

BRINGING BUSINESS THINKING TO WORKER NUTRITION PROGRAMMES

A METHODOLOGY FOR ASSESSING THE BUSINESS CASE FOR
WORKFORCE NUTRITION PROGRAMMES IN SUPPLY CHAINS



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The Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) is a Swiss-based foundation launched at the UN in 2002 to tackle the human suffering caused by malnutrition. Working with governments, businesses and civil society, we aim to transform food systems so that they deliver more nutritious food for all people, especially the most vulnerable.

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SUMMARY

There is significant evidence to suggest that workforce nutrition programmes—i.e., interventions that operate through the existing structures of the workplace to address fundamental aspects of nutrition amongst employees or supply chain workers—bring benefits to employees and employers alike. In 2019, GAIN and NewForesight undertook a study to understand the business case for worker nutrition programmes in company supply chains, focusing on cocoa in Ghana, garments in Bangladesh, and tea in India.

This study aimed to do something that had not been done before: apply business case thinking to worker nutrition programmes in supply chains, using a structured and systematic approach. The study extended the definition of ‘business case’ beyond financial returns on investment to cover a broad range of possible motivations for companies and sectors to invest in nutrition in their supply chains.

This working paper outlines the methodology that GAIN and NewForesight developed, how it was used, and highlights opportunities for others to draw on to develop the methodology further to build the business case for workforce nutrition programmes.

KEY MESSAGES

- For workforce nutrition programmes to be viable in the long term, businesses need to be presented with and invest in a clear business case.
- For many companies, the business case for workforce nutrition programmes often goes beyond revenues, costs, and profits.
- This newly developed methodology assesses the business case for investing in workforce nutrition programmes to help uncover efficiencies, risks, and opportunities for further scaling and replication and to develop deeper understanding of what makes an investable nutrition programme.
- The case study methodology provided significant added value and learning opportunities for the partner companies.
- Moving forward, the methodology can be improved and used in various formats, helping companies considering investment in nutrition programmes clarify motivations, costs, benefits, risks, and opportunities.

BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVE

One in four people globally is food insecure [1], while one in three is overweight/obese [2], a challenge reflected in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 2 target to end malnutrition in all its forms. Malnutrition also brings significant losses in productivity and human potential, posing challenges to employers in both high- and low-income settings [3]. Workplaces offer reach to large sectors of the population, as more than half the world's population spends a majority of their adult life at work. Workforce nutrition programmes are a set of interventions that operate through the existing structures of the workplace to address fundamental aspects of nutrition amongst employees or supply chain workers. Robust evidence suggests that these programmes bring benefits to employers, such as reduced absenteeism, enhanced productivity [4,5], and high returns on investment, with a ratio of up to six to one [3,5].

Supply chains are effective entry points for these workforce nutrition programmes, as they provide established and organised entry channels through which to deliver nutrition interventions (for targeted workers at specific points in the supply chain). For this reason, increasing access to and demand for healthy food in commodity supply chains is a priority for the workforce nutrition programme of the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN). In order for these programmes to be viable in the long term, businesses need to be willing to invest, and the business case needs to be clear.

With this in mind, GAIN and the consultancy NewForesight undertook a study to better understand the business case for investment in nutrition programmes in supply chains. (See Box 1 for definitions of these key terms.) The study worked with three projects across three different countries:

1. Chocolate producers Touton and Ferrero in Ghana.
2. Garment manufacturers Lenny's Apparels Ltd and garment buyers in Bangladesh.
3. Tea producers APPL Plantations and Unilever in India.

The aim of the study was to build a business case to spark investment and strengthen advocacy for nutrition, to transform the tea, garment, and cocoa sectors. The methodology was designed to understand five interrelated questions:

- What motivates different types of sector players to implement or invest in nutrition programmes for workers or farmers in their supply chains?
- Where does workforce nutrition fit within an organisation's sustainability programme, and how are these prioritisations and decisions reached?
- How could nutrition programmes integrate with existing programmes or sustainability strategies to gain traction and reduce barriers to acceptance and implementation?

BOX 1: KEY DEFINITIONS

A nutrition programme in a value chain uses existing channels to reach workers/farmers and their households (for example, smallholder farmers in the cocoa sector, or factory workers in the garment sector) with different types of support for improving their nutrition.

The business case is the overall sum of costs and benefits, financial or otherwise, for different stakeholders surrounding the nutrition programme.

- What would they need to start investing in supply chain nutrition programmes and what would the (long-term) returns be for them?
- What can GAIN do to better support these sector players?

