



Child Health Needs Markets Too

What Healthy Village Ethiopia learned about local entrepreneurs in WASH and nutrition.



Improving child health is often seen as a matter of services: counselling, awareness raising, health extension, community mobilisation and public programmes. These are essential. Families need trusted information, repeated support and strong public systems around them.

But through our work in Ethiopia, we have also learned that awareness alone is not enough.

Many behaviours that support child health depend on products and services that families must be able to access in daily life. A caregiver may understand the importance of diverse diets, but still needs access to vegetables, seeds, fortified flour, poultry or eggs. A family may be motivated to improve sanitation, but still needs affordable latrine materials and sanitation services. A girl may learn about menstrual hygiene, but still needs access to safe and affordable menstrual products.

Child health systems do not only need strong public services. They also need functioning local markets that make health-enabling products and services available, affordable and trusted.



From awareness to access

In WASH and nutrition programmes, behaviour change is often approached as a knowledge gap. But many recommended behaviours are also access questions. Families can only act on advice if the products and services behind that advice are within reach.

This does not mean that government or NGOs should provide everything directly — something that is often done. In many cases, that would not be realistic or sustainable. It means that behaviour change and market access need to be understood together. Government and community platforms can create awareness, trust and demand. Local entrepreneurs can help turn that demand into access.



The role of local entrepreneurs

Micro and small enterprises, agro-dealers, sanitation entrepreneurs and nutrition-related businesses can play an important role in making WASH and nutrition products and services available close to communities. Entrepreneurs may produce or sell fortified flour, latrine slabs, reusable sanitary pads, improved stoves, handwashing facilities or agricultural inputs. These are not just commercial products — they are practical tools that allow families to improve nutrition, hygiene and sanitation at home.

Local entrepreneurs often understand the preferences, constraints and purchasing realities of their communities well. In rural or fragile settings, where formal supply chains may be weak, they can provide flexible and locally adapted solutions.



A local shopkeeper sells nutritious porridge(Mitin) to families in her community.



A sanitation entrepreneur displays latrine materials and tools at his shop.

📍 Asefu Gesesew · Tigray

FIELD STORY

Asefu provides Mitin in the Tigray region. When there is no cash to purchase products, she offers barter trade instead — exchanging a kilo of Mitin for two kilos of wheat.

Selling Mitin has lifted Asefu out of poverty, providing not only a livelihood but also improving her own health and her family's diet, and easing the psychological stress of relying on an unpredictable income. Yet despite her confidence that she could repay a loan and expand, she does not have sufficient collateral to access the financing needed to take that next step.

Women entrepreneurs are especially important. Many WASH and nutrition-related enterprises are led by women, creating opportunities not only for improved access to products, but also for income, confidence and leadership. At the same time, women entrepreneurs often face additional barriers, including unpaid care responsibilities, limited mobility, lack of collateral and limited recognition as business actors.



AN OPPORTUNITY AND A RESPONSIBILITY

If local entrepreneurs are expected to support child health, the systems around them must also support their growth.



Entrepreneurs in fragile and conflict-affected settings

In fragile and conflict-affected areas, the role of local entrepreneurs becomes even more important — but also more difficult. Conflict can disrupt transport routes, damage infrastructure, reduce household purchasing power and make it harder for entrepreneurs to access raw materials, equipment and finance.

At the same time, they may be among the first actors to help restore access to essential goods and services. Entrepreneurs who remain active can provide practical, locally adapted solutions when formal supply chains are weak. In some cases, women entrepreneurs also take on stronger provider roles when men are displaced, migrating or less able to participate in local markets.



Semaynesh, Amhara. The conflict has lost her customers, as she cannot travel to get the right inputs to produce and sell Mitin. She supplements her income by trading fruits and vegetables and joining savings groups as a financial backup.

This shows both the potential and the vulnerability of local entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurs can contribute to community resilience, but they cannot carry this role alone. In fragile settings especially, they need stronger links to finance, inputs, transport, quality assurance, public institutions and community platforms. For WASH and nutrition programming, this means local markets should be part of resilience thinking.



