

Tea



Unilever's Seeds of Prosperity initiative

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Unilever has partnered with the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) and the Sustainable Trade Initiative (IDH) to set up Seeds of Prosperity: a series of interventions to improve health and nutrition of workers on tea estates that increase the demand for and access to healthy nutrition and to address nutrition-related health issues (such as handwashing). The initiative was implemented in cooperation with NGOs locally, such as Solidaridad and Dharma Life in India.



Scope

This case study spotlights a pilot initiative in Tamil Nadu, India, where 2,600 tea workers on four estates, supplying Unilever's tea business Ekaterra, were reached. The program now extends to the Assam region, where it aims to reach 110 estates and 165,000 workers. The model has also been replicated by other tea buyers in different countries, such as Tanzania, Kenya and Malawi.



Motivation

The first phase of the program (the pilot in Tamil Nadu) started in 2015 and ran until 2018. Initially, it was developed as a nine-week intervention. In the current (Assam) phase, which runs until 2023, the program has evolved to a year-long program to ensure sustainable behavior change. If funding is available beyond 2023, the program has the potential to be scaled up to cover another 150-200 tea estates in North India.



Timeline

Addressing malnutrition is a way for Unilever to strengthen the sustainability of the supply chain, by increasing productivity of tea estate workers and establishing loyalty with the tea communities and suppliers.



Impact

The pilot in Tamil Nadu has shown promising results, including an increase in the variety of foods consumed and the number of households growing their own vegetables. This has led to the program being scaled up to Assam and replicated in other countries.



Motivation

The Seeds of Prosperity program builds on Unilever's understanding that 'our families are our most important crop': better health outcomes for workers **increases productivity and loyalty, creating financial benefits and a sustainable supply chain.**

Tea is a commodity in high demand, estates can choose which buyer to sell to, increasing the need for buyer companies like Unilever to establish a good relationship with tea so estates. By supporting the health of their tea communities, the **support and trust of the tea suppliers** is gained, and loyalty increased.

As tea is a labour-intensive crop with handpicking resulting in higher quality products, keeping the workforce healthy is essential. Surveys conducted on the worksites found that malnutrition (particularly anaemia in women) was a greater problem among the tea workforce than in the general population. **High levels of malnutrition led to increased absenteeism, resulting in reduced productivity.** Prevention of malnutrition is therefore an important method to increase productivity of workers.

The project

Seeds of Prosperity was initiated by a partnership between Unilever, the [Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition \(GAIN\)](#)¹, and the [Sustainable Trade Initiative \(IDH\)](#)². Tamil Nadu in India was chosen as the site of the initial pilot for the interventions, because it is a progressive state with a high standard of education and health literacy, and a compact geographic area of tea operations suitable to test the model. After a successful pilot program co-created with [Solidaridad](#)³, the program was adapted for delivery in Assam, where estate workers are generally poorer and levels of literacy are lower. The program was designed to take into account differences in nutrition (for example, in the poorer Assam region, protein intake tends to be lower than in Tamil Nadu).

Women are the primary target for the programs, as they make up more than **60% of the workforce and are key to driving change.** The program seeks to **improve diets** through 1) increasing the demand for good nutrition, by building understanding of its importance for health and wellbeing, and 2) increasing the supply, by improving access to healthy food in the local community.

About Unilever



Unilever is one of the world's largest consumer goods companies, based in the UK, with a total of 149,000 employees. Its product divisions – available in over 190 countries – consist of beauty and personal care, foods and refreshments, and home care. The company had a turnover of €5.1 billion in 2020.

- **Demand for healthy food is increased** in several ways. Estate workers are selected to be 'master trainers', who are provided with training on why it is important to eat a diverse diet, what such a diet entails, and how estate workers and farmers can improve their diets – and they are then encouraged to pass on this learning to groups in their community. A variety of entertaining ways to raise awareness and educate the population about good nutrition have also been designed, with participation encouraged across the community. These include cooking demonstrations and competitions, street plays, nutrition games in school, wall painting and poster campaigns, and videos on nutrition.
- **Access to healthy food** is particularly important, as knowledge and awareness alone are not enough. Initiatives to increase access in Tamil Nadu included the establishment of community kitchen gardens and fruit orchards, encouraging food growing at home and increasing the supply of fruit and vegetables in local shops. The program also facilitated consumption of fortified products by working together with [Dharma Life](#), a local organisation that helps women become entrepreneurs. Women in the communities were trained and given access to fortified products. By selling these products in the tea community, they become social changemakers on the estate.

