



ACCESS TO
NUTRITION
INITIATIVE

Independent Review of ATNI

Access To Nutrition Initiative

Executive Summary

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Acknowledgements

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Steward Redqueen is responsible for all analysis and views expressed in this report. Views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the official views of ATNI, and recommendations were formulated as considerations by the authors.

We hope the report contributes to a better understanding of the role of benchmarking, ATNI's progress to date as well as achievements and the challenges faced. We hope it may lead to a further sharpening of ATNI's operations and approach to stimulate private sector companies to take responsibility and advance global nutrition and health challenges through corporate accountability and engagement.

Executive Summary

The Access to Nutrition Initiative (ATNI) is an independent non-profit organisation dedicated to driving change in the global nutrition landscape by tracking and assessing the food industry's attempts to tackle undernutrition, obesity and diet-related chronic diseases. ATNI does so through designing and delivering a range of accountability tools, research and engagement. ATNI is committed to continuously improving its own organisational performance and effectiveness by monitoring progress and by regularly undertaking independent, third-party evaluations. Through the evaluation ATNI wants to be accountable to donors, identify learnings and feed future strategic and operational decision-making.

Methodology

The evaluation follows a mixed-methods approach. It is based on an in-depth review of key documents, analysis of performance data, a survey among staff and deep-dive interviews with 52 key experts including senior management, staff, funding partners, investors, industry experts, civil society partners and food & beverage companies targeted by ATNI's accountability tools. Due to the restrictions resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic, the interviews were executed virtually, apart from one meeting with ATNI team members. The four different types of sources allowed for robust analysis and triangulation of all data, opinions, and findings.

Conclusions & learnings

Relevance

ATNI is the most in-depth corporate accountability mechanism for the private sector's role in global nutrition and health objectives (SDGs 2 and 3). ATNI influences the industries' contribution to address global nutrition and health challenges, by objectively assessing the food and beverages (F&B) industry in Global and Spotlight Country Nutrition Indexes, by developing new accountability tools and studies and by engaging directly and indirectly with leading companies. ATNI's rigorous analysis of public and non-public (under NDA) company data provides structured and in-depth insights in company performance on key areas relevant to achieving SDGs 2 and 3 as well as the WHO's Global Nutrition Targets 2025.

ATNI's focus is more relevant than ever as the devastating effects of malnutrition have only been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. What we eat matters as malnutrition in all its forms remains a leading cause for over 10 million deaths and 250 million disability-adjusted life years. Overweight and obesity affects one in three people globally, while close to 700 million people are considered undernourished. People with obesity are more likely to experience severe outcomes from COVID-19, while the economic effects of the pandemic are pushing more people into extreme poverty and the lockdown and supply-chain issues have negatively impacted food fortification and nutrition services for children. ATNI aims to encourage companies both to increase access to healthy products and to responsibly exercise their influence on consumers' choice and behaviour, working towards less hunger and better and more affordable healthy food for all.

ATNI gradually expanded its products, adding expertise but also putting a strain on the organisation.

Over time ATNI has grown step-by-step to a current mix of activities and products structured in four strategic pillars. The first pillar at the core of ATNI activities since the establishment of the organisation, concerns the global indexes and tools, including ATNI's flagship product the Global Index as well as the highly specialised benchmark on breast milk substitutes (BMS). Since 2015, a second pillar was added with country initiatives, including Spotlight Indexes in India and the US, focused country studies on BMS marketing and a Retailer Index in the United Kingdom. Since 2019, a third pillar was added, to focus on the development of monitoring tools for third parties, providing data on issues like WHO targets or responsible lobbying. The fourth pillar, put in place in 2019, concerns bespoke action research, such as the Covid-19 project. These four pillars are

underpinned by active engagement. The growth and high number of quality reports that are valued and appreciated for their quality and relevance are a remarkable achievement, especially when taking into account the relatively small team and the constraints of the Covid-19 pandemic over the last two years. While all activities are relevant and fit ATNI's mission, there are however also signals from the team that ATNI may have taken on too much, which resulted in perceived high work pressure. Moving forward, ATNI will have to be more critical on what its core business is, requiring more structured analysis and conscious decision-making on what to take on to better manage workload, to maintain staff satisfaction and maintain the quality of its products.

