Rural women travel over 15km for health services

Access to health care is a priority the world over and in Northern Ireland we are lucky to have resources within easy reach.

For people living in rural Zambia, accessing health care often requires walking many miles to attend clinics. In the Mumbwa district, while there is a hospital in the main town, there are smaller clinics in the outlying areas. During our visit to the district, we visited one of these health clinics in Luili, an hour’s journey from Mumbwa by car, which is benefitting from Concern Worldwide’s help.

Concern's RAIN project in Zambia is focusing on eliminating chronic malnutrition in children. Weekly weigh-ins are held in Luili for mothers to bring their children to, with children’s weights being monitored and advice on nutrition provided if children are showing signs of malnutrition.

Dr Alfred Mwiinga has been with the clinic - which services a population of over 8,000 - since 2004 and says he has seen a vast reduction in the number of cases of malnutrition since the RAIN project began in 2011.

"When I started here, malnutrition cases would have been quite high," Dr Mwiinga said. "It’s all very well giving us seeds to grow new food - but what do we do with it?"

It was such a question which prompted Concern’s RAIN project to look at ways to teach local women how to grow all the new nutritional food they were growing.

"We are trying to get men to have more responsibility for child care, to give their wives more say on what crops they grow. We are trying to get men to buy into the idea, to give over some of their land to grow crops for their household, and we are slowly getting there.”

Working with Zambia’s health and agriculture departments, Concern’s team are extremely passionate about the RAIN project and raising awareness of nutrition and gender equality.

They are raising the debate over the airwaves with a weekly segment featuring information on the RAIN project on local radio station Blue Sky Radio.

One of the regular contributors on the hour-long programme is Emmanuel Mundende, Agriculture Technical Officer attached to the RAIN project.

Both enthusiastic and optimistic about the positive impact of the RAIN project, he commented: "If there is love there, then people will make it work."

Women’s groups have also been set up in the local villages in the Mumbwa district - 233 so far – to impart advice on nutrition and agriculture, as well as discussing gender equality and empowering women to take on more household responsibilities.

Through drama and discussion they are opening up the debate about equality for women - and letting their spouses see it can be a positive change.

Learning about nutrition is helping local families

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Previously, the staple diet was maize, pounded down to make a porridge, or nsheema.

With a diverse range of foods now being grown in their homestead gardens, many women were unsure of how to cook the produce.

As part of the project, a number of women’s groups were set up in the villages, backed by a sterling group of community health volunteers who are helping to teach local women how to cook the new foods they are growing.

The women meet each week and learn about cooking techniques, as well as general health and wellbeing advice.

One of the community health volunteers in the Lungwina village is Agnita Munyama. The 50-year-old mother-of-10 is relishing her role.

"The success for me is when you see healthy children," Agnita said.

She added: "It is great being able to teach women about the benefits. "Seeing the results from this project, and seeing healthy, happy children is what makes me happy."