

COVID-19 Learning Series

SYNTHESIS REPORT



Authors

Kelsey Grey, Natalie Sessions, Brenda Akwanyi and Philip James

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Hannah Ichingwa, Adeck Muganda, Tinashe Mbiriri, Claire Barnhoorn and Stevie Beeby for giving their time for the interviews, for sharing their experiences and for reviewing and approving the final versions of the individual case studies. Thank you to Uduak Igbeka, who suggested potential entrepreneurs we could approach for inclusion in the case studies through the Scaling Up Nutrition Business Network. Thank you to Tanya Khara and Emily Mates for the additional review and suggestions. We were able to undertake this work due to the generous support of USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance, the Eleanor Crook Foundation and the Department of Foreign Affairs, Ireland. The ideas, opinions and comments included here are entirely the responsibility of the document's authors and do not necessarily represent or reflect the policies of the donors.

Designer: Marten Sealby **Cover:** WFP/Derrick Botchway

Recommended citation: Kelsey Grey, Natalie Sessions, Brenda Akwanyi and Philip James (2022). COVID-19 Learning Series. The role of entrepreneurs in supporting nutrition services during the pandemic: Case Study Synthesis Report. Emergency Nutrition Network (ENN): Kidlington, Oxford, UK.

This document is a part of the ENN COVID-19 Learning Series (www.ennonline.net/C19LearningSeries). This series comprises:

- 1. A survey report** outlining the results of a survey collecting information from ENN's network on topics still underrepresented within the available learning regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and nutrition services in low- and middle-income countries (www.ennonline.net/C19LearningSeries/ScopingSurvey). The results of this survey informed the following work.
- 2. Four case studies and a synthesis document**, focusing on the role of entrepreneurs in supporting nutrition and health services during the pandemic.
 - **Case study 1: Western Stone Enterprise**, a woman-led business that produces peanut paste, sesame paste and other value-added agricultural products in Kenya (www.ennonline.net/C19LearningSeries/CS1).
 - **Case study 2: Adeck Juice Bar**, an all-

natural smoothie bar run by a young entrepreneur in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania (www.ennonline.net/C19LearningSeries/CS2).

- **Case study 3: Sky Brands**, a food processing company specialising in biofortified products in Zimbabwe (www.ennonline.net/C19LearningSeries/CS3).
 - **Case study 4: Solvoz**, an open-access digital procurement platform connecting humanitarian organisations and local suppliers (www.ennonline.net/C19LearningSeries/CS4).
 - **Synthesis report:** a short summary of the key learnings from the four case studies relevant for nutrition practitioners (www.ennonline.net/C19LearningSeries/CS_synthesis).
- 3. A report of practitioners' experiences** of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the number and demographics of people accessing nutrition services in low- and middle-income countries (www.ennonline.net/C19LearningSeries/Practitioner_Survey).





WFP/ALICE RAHMOUN

Introduction

In July 2020, UNICEF, with the Food and Agriculture Organization, the World Food Programme and the World Health Organization issued a call to action in the *Lancet* warning of the potential for the COVID-19 pandemic to impact nutrition, with dire consequences.¹ The call to action noted the critical need to act quickly to mitigate the adverse effects of the pandemic on nutrition outcomes. Five urgent actions were highlighted to support nutrition:

- 1) Safeguarding and promoting access to nutritious, safe and affordable diets
- 2) Investing in improving maternal and child nutrition through pregnancy, infancy and early childhood
- 3) Re-activating and scaling up services for the early detection and treatment of child wasting
- 4) Maintaining the provision of nutritious and safe school meals for vulnerable children
- 5) Expanding social protection to safeguard access to nutritious diets and essential services

The COVID-19 Learning Series case studies, summarised below, highlight the important role that entrepreneurs in particular played in promoting access to nutritious and safe diets from the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Emergency Nutrition Network (ENN) created the COVID-19 Learning Series to fill gaps in available information and learning around the pandemic, and nutrition programming and services in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). To inform the focus of the series, and given there had already been significant learning material produced on COVID-19 within the sector, we conducted a scoping survey to find out what people in our network felt were the key remaining learning gaps. The survey report is available online.² The survey found that ENN's network wanted to hear more about the role of "non-nutrition and non-health stakeholders", such as entrepreneurs,³ in strengthening the nutrition response during the pandemic. In response,

¹ Fore HH, Dongyu Q, Beasley DM, Ghebreyesus TA. Child malnutrition and COVID-19: the time to act is now. *The Lancet*. 2020;396:517–8.