Across all three studies, companies producing cocoa, garments, and tea saw a strong business case for nutrition programmes in their supply chains. The motivations for implementing the programmes ranged from immediate business need (a financial return on investment), to market positioning (brand differentiation and reputation), to the long-term sustainability of the sector. Workforce nutrition programmes in supply chains were most successful where they linked to existing sustainability initiatives or company objectives and had high levels of internal buy-in. For more detailed insights, please refer to the individual case studies:

- [Making the business case: Garment worker nutrition programmes](#)
- [Making the business case: Cocoa farmer nutrition programmes](#)
- [Making the business case: Tea worker nutrition programmes](#)

GAIN has also published a briefing paper to present key learnings from these three case studies: [Nutrition programmes for workers in commodity value chains](#).

This working paper outlines the methodology used to develop the business case, how the methodology was implemented, key learnings from its application, and ways in which it could be used or further developed.

THE BUSINESS CASE – CASE STUDY METHODOLOGY

This study aimed to bridge the gap between practitioners (e.g., GAIN) and industry by introducing a common language and applying business case thinking to workforce nutrition programmes in supply chains, using a structured and systematic approach. The methodology was applied in three case studies about companies investing in nutrition programmes in the cocoa, garment, and tea sectors in Ghana, Bangladesh, and India. Two case studies (the cocoa and garment sectors) were compared to broader sector trends.

REDEFINING THE ‘BUSINESS CASE’

Most literature to date [4,5] indicated that, although there often is a clear business case for better nutrition through direct financial incentives (for example, reduced absenteeism), these incentives alone are often not sufficient to explain companies’ investments in nutrition programmes. Other influencing factors include building relationships with partners, enhanced reputation with consumers, or a belief in supporting good nutrition for workers in their factories, plantations, or supply chains; these are often as important as direct financial incentives. This newly developed methodology also considered other factors that incentivise or limit investments, including legislation, knowledge (or lack of), and costs. Drawing on this analysis, the present study extended the definition of ‘business case’ beyond financial costs and returns on investment to the broader set of motivations illustrated in Figure 1. In order to contextualise the projects within the broader sector trends, one additional and willing company in each of the three sectors was also interviewed as part of laying out the wider

motivations for investment in social programmes similar to workforce nutrition, using the motivation questions as outlined in the methodology below.

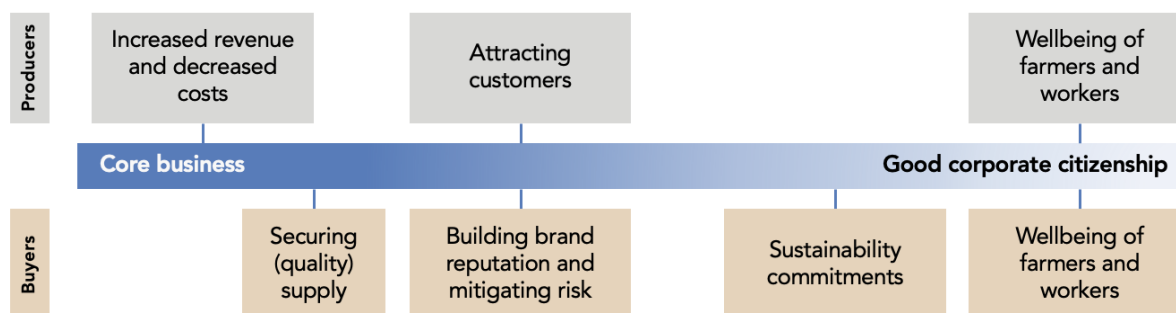


Figure 1: Business case motivation

ASSESSMENT AREAS

Using the business case concept in Figure 1, NewForesight and GAIN formulated learning questions to build a case study to understand why individual companies invest in a nutrition programme and where barriers and opportunities may lie. The learning questions focus on seven main areas:

1. **Context:** if enabling factors are in place to support the implementation of nutrition programmes, for example laws and regulations, strong institutions, effective infrastructure and incentivising taxes and subsidies.
2. **Integration:** if the nutrition approach fits with the business, for example, whether existing training and communication structures can be leveraged to deliver ongoing nutrition programming.
3. **Motivation:** whether the motivation of a company to make (current or future) investments in nutrition programmes is strong, across its relevant departments and people.
4. **Feasibility:** if the level of effort, time, and/or cost for the company to implement, scale up, or replicate the nutrition programme is manageable.
5. **Needs:** if the skills, tools, and knowledge needed to implement, replicate, or scale up the nutrition programme are available.
6. **Efficiency:** whether set-up costs are manageable and operational costs of the nutrition programme exceed its (estimated) benefits.
7. **Effectiveness:** If financial and non-financial benefits of a nutrition programme are sufficient to exceed costs.

