Leveraging the Food System for Child Growth

A nutrition-focused social enterprise builds a new public-private partnership model in East Africa

The challenge in Rwanda and beyond

Despite Rwanda’s remarkable progress on multiple socioeconomic indicators over the past few years, the burden of malnutrition in the country remains persistently high. While the country boasts the highest exclusive breastfeeding rate in the world at 87%, Rwanda’s stunting rate of 38% places it at 110th in a ranking of 132 countries. The country’s rate of vitamin A deficiency in children 6–59 months old remains 39%. Substantial stunting prevalence gaps based on income and urbanization persist. The Cost of Hunger in Rwanda report estimates that the equivalent of 11.5% of the country’s GDP was lost in 2012 as a consequence of child undernutrition, with more than three million people of working age not able to achieve their potential.

In an effort to address malnutrition, the Government of Rwanda has launched a number of mostly health-system-based initiatives. Although health systems are central to nutritional status in the first 1,000 days of life and also to reversing acute malnutrition, it is the food system – the actors, processes, and infrastructure involved “from farm to fork” in feeding a population – that can play a wide-reaching role in sustainably overcoming the nutritional deficiencies of an entire population. Leveraging the food system for child growth and human development is the next frontier for addressing the global burden of malnutrition, which is reflected in unacceptably high rates of stunting, wasting, micronutrient deficiencies, and overweight and obesity. An end-to-end value chain approach building local supply, consumer demand, and a nutrition-enabling environment can improve nutrition through the consistent consumption of nutritious foods among pregnant and lactating women, children 6–24 months old, and other vulnerable groups.

“Leveraging the food system for child growth is the next frontier in the fight against malnutrition”

Inception of a pioneering social enterprise

Inspired by the vision of a sustainable value-chain approach and with the support of the Clinton Health Access Initiative (CHAI), public and private sector players – the Government of Rwanda, the World Bank’s International Finance Corporation, DFID’s CDC Group, the Dutch development bank FMO, and DSM, a global science-based company active in nutrition and health – joined forces in 2013 to launch Africa Improved Foods (AIF). AIF is a unique social enterprise based in Rwanda, with the mission to “help people maximize potential through improved nutrition with affordable, high-quality, locally sourced foods.” This social-purpose food processor is located in Kigali’s Special Economic Zone. With a world-class facility and state-of-the-art equipment, AIF has an annual production capacity of 45,000 metric tons of fortified specialized food products, which enables it to supply both the domestic market and neighboring countries. Production operations started in December 2016, with AIF’s products first reaching the market in early 2017. By the end of 2017, AIF’s plant was operating at full capacity and 90% efficiency. AIF has plans for setting up a smaller yet more flexible facility in Ethiopia to serve Horn of Africa markets.
A nutritious portfolio for growth

To create longevity and market success, AIF has also developed a strategic product portfolio, with the company’s mission as the guiding star. Porridges are popular in East Africa and are generally perceived as a nutritious food for children, making them a highly appropriate vehicle and AIF’s primary product platform. AIF’s first products are two corn-soya-blend porridge mix offerings targeting first 1,000-day mothers and children 6–24 months old. These products are distributed to different populations with distinct packaging through three channels: the World Food Programme (WFP), government-operated health centers across Rwanda, and commercial retail outlets. Building on the success of Nootri Toto (the complementary food product) and Nootri Mama (the maternal food supplement), the Nootri range was expanded with the introduction of Nootri Family in January 2018. Nootri Family is a corn-soya-sorghum blend fortified with 13 vitamins and minerals, with a balanced nutrient profile targeting the entire household.

“AIF aims to make its products the nutritious porridge of choice”

AIF’s three-year outlook aims to establish the foundation in making AIF’s products the nutritious porridge of choice, not only in Rwanda, but also in neighboring East African Community (EAC) countries. The porridge portfolio is therefore cross-cutting in terms of segments (older infants and children, pregnant and breastfeeding women, families, teenagers, males, and millennials), nutritious offerings (general and balanced health, “high in,” “better for you”), and also price points (pack price strategies). AIF is also exploring a country-specific approach due to varia-
tions in consumption habits in the EAC region. The new product development team partners closely with cross-functional stakeholders internally and externally in executing against these strategic opportunities.

Impact beyond nutrition and beyond Rwanda
AIF’s business model and its central position in the food system enable it to create value beyond its intended nutritional impact. Upstream in the value chain, farmers and their families benefit from improved livelihoods and access to process and technology innovations that improve the yield and quality of their crops. With a direct workforce of 300 employees, AIF’s own demand for local products, services, and talent contributes to Rwanda’s economic development and to higher standards in the country’s food and beverage sector. In addition to its substantial contribution to addressing undernutrition, AIF’s marketing communications help educate consumers about nutrition and making smart choices for oneself and one’s family.

“AIF is creating triple bottom-line value with a model that may be relevant to other regions”

Beyond Rwanda, AIF’s products are already consumed in Uganda, Ethiopia, Kenya, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and South Sudan. Some 1.7 million beneficiaries have received AIF’s products through WFP’s programs in East Africa, as well as over 90,000 mothers and young children in Rwanda through the local government’s nutrition program targeting the first 1,000 days. Since AIF’s inception, the organization’s products have enabled over half a billion nutritious porridge meals to be provided.
consumed by mostly underserved beneficiaries and consumers across East Africa.

By purposefully engaging food value chain actors to promote child growth and human development, AIF is both creating triple bottom-line value and experimenting with a model that may yet prove relevant to other countries and regions facing malnutrition, working for a world in which all children thrive.

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References