Coherence

In a polarised sector, ATNI forms a bridge between public, civil society and private actors. ATNI's role is specifically important because in the food and beverages industry, probably more than in any other economic sector, there are strong (differing) opinions between global public health and civil society actors on the one hand and private sector companies on the other hand. In this charged environment, ATNI occupies an important bridging role whilst maintaining its all-important reputation for independence. ATNI has been able to build trust and is recognised by both sides of the aisle as an independent and credible expert organisation. It has been recognised as such in many international platforms like Nutrition for Growth, (N4G), the BMS Call to Action, or the WHO monitoring of business commitments. From this position, ATNI can translate public nutrition and health regulation and standards into methodologies and accountability tools and include actionable recommendations that are welcomed by companies. In doing so, ATNI enables accountability and fosters dialogue around contentious issues, such as BMS. In addition, ATNI has over the last few years also managed to raise interest, assemble, and leverage a growing group of investors to use its results in engaging with companies.

ATNI's single sector focus, scope and in-depth approach make the organisation unique and complementary to others but also vulnerable. The corporate accountability space is evolving quickly and in the past few years new initiatives have been launched. In this landscape, the World Benchmarking Alliance and its Food & Agriculture Benchmark is the most direct new peer. In this dynamic playing field ATNI remains unique and complementary to others mostly due to its expertise, the depth of its research and products, the combination of a global perspective with country-specific perspectives, its strong reputation and its growing investor base. This is recognised by stakeholders and by donors alike. ATNI has been consistently supported by leading donors such as FCDO, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and several additional public entities and philanthropic foundations. In its review, core funder FCDO rated ATNI A++, which represents the highest possible performance rating. However, paradoxically, ATNI's strengths and unique focus also make it more challenging for the organisation to attract core funding. Because of the specialised focus on nutrition challenges (both malnutrition and obesity) without specific geographic priority, it has turned out to be challenging to pursue further budgetary growth as some donors are (increasingly) specific in their funding mandates and priorities. At the same time, there is room for ATNI to translate the strengths and nutrition focus into (geographic) priorities that may suit ODA donors and explore more opportunities with other donors interested in the nutrition space.

Effectiveness

ATNI has delivered in-depth, action-oriented products that are considered credible by companies. Over the eight years of its existence, ATNI has produced indexes, tools and research that have generally been perceived as solid in-depth analysis by companies. Throughout the years, the number of companies targeted by the Global Index that are actively providing data and engaging with ATNI in developing indexes has fluctuated between 72% and 77%, but the level of intensity of engagement among these companies has increased. The improved traction gained of ATNI products is evidenced by the increase in follow-up meetings

between ATNI staff and various relevant departments within companies to discuss action-oriented recommendations for performance enhancements, including at Board level for some companies. In the few months after the launch of the recent Global Index 2021 in July up to October, ATNI has had 20 calls with 18 companies on results (15 on the Global Index and 5 BMS), and another 11 calls were organised by investor stakeholders. In this short period, the results have moved up to Board level for four companies.

ATNI has a growing network of influential stakeholders that use ATNI's products to catalyse change - and this could be leveraged further. ATNI's products as a whole or underlying data are used by a variety of influential stakeholders in the food and beverages sector. These stakeholders include UN agencies such as WHO, UNICEF or the WFP, civil society organisations such as ShareAction or Save the Children, peers such as the FTSE Russel and the World Benchmarking Alliance, and a coalition of investors. Through the cooperation with these influential stakeholders ATNI has created a powerful multiplier effect for its products, which has potential to be further strengthened.

Particularly the investor group has proven to be an effective entry point and lever to generate change at companies. The ATNI investor coalition has grown to a current 75 investor signatories with USD 16.6 trillion asset under management (AUM). ATNI developed and launched a password-protected investor portal, a unique nutrition and finance resource hub, on its website in January 2021. Several groups of investors have engaged with companies based on the 2018 and 2021 Global Index results and recommendations, for which 32 investors specifically reference the use in investment analysis and engagement. After the 2018 Global Index, investor coalition members made 95 'asks' to 18 companies including 39 focused on products. In the engagement process, ATNI has been able to activate non-engaging companies with the support of investors (e.g. UBS was able to generate a dialogue with China Mengniu). The work with investors goes beyond the Global Index, as exemplified by the shareholder resolution put forward to Tesco based on the UK Retailers Index, or ATNI's coordinating role in the Investors' Pledge for Nutrition 4 Growth Summit, which was the first time institutional investors were mobilised for a multilateral nutrition summit. As shareholders in companies, investors have unique leverage and ATNI could focus even more on broadening and further activating the investor coalition.