² Annabel Miller, Philip James, Eilise Brennan, Natalie Sessions, Brenda Akwanyi and Tanya Khara (2022). COVID-19 Learning Series survey report. Emergency Nutrition Network (ENN): Kidlington, Oxford, UK. Available at: www.ennonline.net/C19LearningSeries/ScopingSurvey

³ 'Non-nutrition and non-health stakeholders' was used in the scoping survey to describe private sector actors. The majority of ENN's audience and networks largely comprise nutrition practitioners, covering government, NGO and UN programme managers, clinicians, researchers, policymakers and donors. Businesses and their representative entrepreneurs, however, are essential stakeholders within the nutrition and health sectors.

we sought out relevant contacts and with them created four case studies focusing on the role of entrepreneurs in supporting nutrition and health services during the pandemic:

- 1) Western Stone Enterprise, a woman-led business that produces peanut paste, sesame paste and other value-added agricultural products in Kenya⁴
- 2) Adeck Juice Bar, an all-natural smoothie bar run by a young entrepreneur in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania⁵
- 3) Sky Brands, a food processing company specialising in biofortified products in Zimbabwe⁶
- 4) Solvoz, an open access digital procurement platform working globally to connect humanitarian organisations with appropriate suppliers and to offer support for procurement procedures⁷

In the face of incredible operational challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic, these entrepreneurs continued to support nutrition and health by radically shifting the way they worked. These case studies reveal shared challenges and innovative solutions across contexts, and provide valuable and relevant lessons for those implementing nutrition programmes or interventions. We hope that the stories described in the case studies help to illustrate how nutritionists and social entrepreneurs can support one another in meeting the nutrition goals of the communities they serve.



ADECK MUGANDA



HANNAH ICHINGWA

Methods

The focus and subjects of the four case studies summarised in this report were selected as follows:

1. Following the scoping survey results, we identified entrepreneurs to feature in the case studies via two mechanisms:
 - The Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Business Network linked us with two entrepreneurs: Adeck Juice Bar in Tanzania; and Western Stone Enterprise in Kenya
 - ENN's field connections were leveraged to identify Sky Brands in Zimbabwe and the Solvoz digital procurement platform, working globally to support operations in LMICs
2. The ENN team conducted online interviews with the entrepreneurs using a topic guide that allowed for flexibility. The interview notes were used to draft case studies, which were then reviewed by the entrepreneurs for accuracy. Verbal consent for the interviews to be recorded was secured, along

with permission for the entrepreneurs' stories to be publicly shared through the individual case studies. The interviewees all read and approved the final versions of the case studies.⁸

⁵ Kelsey Grey (2022). COVID-19 Learning Series. The role of entrepreneurs in supporting nutrition services during the pandemic. Case Study 2: Adeck Juice Bar, Tanzania. Emergency Nutrition Network (ENN): Kidlington, Oxford, UK. Available at www.ennonline.net/C19LearningSeries/CS2

⁶ Natalie Sessions (2022). COVID-19 Learning Series. The role of entrepreneurs in supporting nutrition services during the pandemic. Case Study 3: Sky Brands, Zimbabwe. Emergency Nutrition Network (ENN): Kidlington, Oxford, UK. Available at www.ennonline.net/C19LearningSeries/CS3

⁷ Brenda Akwanyi and Philip James (2022). COVID-19 Learning Series. The role of entrepreneurs in supporting nutrition services during the pandemic. Case Study 4: Solvoz: Bridging the gap between humanitarian organisations and local suppliers with an open access digital procurement platform. Emergency Nutrition Network (ENN): Kidlington, Oxford, UK. Available at www.ennonline.net/C19LearningSeries/CS4

⁸ All case studies outline the stories and opinions of the entrepreneurs themselves; ENN did not undertake any independent verification of the claims made.

