure 1. HGSM meal preparation at a school. (Source: NATIONAL STRATEGY ON HGSM, May 2020.)

03 RECOMMENDATIONS

Securing these gains means moving from a centrally supplied, donor-dependent model toward locally anchored, adequately resourced delivery.

1. Diversify the food basket. The Ministry of Education and partners should fund a fortified, multi-food-group ration, including supplements such as HEPS, so meals meet learners' nutritional needs rather than calories alone.
2. Invest in local supply and storage. Establish school and community food-production units and build adequate storerooms in every participating school to stabilise supply, cut spoilage and reduce reliance on central deliveries.
3. Institutionalise funding and training. Government should ring-fence HGSM in the national budget and provide continuous training for school staff and community members so the programme can run without external support.

> **"We saw a lot of dropouts and attendance went down due to the stoppage of food. Children were coming to school because they knew they would have a meal.**
>
> *— District Education official, Mazabuka (KII, 2025)*

04 CONCLUSION

Zambia's Home-Grown School Meals programme is delivering on its core promise: well-fed children attend more, concentrate better and learn more. The challenge is not relevance but durability. Narrow diets, fragile supply chains and donor dependence have already caused the programme to falter in some districts. Embedding stable financing, local food production and trained community ownership is what will turn a valued intervention into a lasting one.

Figure 2. Learners and locally sourced produce under the HGSM programme (Source: Ministry of Health Zambia, April 2026.)

Methodology

This brief draws on qualitative research by M31 Research in Monze, Mazabuka and Chisamba districts. Key informant interviews were held with District Education Board Secretaries, head teachers, the Ministry of Education, and the National Food and Nutrition Commission, alongside a focus group discussion with smallholder farmers supplying schools in Monze. Transcripts were analysed thematically. As a qualitative study in three districts, the findings illustrate stakeholder experience rather than national prevalence.

References & further reading

Ministry of General Education (2020). National Strategy on Home-Grown School Meals 2020–2024. Lusaka: Government of the Republic of Zambia.

World Food Programme (2022). State of School Feeding Worldwide 2022. Rome: WFP.

Sitali, C., Chakulimba, O. & Kasonde-Ng'andu, S. (2020). Sustainability of the School Feeding Programme in Western Zambia. Lusaka: University of Zambia.

AT A GLANCE

35%
Under-five stunting, Zambia, 2018 (from 53% in 2001)

1.0M
Learners reached with locally sourced meals

39
Districts reached across all ten provinces

ABOUT M31 RESEARCH

M31 Research is a research and advisory firm that generates evidence for policy across education, health, agriculture and social protection. This brief is based on M31's independent study of the Home-Grown School Meals programme in Southern and Central Provinces.

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