

# Social Entrepreneurship in Nutrition: Scaling Sustainable Business Models for Public Health Impact

Opeyemi Enitan Moses<sup>1</sup>

Publication Date: 2025/09/20

## Abstract

Malnutrition and nutrition-related illnesses continue to be significant public health concerns worldwide that need solutions beyond government and donor-funded initiatives. The article explores social entrepreneurship in nutrition as a novel approach combining business sustainability and public health impact. The paper examines the conceptual foundations of social-nutrition related enterprises that seek to improve nutrition while emphasizing their hybrid models that ensures a balance in financial sustainability with health-driven missions. Sustainable business models, inclusive value chains, and innovative financing mechanisms are identified as the key drivers of long-term success in social-nutrition enterprises. The study further highlights scaling pathways such as replication, partnerships, and policy integration that enable nutrition enterprises to extend their reach and systemic influence. Case studies, including Kuli Kuli's moringa-based model and Kuli-kuli (groundnut cake) community-level enterprises common in most areas in Nigeria, both demonstrate practical strategies for linking livelihoods with improved nutrition outcomes. While financial sustainability challenges, regulatory challenges, cultural resistance, and lack of infrastructure still remain, enabling policies and cross-sector collaborations are seen to strengthen the ecosystem for growth. In terms of future directions, new technologies, digital platforms, and systems-level collaboration offer new opportunities for scaling impact. The article concludes that social entrepreneurship in nutrition holds tremendous potential to advance the Sustainable Development Goals of zero hunger and good health and thus a central path to sustainable public health transformation.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Malnourishment and diet-related diseases remain top as some of the most pressing public health challenges of the 21st century. Global reports continue to highlight the double burden of under-nutrition and obesity, which disproportionately affects low-income groups and strains the healthcare system (Drewnowski & Darmon, 2021). It requires not only government intervention but also innovative and sustainable solutions that combine business acumen with social goals.

Social entrepreneurship has also played a crucial role in this regard, providing nutrition enterprises that are both socially motivated and financially sustainable for the entrepreneurs and their businesses. Unlike charitable interventions based on aid, social enterprises insert sustainability into their activities, as this will ensure they can offer long-term low-cost and healthy food products and services. This transformation is inherent to public health since it reduces dependence on aid and encourages locally driven solutions (Bocken et al., 2014).

## II. CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS OF SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN NUTRITION

Social entrepreneurship in nutrition involves the creation and expansion of businesses that contribute as much to nutrition as possible but are profitable. As opposed to conventional business operations with barely any component of profit, nutrition-based social enterprises commonly follow hybrid forms where profit is reinvested in taking health-oriented agendas forward (Jenkins & Ishikawa, 2010).

Inclusive business models, for example, introduction of small commercial farmers and poor producers into nutrition value chains, generating livelihoods alongside improved access to nutritious food (Vellema & Ton, 2017). Mainstream market approaches differ from such models in that they tackle root food system inequalities. Additionally, nutrition businesses create product innovations, e.g., fortified foods and low-cost dietary supplements and distribution innovations, e.g., mobile sellers and community kitchens. These innovations

aim to maximize reach and public health impact on a sustainable operation (Guarín et al., 2020).

Theoretically, the foundations therefore rest on three interconnected goals which are; achieving a social mission, assuring financial sustainability, and bringing about measurable changes in public health outcomes.

#### ➤ *Sustainable Business Models for Nutrition Enterprises*

Building sustainable business models is fundamental to ensuring that the nutrition-driven social enterprises survive while making long-term contributions to public health. Such models differ from conventional business models in that they feature social and environmental objectives in their value proposition. Sustainable business models, as defined by Bocken, et al, (2014), are those which create, deliver, and capture value for shareholders and society and the environment. In nutritional terms, that translates to companies producing food products and services that are accessible and nutritionally beneficial, particularly for marginal groups.

One of the most important features of the sustainability of nutrition enterprise is generating revenue. USAID (2019) highlights that nutrition programs with innovative financing arrangements in place e.g., cross-subsidization, revolving funds, or private-sector partnerships will be more sustainable in the long term than donor-aid-dependent programs. For example, some enterprises sell high-end nutritional products to wealthier consumers and cross-subsidize low-end versions to poorer segments, gaining financial sustainability and greater access.

Besides, inclusive business models support sustainability by involving smallholder farmers and local food producers in supply chains, which not only supports livelihoods but also enhances access to nutritious food (Vellema & Ton, 2017). This systemic focus ensures that nutrition businesses effectively link economic empowerment with health effects, as evidenced by the interconnectivity of sustainable business models.

#### ➤ *Scaling Pathways for Nutrition-Based Social Enterprises*

Scaling is required for nutrition-focused social enterprises to achieve public health impact. Scaling in social entrepreneurship, as noted by Dees, et al, (2004), does not just mean organizational growth but also the replication, adaptation, and diffusion of innovation across settings. In nutrition, this may involve expanding fortified food distribution networks, duplicating community kitchen programs in new geographies, or leveraging technology to reach more populations.