The initial Seeds of Prosperity program was designed as a nine-week model: five weeks on nutrition and four weeks on handwashing. However, this has since been extended to a year-long program, as a longer-term approach is more likely to lead to sustained behaviour change and new, healthier habits.

¹ The Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) is a Swiss-based foundation launched at the United Nations to tackle the human suffering caused by malnutrition.

² The Sustainable Trade Initiative (IDH) is an organization (foundation) that works with businesses, financiers, governments and civil society to realize sustainable trade in global value chains.

³ Solidaridad is an international civil society organization that aims to develop socially and ecologically sustainable supply chains where farmers and workers earn a living income, shape their own future, and produce in balance with nature.



Impact

Evaluation of the Tamil Nadu pilot clearly demonstrated **improvements in dietary diversity** (consumption of a greater variety of food groups and greater intake of essential micronutrients) and in tea-growers' **satisfaction with their employment**. The evaluation also made clear that **awareness of the importance of good nutrition** is not sufficient on its own: it must be accompanied by **improved access to healthy food**. Among the successes of the pilot are:

- Women who participated in the program reported a **41% increase in the variety of foods consumed**, almost double the 24% increase in women who were not part of the program. The number of households growing their own vegetables increased also increased by 41%.
- **78% of tea workers** who took part in the hygiene component of the program **wash their hands** before lunch, compared with 51% of growers who did not participate.
- **98%** of those taking part reported that the program made them **more likely to continue to work for the tea estate**.
- Anecdotal evidence suggests that the program **reduced absenteeism and health costs** to the workers, and increased loyalty, productivity, and pride in the program.
- Other businesses joined the company in their efforts (such as scale ups in other countries) which is itself a sign of the success of the project.

Long-term impact on the diet and health of the tea farmers has not been measured. The current phase of the program will continue until 2023 and will be evaluated after the completion of implementation.

Challenges and lessons learned

The Seeds of Prosperity interventions were well received by the estates for several reasons.

- The program was designed **not to interfere with activities on the estate** and was co-designed by the communities themselves in consultation with estate management.

More information and tools

GAIN, IDH and Unilever, The Seeds of Prosperity Program: Making Business Work for Nutrition, and Nutrition Work for Business

<https://www.idhsustainabletrade.com/uploaded/2017/01/Seeds-of-Prosperity.pdf>

IDH, Seeds of Prosperity video <https://www.idhsustainabletrade.com/initiative/seeds-prosperity-programme/>

NewForesight and GAIN, Making the Business Case: Tea Worker Nutrition Programmes

<https://nutritionconnect.org/sites/default/files/2019-12/Final%20tea%20study%20-%20GAIN%20and%20NewForesight.pdf>

Unilever, 'Why we're encouraging tea workers to eat more balanced diets' (blog, September 2020) <https://www.unilever.com/news/news-and-features/Feature-article/2020/why-were-encouraging-tea-workers-to-eat-more-balanced-diets.html>

- As tea estate workers are largely permanent workers living on the estate, estate owners are generally receptive to activities that benefit their workers and are looking for ways to support the community.
- After selling to Unilever for 30-40 years, there was **long-standing trust** between the estate and the company.
- Unilever funded the program, so the **suppliers did not have to invest** without an immediate return on their investment. Costs of sustainability programs can be reflected in retail prices, as consumers are willing to pay extra for premium products (tea), knowing that they are responsibly sourced.

The greatest challenge to date has been the **COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns**, which disrupted the on-the-ground implementation of the program just as the importance of good nutrition and handwashing became even more apparent. Restrictions on movement meant that face-to-face activities such as cooking demonstrations and counselling on nutrition were adapted to be provided digitally and, while there were some initial delivery challenges, these have since been welcomed – and have contributed to greater use and understanding of technology in local communities.

Ensuring long-term access to good nutrition was also challenging, so Unilever worked with a local social enterprise, Dharma Life, that trains women to become local entrepreneurs, trading products such as fortified oil and salt.

Next steps

The potential for scale-up is significant: using learning from the pilot project, GAIN now hopes to **replicate and scale up the project in tea-farming communities in Kenya and Malawi, potentially benefiting a further 300,000 people, and going beyond Unilever's tea estates**. The current implementation phase of the Unilever program is due to run until 2023, when a final evaluation will take place. If funding is secured beyond 2023, the project could be further extended to cover another 150–200 tea estates in northern India.

