

# **SBN Ethiopia's strategic plan:**

*embracing public-private partnership for Ethiopian nutrition*



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*In their efforts to engage the private sector in the government's nutrition agenda, the Scaling Up Nutrition Business Network (SBN) in Ethiopia has been cultivating collaborations between enterprises working in the food system and the government officials responsible for the environment in which they operate. Through meetings, awareness campaigns, and a Strategic Plan, this teamwork is making strides in improving nutrition for all Ethiopians.*

Over the last decade, Ethiopia has made significant strides in tackling nutrition challenges. According to the United Nations Children's Fund, stunting reduced from 58% in 2000 to 38% in 2016, while the number of underweight children dropped from 41% to 23.6% within the same period. However, the country is still one of the highest contributors to the global burden of malnutrition, ranking fifth globally. Harnessing the unique skill set that exists within the private sector is emerging as a key strategy in the country's fight against malnutrition.

## **Government support to boost nutrition**

To bridge the gap between government and the private sector, SBN Ethiopia has facilitated dialogues and advocated for private sector inclusion in all matters related to improving food systems and access to safe nutritious foods in the country.

"Despite being the producers and suppliers of foods in Ethiopia, the private sector is largely excluded in the development of policies that govern food production. Small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Ethiopia do not have a problem running businesses. Instead, they have to grapple with numerous restrictive policies and the high cost of doing business, which inhibits them from scaling up. That prompted us to start

*"As a network, we are focusing on improving and strengthening the private sector's contribution towards improving nutrition in Ethiopia while collaborating with the government to provide a strong enabling environment for business investment in nutrition, to ensure that all people have access to good food and nutrition."*

Abenezer Feleke,  
Programme Lead, SBN Ethiopia

engaging the government," explains Abenezer Feleke, Programme Lead for SBN Ethiopia.

This engagement started in 2020, with a members' meeting convened by SBN Ethiopia to discuss with SMEs the challenges they were experiencing and potential opportunities for scaling up their operations and impact on nutrition.

Among the issues raised was a restrictive policy and regulatory regime that included prohibitive taxes – especially on imported ingredients for companies that provide fortified foods – and was slowing business growth. As nutrition is a matter of national importance, members believed tax relief could serve as an incentive for more businesses to invest in improving the nutritional quality of processed foods.

Consumer preference has also been a critical issue for businesses in Ethiopia, with the perception that imported products are of better quality serving as a limiting factor for local producers. They called for awareness campaigns aimed at consumers to highlight the need of

embracing locally-produced products, including pulses, oilseed, and fortified flour, that meet the nutrition threshold and support local businesses.

While SBN Ethiopia has been keen to promote locally-made, affordable, and nutritious foods, members highlighted the Ethiopian Standards Agency's (ESA) lack of specific standardisations on fortified products as making it difficult for businesses to operate within a uniform regulatory environment.

Members also raised concerns over their limited internal capacity and expertise, and requested training in areas such as marketing, commercialisation, quality control, and safety protocols. Such assistance would support them in enhancing their internal capacity and reaching a wider customer base.

## Partners in progress

Following these deliberations, SBN Ethiopia facilitated a public-private sector dialogue which brought together the SBN Focal Point, who works in the Ministry of Health; policymakers; Ministry of Trade and Industry officials; the Deputy Director General of the Food Beverage Pharmaceutical Industry Development Institute; and officials from the ESA, for a follow-up meeting. During this dialogue, the challenges that had been previously raised by SMEs were discussed. Among the meeting's positive outcomes was the partnership established between SBN Ethiopia and the ESA to develop a standard on fortified foods.

"To get the conversation with government officials going and have them attend these deliberations was tough, because they had not previously interacted with businesses in the food and nutrition sector. We are happy that we are now seeing a great deal of commitment by officials on issues we raised, and that they



are engaging with us and accommodating our recommendations. To have changed government mindset on involving the private sector in the nutrition agenda is quite a success on our end," enthuses Abenezer.

The meetings gave rise to seven key objectives that guide SBN Ethiopia's three-year Strategic Plan for engaging the private sector in nutrition. Each objective is geared towards tackling the challenges and concerns that members have raised, and include:

- Developing a strong SBN brand and membership
- Improving nutrition policies and regulations
- Increasing business engagement in the non-nutrition sector
- Growing nutrition partnerships
- Improving nutrition sensitivity along the agricultural value chain
- Increasing availability of fortified products and supplements
- Enhancing nutrition awareness and demand.

Each objective spells out specific activities to be implemented, who is to execute them, their duration, and key performance indicators.

For example, under the strategic objective on improving nutrition policies and regulations, SBN Ethiopia has set out initiatives geared towards providing input to government on behalf of the private sector and cultivating strategic relationships with key government departments.

Once completed, the strategy was endorsed in a follow-up workshop attended by government officials and a launch event. “Developing the national nutrition strategy was one of the most complex and challenging endeavours I have ever undertaken. A lot of work still needs to be done, and having SBN Ethiopia as one of the key actors is not just key, it is a necessity if we are going to really tackle the burden of malnutrition in this country,” says Mrs. Frealem Shibabaw, Founder of the Ethiopian School Meals Initiative, and State Minister of Peace.

## Tackling unforeseen challenges

Despite having a successful strategy to enlist government support for nutrition-led businesses, SBN Ethiopia still struggled to navigate the bureaucracy of government to ensure sustained interest in private sector engagement. “We needed to make sure that the people who would come on board were the right people to walk with us in this crucial journey, and the reputation that the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition has in matters of

nutrition and food systems played a key role in making that happen,” says Abenezer.

Even with these measures in place, the onset of COVID-19 posed further challenges as SBN Ethiopia was forced to work mostly virtually with government officials – something that often proved difficult due to connectivity problems.

## Solid strategies for success

As the network looks to continue solidifying its partnerships with government officials and advance the nutrition agenda, it sets timelines and goals for each of the objectives under the Strategic Plan. For example, under the Increase Nutrition Awareness and Demand objective, SBN hopes to have successfully rolled out, through partnerships, one major nutrition awareness campaign aimed at increasing the demand and consumption of nutritious foods by the end of 2021.

Abenezer says that, although it is too early to gauge the specific results of SBN Ethiopia’s interactions with the government as it is still a work in progress, he believes the enthusiasm exhibited by officials in their attendance of workshops and forums organised by SBN, frequent dialogues on implementing the Strategic Plan and nutrition agenda, and assistance provided to the network in growing its membership, is a sign of good things to come.



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