Challenges highlighted in the case studies

Some key common challenges were highlighted across the case studies. These challenges are particularly relevant to, and in some instances shared with, practitioners and organisations working to improve nutrition outcomes across LMICs.

Reduced access to customers due to pandemic-related restrictions was one of the main challenges faced by these entrepreneurs. As governments mandated lockdowns, curfews and school closures, in-person sales plummeted and previously successful business strategies had to be rapidly adapted to the novel pandemic environment. The needs and capacities of customers further shifted with the onset of the pandemic; they required businesses to adapt their ways of working to cater to the evolving market.

Problems with supplies and logistics were other important challenges created by COVID-19 restrictions. Supply chains were severely affected by border closures

and restrictions on movement, leaving businesses with insufficient access to the inputs needed to make their products, such as raw ingredients and packaging. Procurement is generally an expensive process, and humanitarian sector supply chains are especially long and can be fragile. Procurement rules and regulations can be difficult to navigate, especially for smaller organisations; even more so with the additional complexities that a global pandemic brings.

The pandemic also exacerbated and highlighted existing challenges that small businesses face in accessing technical support. For example, several of these businesses could have benefited from better access to technical nutrition information to enhance the nutrition sensitivity⁹ of their products, and from support for achieving product quality standards and subsequent certifications. This kind of technical support could have facilitated access to larger populations and so increased sales.

Responses

The entrepreneurs featured in these case studies all used innovative approaches to overcome operational challenges related to the pandemic.

For Western Stone Enterprise in Kenya, border closures and restrictions on movements meant that raw ingredients, such as peanuts and sesame, which would normally be imported from Uganda, were no longer available. Their short-term solution was to shift to using what could be purchased from local producers; in the long term, they plan to invest in building capacity among local small-scale farmers to produce and sell high-quality raw ingredients. By localising their supply chain, Western Stone Enterprise hopes to prevent any future disruptions to production. In comparison, Sky Brands in Zimbabwe had already focused on sourcing their biofortified crops from local farmers before the pandemic, which meant that they experienced fewer disruptions to their supply chains when restrictions were enacted. Shifting to local sourcing generally means more flexibility for procurement and greater resilience in operations.

Solvoz used a different approach to achieve a similar goal and localise supply chains. Their digital

procurement platform was specifically designed to address the fragile supply chains commonly found in humanitarian emergencies and exacerbated by the pandemic. Their open access online catalogue of supplies and tailored procurement support to organisations aimed at streamlining the procurement process in order to help provide faster, more responsive programming where it was most needed. By providing a platform where organisations based in LMICs could directly access a range of suppliers and receive competitive quotes for humanitarian supplies, Solvoz's vision was to provide important support towards creating shorter and more efficient supply chains, and empowering local organisations to take charge of their own supplies.

Several of the case studies highlighted how adaptations to processing and packaging methods could help boost sales during the pandemic. Sky Brands adapted their

⁹ 'Nutrition-sensitivity' here refers to the ability of products and services (which may not have nutrition as their primary objective) to directly improve the nutritional status of individuals or populations.

high iron beans into a fast-cooking version to appeal to customers experiencing power cuts and therefore needing to save on energy costs. Meanwhile, Western Stone Enterprise packaged and sold smaller quantities of their products to allow customers experiencing financial hardship as a result of the pandemic to continue purchasing their peanut butter and peanut flour on a day-to-day basis.

Some of the key adaptations made to overcome challenges were related to marketing and customer service. As lockdowns, curfews and school closures reduced face-to-face access to customers, several of the businesses pivoted their approach by shifting to door-to-door sales (e.g. Western Stone Enterprise and Adeck Juice Bar in Tanzania) or online ordering coupled with home delivery via local transport systems

such as motorcycle taxis (e.g. Adeck Juice Bar). Entrepreneurs creatively leveraged digital technology to facilitate online procurement and sales and to launch and spread marketing campaigns. Social media took on even greater importance as a platform for social and behaviour change communication, advertising and ordering. Several of the entrepreneurs highlighted how they focused on understanding their customers' needs, desires and motivations in the pandemic environment to tailor their products and marketing most effectively. In some cases, the entrepreneurs also shifted their target market in response to the pandemic; for example, Sky Brands temporarily re-focused on selling to higher income, health-conscious consumers when they were unable to access their usual market due to school closures and the purchasing power of lower income groups fell.