Weber, Kröger, and Lambrich (2012) identify partnership as one of the scalars. Governments, NGOs, and private sectors typically provide nutrition businesses with distribution networks, policy leverage, and finance that enable them to scale beyond pilots. Jenkins and Ishikawa (2010) also explain how the development of sustainable business models out of "base of the pyramid" markets

enables social enterprises to reach low-income consumers at scale effectively.

Evidence from cases suggests that growth of nutrition businesses often entails both horizontal and vertical expansions. Horizontal growth aims at replicating models across geographic spaces, and vertical growth is institutionalized through the integration of successful approaches through policy harmonization and system implementation (Alter, 2007). Overall, these channels guarantee that innovations in nutrition entrepreneurship go beyond single interventions and result in systemic public health impacts.

### III. CASE STUDIES OF NUTRITION SOCIAL ENTERPRISES

Case studies illustrate how nutrition social enterprises operationalize theory and convey practical lessons regarding sustainable practice and measurable outcomes.

A notable example is Kuli Kuli, a U.S.-based company that utilizes moringa as a nutrient-dense superfood. By accessing moringa that comes from African and Latin American women-run cooperatives, Kuli Kuli empowers farmers with livelihoods while addressing global nutritional demands. Its dual business model combines for-profit sales in industrialized markets with social impacts in production communities, illustrating how nutrition companies can balance commercial success and health outcomes (Kuli Kuli Inc., 2015).

For Nigeria, small-scale businesses manufacturing kuli-kuli (groundnut cake) which is common in most part of the country show the localized strategies for nutrition entrepreneurship. Kuli-kiuli is one of the most affordable food in Nigeria and it is often used to complement other affordable food like garri (cassava flakes). Adeyeye et al. (2017) identified that kuli-kuli offers high protein and micronutrient intake, suggesting a culturally appropriate and low-cost nutrition intervention. Though frequently informal, these community-level enterprises show how indigenous foods can be monetized with sustainable social business models to fight malnutrition.

Community-based projects enter the scene as well. Sustain (2014) documents initiatives in the United Kingdom where food co-ops and community kitchens are operated as social enterprises. The structures improve nutrition access in low-resourced neighborhoods through reinvesting profits in health education, cooking classes, and food justice campaigns.

Together, these case studies demonstrate the adaptability of nutrition social enterprises in diverse cultural and economic environments, from small-scale operations in West Africa to global brands shipping to global markets.

### ➤ *Impact of Nutrition Social Enterprises on Public Health Outcomes*

The ultimate challenge of nutrition-social entrepreneurship lies in its ability to improve public health outcomes. It is clear that companies undertaking the sales of fortified foods, denser nutrient foods, and greater access to fresh fruits and vegetables have registered reductions in micronutrient deficiency and diet-related disorders among the desired populations (Drewnowski & Darmon, 2021).

Social impact is still hard to quantify, but numerous frameworks have been advanced. Weber et al. (2012) suggest that impact must be quantified through both health indicators (e.g., prevalence of anemia, growth in children) and social indicators (e.g., farmers' incomes, women's empowerment). For example, businesses involving smallholder farmers in supply chains not only expand access to food but also enhance indirectly health determinants by empowering household income and food availability (Guarín, Rivera, & Pinto, 2020).

Furthermore, scaling efforts have a multiplicative impact on public health. By moving out of small-scale levels and into larger networks backed by government and NGOs, enterprises contribute to the achievement of food environment shifts at the systems level. These include improved affordability of healthier foods, reduced consumption of low-nutrient processed food, and community resistance to nutrition-related health shocks (USAID, 2019).

Thus, nutrition social enterprises not only provide immediate access to healthier food but also give support to long-term structural changes in public health systems.

### ➤ *Challenges in Scaling Nutrition-Focused Social Enterprises*

While social entrepreneurship in nutrition is highly promising, scaling up such enterprises is often hampered by a number of challenges. Some of these challenges include:

- *Financial Sustainability:*

The majority of nutrition enterprises fail to effectively synchronize profitability and affordability, particularly when dealing with low-income populations. Without stable sources of revenue, they are susceptible to overreliance on subsidies or donor funding, which erodes long-term sustainability (USAID, 2019).

- *Policy and Regulatory Barriers:*

This also limits the expansion of nutrition enterprises. For example, small nutrition enterprises may face complex food safety rules, trade barriers, or red-tape licensing processes that smother innovation and growth (Alter, 2007).

- *Capital:*

Access to capital has been a long-standing barrier faced by entrepreneurs trying to execute nutrition enterprises. Traditional investors might view nutrition-focused social enterprises as risky due to their hybrid goals and relatively modest profit margins (Dees, Anderson, & Wei-Skillern, 2004).

- *Dietary Culture:*

Cultural and infrastructural factors make scaling yet more difficult. Habits and inclinations surrounding traditional diets are often deeply rooted in most areas and can prolong the acceptance and take-up of new products, even if they are nutritionally superior (Drewnowski & Darmon, 2021).