NewForesight and GAIN translated these assessment categories into a case study template that provides an organisation with an overview of the main functions of a nutrition programme, the context in which it operates, its main costs and benefits, and identified risks and potential areas for improvement, in line with the assessment criteria. Each of the categories is underpinned by an analytical approach to assess the extent to which the conditions are met (see [case study template](#)). This approach helps clarify the barriers to implementation, scaling, and achieving efficiency, and where they may lie. As the approach is standardised, results across case studies can be aggregated to facilitate further learning.

ANALYSIS METHODS

The research questions and initial design of the case study template were informed by a literature review of what makes a successful nutrition programme, including outcomes and factors that could lead to positive financial returns for businesses (e.g., reduced absenteeism or increased productivity). An additional targeted review of materials for specific topics that were not covered in this overview was completed. The research questions and case study template were then iteratively developed in close collaboration between the GAIN and NewForesight teams, as well as through case study execution and expert interviews.

The GAIN and NewForesight teams applied the methodology to three companies that are currently investing in nutrition programmes: a garment manufacturer in Bangladesh, a tea producer in India, and a cocoa-trading company implementing a programme in Ghana. The case studies were selected by the GAIN and NewForesight teams to cover different types of nutrition interventions across sectors, geographies, and practicalities, such as availability of information and timing (see Figure 2). The method was piloted in one case study, then adapted and applied to others based on those lessons learned. Each case study started with a literature review to understand the individual companies involved and the environments in which it operates. The literature was provided by GAIN and the case study partners and supplemented with research by NewForesight; it included programme documentation, financial reports, company and strategy reports, and impact data.