What we tried and what we learned

Within the Healthy Village Programme, we worked with local entrepreneurs through training, direct engagement and links with community structures such as Village Economic and Social Association (VESA) groups. This helped make the role of local market actors more visible within a programme focused on child health, WASH and nutrition.

At community level, VESA groups may offer an important entry point. They can support savings habits, peer learning, trust, small-scale loans and links between entrepreneurs and households. They may also help position entrepreneurs within existing community platforms where WASH and nutrition behaviours are discussed and promoted.

At the same time, VESA groups should not be expected to solve all business constraints. Wider evidence on savings groups suggests they can support household resilience and small-scale economic activity, but are usually not sufficient on their own for enterprise growth. Entrepreneurs who want to expand often need larger and more reliable capital, access to inputs, equipment, workspace, transport, quality assurance and stronger market linkages.

Our learning is therefore not that entrepreneurs only need to be trained or linked to community groups. The bigger lesson is that entrepreneurs need a stronger system around them. An entrepreneur may have motivation, ideas, community trust and basic skills, but still struggle if finance is unavailable, inputs are too expensive, transport is unreliable, quality standards are unclear, demand is weak, or licensing and taxation procedures are difficult.



THE QUESTION BECOMES

How can government, finance institutions, training providers, input suppliers, extension services, cooperatives, NGOs and community platforms work together so that local entrepreneurs become reliable suppliers of WASH and nutrition products and services?



The system around entrepreneurs needs strengthening

A useful way to understand this is through a market system lens:



Our learning is that the challenge is not only located with entrepreneurs themselves. Both the support layer and the enabling environment are often not functioning well enough. Even though limited working capital is one of the primary challenges entrepreneurs face, banks have a limited presence in conflict-affected regions such as Amhara and Tigray because of the heightened risks of operating there.

Market System Development approach: entrepreneurs sit at the centre, surrounded by support actors and the wider enabling environment.



Frehiwet Redae, Tigray. A lack of adequate workplace and reliable electricity is one of the challenges to scaling up. Yet she continues to adapt — sealing her products with candlelight during power outages.



Lamesgen Mekuriaw, Amhara. An agro-dealer running a larger operation distributing animal feed and day-old chicks, falling under a higher taxpayer bracket has brought complex legal duties with little commensurate support from government.

Support actors may not be able to provide the services entrepreneurs need. Finance may be unavailable or unsuitable for small and women-led businesses. TVETs may offer training not linked to real market opportunities. Input suppliers may be unreliable or expensive. Transport may be difficult. Extension services and cooperatives may not yet see entrepreneurs as part of the WASH and nutrition system.

At the same time, the enabling environment is not yet sufficiently supportive. Rules, quality standards, licensing procedures, taxation systems and coordination mechanisms do not always make it easy for entrepreneurs and support actors to work together. In Tigray, there is very little engagement by local government bodies, beyond allowing entrepreneurs to run their operations unlicensed. Government actors may recognise the importance of WASH and nutrition behaviours, but not yet fully see the private sector as part of the system that allows households to practise those behaviours.

This matters because entrepreneurs do not grow in isolation. If the support layer and enabling environment remain weak, entrepreneurs may continue to depend on project support and struggle to become sustainable suppliers of WASH and nutrition products and services.



What this means for government & NGOs

Government

Can create awareness and demand through health workers, schools and community platforms — while also supporting coordination, simplifying policies and procedures, assuring quality, and local planning that includes entrepreneurs.

NGOs

Can move beyond direct support to individual businesses and work as market system facilitators — connecting entrepreneurs with finance providers, TVETs, input suppliers, cooperatives, government offices and community structures, while identifying where the system is not yet functioning.

This does not mean commercialising child health. It means recognising that many essential WASH and nutrition products already move through local markets — and that these markets need to work better for low-income families.

Healthy Village Ethiopia

A new standard in WASH & nutrition solutions for healthier futures. A partnership of Max Foundation and Plan International, implemented with the Government of Ethiopia, ORDA and iDA.

