

# Nurturing networks:

*building up Ethiopia's food system SMEs*



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*As Ethiopia looks to address the nutrition challenges it faces, the private sector is stepping up its resolve to make its contribution to this agenda. Since it was set up three years ago, the Scaling Up Nutrition Business Network (SBN), has been working to improve and strengthen the private sector's contribution towards improving nutrition in Ethiopia and ensuring nutritious foods are more accessible and affordable to all.*

Three years after the idea of convening private sector players in the nutrition sector was proposed, SBN Ethiopia now comprises 25 members drawn from various value chains. Officially launched in April 2021 by the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN), SBN Ethiopia's focus is on organising small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the food sector to improve the country's nutrition status and explore ways to assist these businesses in scaling up.

With Ethiopia relying on its [National Nutrition Plan](#) blueprint and [The Seqota Declaration](#) to tackle all forms of malnutrition by 2030, the government is enlisting the support of the private sector to help achieve this ambition. As such, SBN Ethiopia's work to create awareness among food system SMEs on their role in

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*"As we advocate for, mobilise, and support private sector commitments and investments in nutrition, we are keen to diversify membership of the network from gender, value chain, and regional perspectives to ensure that our nutrition agenda has everyone on board."*

Abenezer Feleke,  
Programme Lead, SBN Ethiopia

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addressing malnutrition is highly relevant. It is hoped they will be emboldened and encouraged to embrace innovations and technologies, like food fortification, to enhance the availability of affordable and nutritious foods for all.

The network also seeks to identify challenges faced by nutrition-led businesses, while pointing them to opportunities and providing guidance. "At SBN Ethiopia, we have created a platform where businesses can showcase products, interact and learn from each other, identify opportunities, and together work to find lasting solutions to the nutrition challenge," reveals Abenezer Feleke, Programme Lead.

## Strategies for success

Once the network's establishment was agreed upon, an expression of interest was sent to businesses in the food and nutrition sector. The first members to show enthusiasm were from dairy, oil, and coffee value chains.

Over the course of four months, the network held a consultative workshop with private sector representatives and a validation workshop on the draft strategy with stakeholders from the private sector, policymakers and government, before finally hosting a strategy launching workshop. These events highlighted pathways to grow the network and engage more partners, and the resulting three-year Strategic Plan serves as a roadmap identifying seven priority intervention areas that can influence business practices around nutrition. These areas were divided into core objectives, priority initiatives, key performance indicators, and bodies responsible for step-by-step implementation.

## Exciting new beginnings

The [launch event](#) for the network, held on 27 April 2021 in Addis Ababa, was attended



by 50 individuals from small- and medium-scale businesses, government, academia, and development agencies. In addition to introducing the network to the public and garnering support, the event helped increase awareness about the local members creating nutritional and affordable products. It was also used as a recruitment drive to grow SBN Ethiopia's membership.

"Prior to the event, we created social media platforms and a [website](#) that explained the benefits of joining the network, and invited businesses to the launch. These platforms also gave some existing members a chance to showcase their products," notes Abenezer. "Following the day, our membership grew by nearly half."

Abenezer also notes that the attendance of 15 media outlets, spread across TV, radio, and print, was key. "The enthusiasm exhibited by the media during the press conference shifted the conversation from the network itself to nutrition in Ethiopia and the need for dietary diversification; an issue that had greatly been missed in national debates. This coverage gave the conversation momentum and elicited more interest with businesses and government," he enthuses.

## Learning lessons from challenges

Amidst its successes, the network has also had to deal with setbacks. The COVID-19 situation meant meetings had to be done virtually and, with some members located in rural areas that lack connectivity, including everyone was exceedingly difficult. The network also had to cancel a series of physical events planned for members and partners. Meanwhile, members involved in the importation of raw materials were affected by the cancellation and disruptions of flights, which slowed their operations.



To help minimise the pandemic's impact, SBN Ethiopia collaborated with GAIN to provide a COVID-19 relief fund through the Keeping Food Markets Working Programme, to protect the businesses and sustain the supply chain at this critical time.

The pandemic wasn't the only challenge. The security situation in the northern region of Tigray, impacted by armed conflicts that began in 2020, equally disrupted network operations, as members in the region were unable to attend meetings and communication was cut from the area. The government's attention also shifted to managing the conflict, and most of the activities SBN Ethiopia had planned with officials were cancelled or postponed.

## Rewarding hard work and achievements

One of the network's key endeavours was organising the [first National SUN Pitch Competition in Ethiopia](#), led by GAIN and the United Nations World Food Programme, with support from Irish Aid.

The [competition](#) sought to identify innovative, nutrition-sensitive SMEs providing scalable, inspiring, disruptive, and investable solutions. A call for applications began in early June, and attracted over 20 entries which were narrowed down to five finalists. The finalists underwent a boot camp facilitated by the [Base of Pyramid Innovation Centre](#) (Bopinc), business support service experts and anchor partner for the National SUN Pitch Competition. The experts coached the finalists on business development, marketing, consumer profiling, investment readiness and how best to pitch to investors. On pitch day, the businesses were assessed by four judges based on business relevance, nutrition impact, financial viability, and overall business sustainability, to determine the top three winners, who were crowned on 28 June 2021. A USD 10,000 cash prize was shared between them.

The first-place winner was Muluken Anteneh from [Anjo-nus](#), a fruit and vegetable enterprise that processes nutritionally-rich foods from bananas, including flour. In addition to addressing nutrition challenges, the processing of bananas by Anjo-nus has helped reduce post-harvest losses and created a market for 150 Ethiopian farmers. He received USD 5,000 as a cash prize.

The first and second runner-ups were Selam Wondim of [Grohydro Manufacturing SC](#), a soilless farming equipment manufacturer, and Alem Greiling, the founder of Nutridense, which processes oats procured from farmers into a wide range of food products, respectively.

## A brighter future ahead

SBN Ethiopia aims to expand to over 250 members by 2023 and, to support this, is investing in marketing, and publicity campaigns across major cities including Addis Ababa, Mekelle, and Adama.

One such campaign was rolled out in major business districts to reach the small food and nutrition companies and entrepreneurs who operate there. These areas also have large populations that can be targeted at scale to enhance awareness of SBN Ethiopia's activities. The campaigns include information about the network, benefits to members, and details on how to join.

SBN recognises the importance of sustaining a relationship with the government and continuously advocating for positive change by facilitating more dialogues with officials and policymakers. Among other topics, these dialogues will cover enhancing food fortification standards, deepening partnerships through frequent public-private nutrition activities, and looking for solutions and opportunities around issues inhibiting the production and distribution of local high-priority and nutrient-rich foods. In addition to these dialogues, the network has plans for a major nutrition awareness campaign and further partnership meetings, which will include relevant government institutions in their efforts to improve nutrition across Ethiopia.



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