The Global Index is a powerful tool but could be better communicated, streamlined, and used in smarter ways. ATNI still is most known for its flagship product, the Global Index and the BMS supplement. A significant number of staff hours and external support is required from ATNI's budget for its development, with a resulting product that is well respected in the sector. At the same time, it can be questioned whether for the Global Index in its current form there is the right balance between the level of effort invested and the results generated. On the one side of the level of efforts, this is because of the intense and lengthy data collection process, the in-depth analysis and the detailed writing-up of results and recommendations. On the side of the results, the potential impact of the Global Index may be eroded by the choice for key messages, which now highlight the incremental progress. Moreover, there is room for ATNI to further strengthen its understanding of how processes work within companies, in order to formulate recommendations that make business sense and are more likely to be picked up, addressed and implemented.

Efficiency

ATNI has gradually delivered on an increasing number of quality projects at a decreasing average cost per project. ATNI has been able to increase its level of activities from one single project per year at its establishment up to more than ten parallel active projects in the latest years. The size of the team reflects this increased activity as it has grown from 1 up to the current 15 FTEs, with a ratio FTE/active project oscillating between 0.9 and 1.3 FTE. ATNI has become more cost efficient over time by streamlining processes and leveraging its experience, as the average expenditure per project in 2019/2020 was halved compared to 2015/2016.

Different projects offer different levels of scaling potential. Global indexes and tools as well as country indexes have a high potential for streamlining processes and scaling up results as they do not require the development of a new methodological approach at every iteration – although adapting the methodology to new insights does require time and consideration of indicators and the scoring algorithm. On the other hand, specific tools developed for third parties and action research for third parties may not offer the same replication and scaling potential and may include one-off efforts, particularly in the case of action research. While these are certainly helpful to attract additional funding and help ATNI build and maintain a strong expert reputation in the market, ATNI is encouraged to carefully consider whether these are worth undertaking.

Impact

There is ample evidence of change at companies where ATNI contributed that translates into positive impact. ATNI has contributed to change at companies in various ways and levels of intensity. It has contributed by flagging areas of improvements and providing concrete recommendations. The success of ATNI's efforts to influence companies is visible in the increased scores of companies in the Global Index from 2013 to 2016 to 2018 and 2021, exemplified by the fact that the average overall Global Index score increasing from 2.5 in 2016 to 3.3 in 2021, and the average BMS score increased from 20% in 2016 to 25% in 2021. Underneath these increase in scores are for instance strengthened nutrition policies and management systems, improved healthiness of products at portfolio level, more responsible product labelling and marketing, commitments to follow international guidance on food fortification, disclosure of lobbying positions on important nutrition topics, or commitments of supporting governments in their efforts to prevent and address malnutrition. These practices at companies in turn result in healthier product offering to consumers, opportunities for more conscious decision-making on what to buy, less perverse targeting of vulnerable groups, and more interest in public-private partnerships to solve nutrition-related challenges.

ATNI is encouraged to enhance structural results monitoring to better track change at companies and translate these into positive impact effects. Despite the examples, ATNI has not sufficiently tracked how companies have picked up on recommendations and engagement by ATNI and investors to change practices. ATNI could invest in a monitoring system where it tracks the (lack of) progress of companies on an continuous basis after the launch of an Index or Spotlight. ATNI is also encouraged to better research and consistently identify the linkages between changes in company practices and the subsequent change on the level of society or individual peoples' lives (even if theoretical), which until now has been absent or anecdotal. Stakeholders and donors demand a clearer impact vision, more evidence and thus a more substantiated narrative on how ATNI meets its mission.

Sustainability

The change generated at companies over the past eight years and their positive impact on health and nutrition are permanent. The long-term presence and reputation of ATNI is conducive to generating change in the field of nutrition within the food and beverages industry, which according to many interviewed stakeholders can be characterised as conservative, polarised and slowly changing. Despite this relatively slow pace of progress, the change generated at companies is permanent. The generated change at companies in turn has positive sustainable impact effects on consumers in the form of more healthy, affordable and balanced diets, including more vulnerable populations.

At present ATNI is in a crucial phase of its development where challenges require concerted efforts by the organisation and Board. ATNI is in an important phase, as the succession of the current executive director and fundraising require action from senior management and a strong guiding role and support from the Board.

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