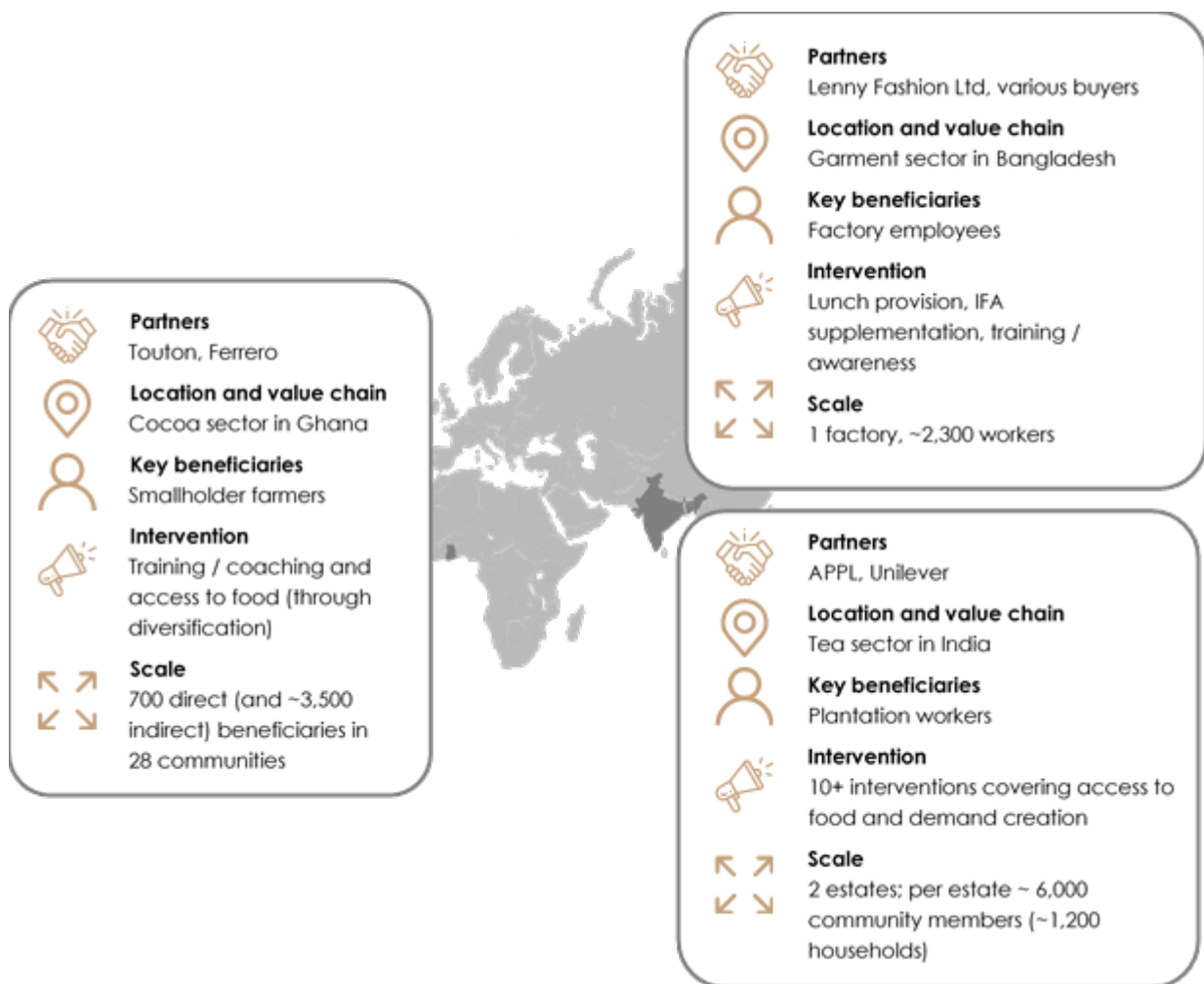


Figure 2: Three companies were selected in different geographies and sectors

Insights from the review were then confirmed and built upon through interviews with company staff members, across departments and levels, to discover further details on the programme, the associated costs, and experienced or expected benefits. The first interviews were conducted remotely, followed by country visits for the tea and garment case studies, enabling a deeper understanding of their nutrition programmes, costs, and impacts. In-person visits allowed the team to engage in further conversations with a wider set of staff (e.g., the plantation physician and some of the factory workers) and gather additional data (e.g., seeing what the food workers received for lunch).

The findings were supplemented by interviewing stakeholders in the cocoa (nine people) and garment (seven people) sectors about their perspectives on nutrition interventions. Each interview was conducted using a semi-structured interview format, supported by interview guides. Notes were taken during the interviews and were later analysed using the high-level scoring methodology in the case study 'template' and confirming the findings in other interviews. The data obtained were used to complete the case study 'template', including a detailed costing model for each of the case studies, and each case study was then evaluated across the seven assessment criteria, using the high-level scoring methodology. Results were refined iteratively throughout the case study process.

REFLECTIONS ON THE METHODOLOGY

Overall, the developed methodology was fit for purpose for this study. The analytical approach enabled the study team to gain specific understanding of and insight into the broad business case for nutrition programmes of individual companies; it also allowed for comparison across the companies to obtain overarching insights. Understanding the motivation of companies helped uncover the importance of non-financial benefits of workforce nutrition programmes and the likelihood of companies to invest in the absence of a 'direct' business case. The costing models and comprehensive analyses of the strategic and operational structures, approaches, and processes of the companies helped uncover efficiencies, risks, and opportunities for further development of the programmes, yielding deeper understanding of what makes a successful workforce nutrition programme. This insight is particularly useful for the partner organisations detailed in Figure 2.

The methodology resonated very well with partner organisations, but there are significant differences in what the academic and practitioner communities are comfortable saying and the types of impact and language that are useful and convincing to the private sector. Part of the challenge for the academic and practitioner communities is the level of accuracy and salience of private-sector sustainability reporting, including on nutrition. Many companies' focus continues to be on reach rather than impact, and attribution and rigor are limited.

There are several areas in which the methodology could be improved. First, the scoring methodology is qualitative, and assessments depend on the different individuals completing the studies and the people they interview. This can potentially undermine the scoring comparability across case studies. In further developing the methodology, the scoring could be removed or redeveloped to improve overall consistency. The methodology could also be simplified by removing or combining several of the assessment criteria. For example, the template could be reorganised to describe 1) sector and geographic context, 2) company context, 3) nutrition programme characteristics, 4) costs and benefits/impact, and 5) opportunities and barriers to improvement and scale. Third, standard key indicators could be introduced to compare contexts (for example, political stability and economic growth indexes).

Moreover, accurate assessment and attribution of the impact of workforce nutrition programmes is problematic, as most businesses do not measure relevant outcomes (e.g., nutrition gains or cost savings). To adequately assess these components and ultimately develop a 'direct' business case of financial returns, more of this type of data needs to be collected. However, companies may not be interested in additional investment for data collection to prove impact. The established belief that healthy lunches are good for overall wellbeing of workers may be enough for many, without the need for proof and attribution of financial impact. For others, it may be important, especially when the investment needs are considered high.