Lessons learnt

These case studies demonstrated valuable lessons that could be applied by practitioners and organisations working in nutrition to their programming and delivery of services in the context of COVID-19 and beyond.

1. Above all, the entrepreneurs showed how adaptability and innovation in ways of working are critical to successfully navigating crises and shocks. By focusing on the needs and desires of their customers and rapidly shifting to cater to them, these businesses were able to survive a challenging period. As small private businesses, they were able to be nimble and move dynamically towards solutions in a way that many organisations implementing nutrition programmes may struggle to do.
2. Increased use of digital technology and social media for procurement, sales and marketing emerged as one of the key adaptations that the entrepreneurs made to their operations in response to the pandemic. As access to internet and communications technology becomes near universal, optimising the use of digital technology for nutrition programming presents many opportunities. Leveraging social media and app-based technology offers wide-ranging potential to deliver nutrition programming and services in novel ways that can help meet the needs of beneficiaries.
3. The case studies also highlighted the value of taking an entrepreneurial approach to marketing, with



Hospital staff in Mumbai receiving medical supplies they procured using the Solvoz platform

BRAHMA KUMARIS

the business owners aiming to understand their customers' needs and motivations, and then tailoring products and marketing campaigns in response. Although this is done to some extent within formative research for nutrition programming, considering beneficiaries as customers can bring a different, more real-time, perspective to engaging them in programming that may have the potential to increase the appeal and uptake of nutrition interventions. In particular, the case studies highlight the need to contextualise interventions: people have unique needs which require unique solutions in different settings and which can shift over time.

4. Leveraging existing infrastructure is another lesson to be learnt from these entrepreneurs. For example, home deliveries used existing local motorcycle taxi transport systems in Tanzania, and social media

networks, such as WhatsApp groups, were used for marketing and sales.

5. The entrepreneurs who established Solvoz explained how support provided to organisations to help them navigate complex procurement procedures, to find the most appropriate (ideally, local) suppliers, and to maintain auditable documentation, can help to establish trust between organisations, suppliers and donors. Digital procurement platforms can potentially have a considerable impact, making more efficient use of financial resources and reducing the draw on precious staff time. This can result in a more streamlined procurement process by organisations and also plays an important role in helping to provide faster, more responsive programming where it is most needed.

Nutrition organisations working on public health programmes, in humanitarian aid and in the provision of clinical services generally have different characteristics in their funding, operations and objectives than entrepreneurs. For example, nutrition organisations may often be restricted by overall and specific spending on certain budget lines, whereas entrepreneurs may be able to adapt their strategies more quickly for success, with many operational decisions requiring a focus on profit. However, there are many similarities too. For example, both nutrition organisations and entrepreneurs rely on the efficiency and sustainability of operations, reaching the most people possible within their target group with the available resources, and prioritising people's health and well-being in the process.



W/PARETE/BENSON IBEABUCHI

Conclusion

As demonstrated in these case studies, entrepreneurs have an important role to play in safeguarding and promoting access to nutritious, safe and affordable food throughout the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. They have illustrated their adaptability and innovation in the face of a crisis and have provided valuable lessons for nutrition organisations. Strengthening and leveraging partnerships with health- and nutrition-focused entrepreneurs is a practical action that nutrition technical stakeholders can take to ensure better access to

adequate diets during future crises. In the long term, food and nutrition security depends to a large degree on the private sector providing nutritious food to populations on an ongoing basis, and supporting entrepreneurs in small- to medium-sized enterprises that provide nutritious products can make an important contribution. We hope that these examples of how businesses have adapted during the COVID-19 pandemic provide useful insights into approaches that could be applied by organisations implementing nutrition programmes and interventions in their ongoing planning and operations.



ENN

2nd Floor, Marlborough House, 69 High Street,
Kidlington, Oxfordshire, OX5 2DN, UK

Tel: +44 (0)1865 372340 | office@enonline.net | www.enonline.net

Charity registration no: 1115156. Company registration no: 4889844

