ON THE OTHER HAND

Can the Food Industry Help Tackle the Growing Global Burden of Undernutrition?

If we are to successfully combat global undernutrition, efforts must be sustained by multiple stakeholders from various sectors. We believe that trust is built through industry’s demonstration of practical actions that improve health, and recognition of these actions by governments and nongovernmental organizations.

HUNGER AND UNDERNUTRITION remain major threats to global health. The solutions required will be complex and long term and should include stronger private–public collaboration. We identify eight specific actions by food companies that could contribute to reducing hunger worldwide. These include investing in agriculture, especially local smallholders; expanding use of corporations’ core capabilities in distribution and quality control; greater support for fortification of staples and commonly consumed nutritious foods and beverages; expansion of the portfolio of foods currently available for complementary feeding in settings of acute and chronic undernutrition; cocreation of new and innovative social business models to help combat the global burden of undernutrition; investment in the development of nutrition science capacity, especially in developing nations; innovation of product reformulation aimed at developing low-cost nutritious foods for all markets; and committed advocacy by multinational food and beverage corporations for nutrition-friendly trade policies.

INCREASED GLOBAL ATTENTION TO UNDERNUTRITION

The number of people suffering from severe undernutrition and food insecurity recently reached one billion, and most of those affected live in developing countries.1 Concerns about hunger dominated debates during the January 2009 United Nations meeting in Madrid2 and during the April 2009 G8 Summit in Italy,3 where world leaders called for “enhanced support including investments in agricultural science, research, technology, education, extension services, and innovation.”4

In 2008 the results from newly published cohort studies confirmed that early stunting and micronutrient deficiencies lead to permanent intellectual and developmental outcomes and that intimate links exist between early stunting and the later onset of diabetes and cardiovascular diseases. The need for action has never been stronger, as shown in a recent Institute of Medicine report on promoting cardiovascular health in the developing world, which emphasized early nutritional origins of cardiovascular disease.5

FOOD INDUSTRY AND GLOBAL NUTRITION CHALLENGES

The food industry has a vital role to play alongside governments, nongovernmental organizations, and academics in addressing nutrition. On May 13, 2008, the CEOs from 10 multinational food and nonalcoholic beverage companies and one major national company (with combined annual sales revenues totaling more than US$350 billion) committed advocacy by multinational food and beverage corporations for nutrition-friendly trade policies.

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Innovation and Expansion of 
ative capitalism,” and Muham-
nership hampers progress in 
food industry and governments 
public partnerships between the 
solution to the crisis of urgent 
focus of philanthropy as the 
growth and improve both popu-
profits critical for long-term 
velop new business models that 
problems like hunger. There is grow-
ndered and lower-income 
address the needs of children younger than two years. This window of opportunity closes rapidly. In an ideal world, exclusive breastfeeding, the most cost-effective inter-
vention for nutrition, would be 
ally practiced for at least the first six months of a child’s life and be followed by a smooth 
transition to healthy, nutritious, and safe weaning foods. The reality, however, is that breastfeeding frequently ends within the first month of life and is replaced by less optimal foods. Neither the 
WHO recommendations on in-
and child feeding nor the 
WHO–UNICEF Code on the 
Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes are adequately imple-
ated worldwide. The conse-
sequences are seen in the dramatic decline in nutrition status during early weaning. Josette Sheeran, 
executive director of the United Nations World Food Programme, 
believes that there is need to cre-
ate incentives for food companies 
to develop a wider range of 
healthy weaning foods, especially 
for populations suffering from 
acute and chronic malnutrition, 
and do so in ways in which breastfeeding promotion would be enhanced.

There are many initiatives un-
derway to develop new products, 
led by Nutriset SA and Valid In-
ternational. Nutriset produces 
Plumpy’Nut, a fortified ready-to-
use therapeutic food (RUTF) for 

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Sustained and Greater Investment in Development of Nutrition Science Capacity in Developing Nations

Nutrition science capacity is weak in developing countries. We reviewed full-length publications in the top 10 leading nutrition and general medical journals (based on ISI citation indexes) by country of the first author, nutrition topic, and year from 1991 to 2007 (unpublished data). For the last two years, 83% of a total 1716 articles were on overweight or obesity, and only approximately 5% of first authors for any nutrition category were from India or China—two countries that comprise 40% of the total world population. Only one article came from all African countries combined. There is an urgent need for major donors from the private sector, foundations, and the development community to invest in a twenty-first century approach to nutrition science. Such investment would likely yield greater attention to the field, innovation emanating from the countries in greatest need, leverage of food company research capabilities for public good, and more science-based nutrition policies. Initiatives now underway to address these capacity needs deserve strong support from governments, food companies, and foundations.

Product Reformulation of Low-Cost Nutritious Foods for All Markets

Increases in food prices are having severe impacts on the nutritional status of global populations in both developed and developing nations. The dramatic rise of the past 12 months in the cost of food poses a threat to global food and nutrition security and “creates a host of humanitarian, human rights, socioeconomic, environmental, developmental, political and security-related challenges.” The World Bank estimates that the double or greater increase in food prices between 2006 and 2008 pushed 100 million people into poverty worldwide. In the developed economy of the United States, rising food prices have created a shortfall between maximum food stamp benefits and the cost of a nutritionally adequate diet. As of March 2009, the number of food stamp recipients in the United States reached a record 31.8 million individuals, with over 700,000 applying in a single month because of the economic recession. Economists forecast that food stamps will cost at least $51 billion for fiscal year 2009, a $10 billion increase from fiscal year 2008. Food companies in all countries have a role to play in supporting improved access to nutritious foods and drinks.

Advocacy by Multinational Food and Beverage Corporations for Nutrition-Friendly Trade Policies

The need to address agricultural subsidies as part of the next world trade roundtable is supported by major food companies and leaders in public health. The impact of changes to the antiquated system could create major gains for farmers in developing countries that, if well-managed, could boost food production and reduce hunger in developing countries over the long term. At a recent G8 Summit in Italy, world leaders called for increasing public and private investment in agriculture. At PepsiCo, our US Farm Subsidy Policy supports reform of current policies. We support key producer groups, such as oat and sunflower farmers, in their efforts to rebalance subsidies.

CONCLUSIONS

If we are to successfully combat global undernutrition, efforts must be sustained by multiple stakeholders from various sectors. We believe that trust is built through industry’s demonstration of practical actions that improve health, and recognition of these actions by governments and non-governmental organizations. Only through new and innovative public–private sector partnerships can we truly make a difference.
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References


