

Jolenta's big dream:

tackling malnutrition in Tanzania using biofortified foods



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An upsurge in cases of malnutrition among children in rural Tanzania, combined with the issue of poor market access for farmers, inspired Jolenta Joseph to venture into a nutrition-related business in 2017. Her enterprise, [Sanavita](#), started out by selling orange-fleshed sweet potatoes (OFSP) to consumers but has evolved over time to add value to OFSP, beans and maize.

Across Tanzania, micronutrient deficiencies represent a significant threat to public health. Iron deficiency, for example, affects up to 58% of children below five years of age, and 45% of women aged 15-49 years. Similarly, 33% of children aged six months to five years are deficient in vitamin A, making Tanzania one of the most nutrition-insecure nations in sub-Saharan Africa.

Sanavita, a women-led small- and medium-sized enterprise (SME), is working to address this by collaborating with smallholder farmers to provide nutritious food products for the community. Sanavita partners with more than 2,000 farmers to produce highly nutritious biofortified crops, including orange fleshed sweet potatoes (OFSP), soybeans, pro-Vitamin A maize, and high-iron and -zinc beans, which are then processed into OFSP flour, biscuits and purees, bread, soya flour, and pro-vitamin A flour. Sanavita sells its products in local shops, supermarkets and

"We are proud to be working with women to address their nutritional needs and promote dietary diversification, while economically empowering them by giving them a ready market."

Jolenta Joseph, Founder, Sanavita

markets, targeting women of childbearing age, lactating mothers and school-age children, who have significant nutritional needs and are most at risk of developing micronutrient deficiencies.

Scaling up with added value

While working on a nutrition awareness programme as part of her university studies, Jolenta was concerned by the growing cases of malnutrition among children in rural Tanzania. At the same time, the International Potato Center introduced OFSP as an alternative to maize. Uptake by farmers was so successful that markets quickly became saturated, and making a profit became increasingly difficult.

"I noticed the large swathes of land being used for OFSP production and the farmers' struggle in getting their produce to market," she says. "That became my light bulb moment." She approached 10 farmers in Morogoro who agreed to supply her with OFSP, on the condition that she would provide a consistent and ready market. With a steady supply, Sanavita became an officially-registered enterprise in 2019.

After gaining approval from the Tanzania Food and Drug Authority to begin processing OFSP flour, Jolenta was admitted to the Sokoine University Graduate Entrepreneurs Cooperative (SUGECO), an agriculture incubator that gives Sanavita access to milling and solar drying machines and laboratory services at a subsidised rate. In 2020, Sanavita also received support from the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Business Network, after winning its SUN Pitch Competition, which enabled Jolenta to purchase new equipment, increase volumes and product ranges, and boost the company's customer base. An electric chopping machine allows Sanavita to more than triple the amount of OFSP cut per hour, whilst a bag-sealing machine has doubled the amount of flour sales per month, as the

"We are really delighted for what Sanavita has accomplished by setting examples to nutritious food businesses, particularly to other female entrepreneurs."

Haika Maleko,
SBN Tanzania Coordinator

company is able to package different quantities of flour for a wider range of customers, including wholesalers, local markets and shops.

Women and children are the company's primary target consumers, and Sanavita also supports women in the wider community. The company has 18 employees, 13 of whom are women, and 40% of the farmers who supply Sanavita are women. To support women farmers, Sanavita holds training sessions on the importance of feeding their families with OFSP in order to boost household nutrition. The SME also provides the farmers with a guaranteed market in a bid to support women-led agribusinesses and, through schools and health centres, Sanavita has been helping women become nutrition ambassadors within their local communities.

Small business, big impact

To convey the importance of biofortified foods, Sanavita runs nutrition awareness campaigns on local radio and TV stations, social media platforms, and at public gatherings. These campaigns are complemented by nutrition education and cooking demonstrations in schools and, so far, the company has reached 20,000 people.

To expand its markets and impact on nutrition, Sanavita issues all products with barcodes and is in the process of acquiring Tanzania Bureau



of Standards marks of quality, which will enable their products to reach more large retail stores and export markets. From an initial 1,500 customers in Morogoro when the SME started in 2009, Sanavita's reach grew to 5,000 in 2020, and by early 2021 it stood at an estimated 10,000 across Tanzania.

Rising to challenges

Despite Sanavita's success, its journey has not been without some challenges. The SME has struggled with insufficient supply of raw materials to match growing demand for its products. To counter this,

Sanavita has been recruiting more farmers under a contract farming system, while giving them competitive market rates for their produce.

Financial institutions can often be less supportive of women-led businesses, which Jolenta experienced when she tried to access credit facilities. From prohibitive interest rates to a request for collateral that she didn't have, it was an uphill task to secure financial support. She initially relied on her own savings, before using SUGECO's milling machines and laboratory services at a subsidised rate. This helped her grow the business until she was able to access formal financing.

When the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic first struck Tanzania, Sanavita lost wholesale buyers and schools, which were some of its largest customers. To insulate the business from the effects of the pandemic, the company began targeting customers on social media platforms, including Facebook and WhatsApp groups, and making deliveries to local shops and homes.

A bright future

- Moving forward, Sanavita aims to strengthen its partnerships with actors in Tanzania who are implementing different nutrition programmes, among them Save the Children and the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN).

- Due to growing demand, Jolenta hopes that Sanavita will soon be able to expand operations to other major towns in Tanzania, including Arusha, Tanga and Kilimanjaro, and increase the range of biofortified foods it produces. Ultimately, the company is looking to venture into regional and export markets.

Jolenta's tips for success

Jolenta encourages entrepreneurs in the food sector to shape their businesses to respond to market needs, but also to change lives. She also advises investing to ensure products are of a high quality.

"Identify your niche, own your products, and find mentors who will support you in achieving your dreams," she says. "Having a mentor who works in your line of work is equally important, as they are able to guide you through the toughest hurdles, chief among them access to finance."

Jolenta believes in the power of numbers and encourages female entrepreneurs to form the networks that are pivotal in increasing access to finance. "Gaining exposure, through participating in various forums and interacting with other business people, especially entrepreneurs, can also help you learn how and where to access funding," she says.



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