Additional improvements were highlighted through an internal reflection process, assessing the post-study confidence in the methodology by criteria, as shown in Figure 3.







Assessment criteria	Level of confidence in methodology	Reflection
Feasibility		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The methodology helped facilitate conversations and understanding how companies approached the set-up of nutrition programs, and what the ambition and barriers were for further scaling or replication of nutrition programs. The methodology did not provide sufficient understanding on barriers to implementation, as the case studies solely focused on successful programs by front-runner companies. Further research would be needed to understand barriers of companies that decided to not invest in nutrition.
Motivation		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The analytical method to uncover motivational factors to invest in nutrition programs works well. Key to its success is the inclusion of multiple organizations and people to obtain a broad (ideally sector-wide) image. The results in this study were often based on several interviews and therefore do not necessarily reflect the organization (or sector) as a whole.
Integration		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The methodology allows for a clear analysis of how the nutrition intervention is embedded in the organizational structure of companies. This helps to understand who key contact persons and decision makers are, and helps define how nutrition interventions can be linked to other (sustainability) initiatives. In future cases, a more detailed image of what sustainability programs the company is involved in would be beneficial.
Needs		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The understanding of what companies need to continue, replicate, or scale the program was solid. For future cases a standardized list of activities that GAIN undertakes and can provide as support to companies would help facilitate conversations and analysis.
Efficiency		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The methodology helped provide a clear understanding of costs and cost structure for all three case studies within a short timeframe. Some insights could be gained on secondary costs (e.g. opportunity costs such as time investments). There are opportunities for further standardization across case studies. Perspective is missing on how these costs compare to other sustainability programs and the business as a whole.
Effectiveness		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The methodology provided limited understanding of effectiveness of programs. Data on effectiveness is difficult to obtain; it is quite sensitive and also not always collected consistently. Attribution is very difficult to measure and assess credibly.

Figure 3: Confidence in methodology

Some additional lessons on case study implementation include that it is better to conduct case studies in the field, rather than remotely: it is more efficient for data collection and results validation and leads to increased levels of buy-in from the partner companies because of increased collaboration and co-creation opportunities. In this case, close coordination and alignment between NewForesight and GAIN (including country teams) was invaluable for planning, framing, logistics, partner relationship management, and insights. Partner selection was also very successful; partners chosen were responsive, motivated, and could share relevant insights. In particular, having multiple points of contact within the companies enabled the teams to check information and fill gaps.

Another strength was applying the methodology to an initial case study first, which helped the team to understand its strengths and weaknesses before applying it onward. This meant that significant methodological improvements were able to be made as a result of learnings from the initial case study. In particular, it was decided that a broader sector overview was needed to understand the different stakeholders in the sector. The addition of this aspect greatly improved the value and relevance of the work.

The methodology is broadly applicable to other company-led sustainability or social programmes. Moving forward, it is possible to use parts of the methodology for assessing the success of different programmes across different impact measurements in different supply chains and sectors. The methodology could guide initial discussions with companies on

motivations, context, challenges, and needs for a programme. For example, the motivation analyses could be used to start a discussion on willingness to invest, and effectiveness analyses could be used to start discussions on evidence that may be needed.

The methodology could also be used to inform decision-making on if and how partnerships may work between technical partners (e.g., GAIN) and companies on nutrition interventions. For example, the methodology can be used to assess the degree and type of company buy-in, projected costs and impact of the programme, and the long-term sustainability and ambition beyond the project's end.

Finally, aggregating insights across multiple companies could inform learning and best practices. For instance, lessons from and across case studies could be used to identify scaling and replication potential of best practices.

CONCLUSION

This paper aimed to share a newly developed and systematic methodology applying business case thinking to wider motivations for workforce nutrition programmes in supply chains. The results of the application of the methodology are found in separate papers, as cited earlier. In brief, for all the companies involved in the case studies—Touton, Ferrero, Lenny Fashion, APPL, and Unilever—the business case for investing in nutrition programmes in supply chains proved to be clear, with specific motivations varying significantly according to sector context and company structures.

The case study provided significant added value and learning opportunities for the partner companies. Moving forward, the methodology can be improved and used in various formats, helping companies that are considering investment in nutrition programmes clarify motivations, costs, benefits, risks, and opportunities.

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