

Everyone Around the Table: The Private Sector on Healthy Diets

Lawrence Haddad, Executive Director, GAIN, Opening Remarks

Good morning, good afternoon and good evening. I'd like to thank Director General Dongyu for his wise opening remarks, his strong leadership, and for the fantastic SOFI report that was launched last week. I've written to the team behind it and told them that it is the best SOFI yet.

The report confirms some sobering facts.

1. Hunger numbers have increased by 60 million in 5 years—and that is before COVID-19 hit.
2. Another 80-130 million people will be added in the coming year due to the economic lockdowns precipitated by COVID-19.
3. Healthy diets are unaffordable to 3 billion people
4. 57% of the population in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa cannot afford a healthy diet

I could go on.

For those of us who live to change this dynamic, the private sector is an ally. All businesses, whether big, medium and small; whether in food, transport, storage, finance, or advertising—have a role to play. And the rest of us have an incentive to help them do that. Why?

Motives

What are the motives for getting everyone around the table?

I think they are clear.

Progress towards the SDGs is too slow. Moreover most people buy their food from markets and therefore engage with the private sector. Businesses have to be part of the solution.

Governments have a key role to play -- they need to do everything in their power to make it easier for businesses to make safe nutritious food more available, affordable and desirable - and harder for businesses to make unhealthy foods more affordable and available.

What incentives do businesses have to come to the table? Many SMEs are already producing nutritious foods—for them we need to help them to grow their businesses and so make nutritious foods more accessible to all. We can do this via finance, TA for business development and nutrition impact, and via policy incentives.

For the bigger businesses, who perhaps are not producing as much healthy food, their incentives to change are growing. The demand for healthy diets is building—COVID-19 has accelerated that. The evidence is becoming clearer on the very positive business returns to healthy employees and workers in their value chains. And government regulations will become tighter and tighter on business practices that impact nutrition negatively. For big businesses, the challenge is to become a leader, a pace setter, to seize the opportunity.

Means

The UN Food Systems Summit and the Nutrition for Growth Summit provide the perfect mechanisms to accelerate engagement between the public and private sectors. Business associations are working together really productively to make significant commitments for N4G -- and the UN Food System Summit will build on and learn from that.

Opportunities

What about the opportunity? Well, change is in the air. Things that seemed impossible 4 months ago now seem to happen on a regular basis. Trillion-dollar bailout packages, vaccines developed in record time, and statues toppled.

Food has never been more present in its absence. People in high income countries have never been so aware of their food systems and the essential nature of food system workers. People in low income contexts are faced daily with choosing to get infected or to avoid hunger.

COVID-19 has been like a time machine in that it has propelled us 10 years into the future on many things -- such as ways of working. But time machines can also work backwards and we are at severe risk of development being dragged back by 10 years if we do not fix food systems -- and fast.

That is our challenge over the next 3 days—to talk about what we can do—together—to accelerate these changes.

Day 1, today, is focused on business perspectives. Day 2 is focused on government and consumer perspectives. And Day 3 is focused on the kinds of commitment areas we would like to see developed out in the UN Summit Action tracks and other fora.

So colleagues: let us reject any notions of development delayed and instead move our efforts into overdrive.

On to our first Panel:

Business Strategies for the Delivery of Healthy Diets for a Healthy Planet.

What is a healthy diet? We could spend a lot of time on that, but let's not.

According to WHO, a healthy diet protects against malnutrition in all its forms as well as diet related non-communicable diseases such as obesity, type 2 diabetes and some cancers. It contains a balanced, diverse and appropriate selection of foods eaten over a period of time.

And it is important to remember that a healthy diet not always sustainable and a sustainable one is not always healthy.

And while we will talk in this panel about businesses in general there will be a focus on SMEs: businesses with less than 250 employees--including smallholder farmers--because they are the backbone of food systems in low income contexts in Africa and Asia.