- *Poor Infrastructures:*

Infrastructural deficiencies like rural road networks, lack of cold storage facilities, or unreliable electricity boost costs and limit distribution reach. These together indicate that nutrition companies operate under conditions where business and public health risks are high.

### ➤ *Policy and Ecosystem Support for Nutrition Entrepreneurship*

Against the challenges, supportive policies and ecosystem structures are essential to enable nutrition-focused social enterprises to scale effectively. Governments can play a central role by integrating social enterprises into national nutrition strategies, providing subsidies or tax benefits for the production of nutrient-rich food, and creating facilitatory regulatory systems that meet food safety while facilitating innovation (European Commission, 2018).

Multilateral institutions and NGOs also strengthen the ecosystem through technical assistance, financing windows, and information-sharing mechanisms. Jenkins and Ishikawa (2010) recognize that inclusive business models thrive under cross-sectoral collaboration facilitated by government, corporations, and civil society actors aligning incentives for economic and social outcomes.

Partnerships are particularly useful for scale-up. Weber, et al, (2012) argue that cooperative strategies like co-branding with large food firms, employing public distribution networks, or cooperatives enhance market access and reduce operation risk. Similarly, Guarín, Rivera, and Pinto (2020) show that integrating enterprises into bigger food system strategies enhances sustainability and equity of nutrition access.

Lastly, policy ecosystems and enabling systems can transform nutrition social enterprises into major players in public health systems from tiny personal endeavors. Through the use of enabling regulation, strategic investment, and cross-sector coordination, actors are able to facilitate these enterprises in delivering sustainable solutions in nutrition at scale.

#### IV. FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR NUTRITION SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

The promise of nutrition-social entrepreneurship in the future is in harnessing innovation, technology, and systems-level cooperation to grow both reach and sustainability. Online platforms, for instance, are being used more and more to bring smallholder farmers closer to urban markets, cutting supply chain inefficiencies and expanding access to fresh, healthy food (Guarín, Rivera, & Pinto, 2020).

Emerging technologies also provide greater opportunities for scaling up impact. Artificial intelligence and machine learning are being researched to predict patterns of food demand, optimize logistics, and adapt nutrition interventions, especially in urban areas where dietary hazards are shifting at a rapid rate (Bocken et al., 2014). In addition, advances in food processing such as vegetable proteins and biofortification offer businesses new product possibilities that are sensitive to both nutrition and environmental sustainability goals (Drewnowski & Darmon, 2021).

A second important direction is the deepening of cross-sector partnerships. As Jenkins and Ishikawa (2010) note, inclusive business models work well when firms, governments, and social enterprises work together and exchange resources and capabilities. For nutrition entrepreneurship, this means partnerships that bring together agricultural development, public health interventions, and commercial distribution channels into combined approaches to addressing malnutrition.

In the future, social entrepreneurship in nutrition will have a great role to play in the success of Sustainable Development Goal No.2 (which is; Zero Hunger) and Sustainable Development Goal 3 (which is; Good Health and Well-being). Because it can prevent both diet-related diseases and food insecurity, it is an intervention essential to public health in the future.

#### V. CONCLUSION

Nutrition social entrepreneurship is a powerful paradigm shift in addressing international health issues. Combining business efficiency with a social goal, such businesses provide innovative, cost-effective, and sustainable solutions for diet-related diseases and malnutrition. Examples of Kuli Kuli and food enterprise businesses based at the community level suggest that social enterprises for nutrition possess the potential to create livelihood and improve public health results simultaneously (Kuli Kuli Inc., 2015; Sustain, 2014).

Various literatures suggests that sustainable business models that are based on financial sustainability and the values of inclusivity are crucial for long-term success (Bocken et al., 2014; Vellema & Ton, 2017). No less important are scaling-up plans that draw on growing impact beyond pilot projects through replication,

partnerships, and policy mainstreaming (Dees, et al, 2004; Weber, et al, 2012). However, financial instability, cultural barriers, and infrastructural shortfalls still remain as major issues (USAID, 2019).

Policy and ecosystem facilitation are therefore key to unleashing the potential of nutrition entrepreneurship. By building supportive regulatory environments, spurring innovation incentives, and facilitating multi-actor partnerships, governments and development partners can enable social enterprises to achieve systemic impact.

Ultimately, the future of nutrition social entrepreneurship is in its potential to innovate, adapt, and scale to work with evolving food systems. With robust ecosystems and global policies, these companies can be a game-changer to support global nutrition and public health.

#### REFERENCES

- [1]. Adeyeye, S. A. O., et al. (2017). *Evaluation of the nutritional quality of Kuli-kuli (peanut cake) from different processors in Nigeria*. Journal of Food Research, 6(3), 12–20.
- [2]. Alter, K. (2007). *Social enterprise typology: Considerations for scaling a social enterprise*. Virtue Ventures. Retrieved from <https://www.scribd.com/document/59008814/Social-Enterprise-Typology?utm>
- [3]. Bocken, N. M. P., et al, (2014). *Business models for sustainability*. Journal of Cleaner Production, 65, 42–56.
- [4]. Dees, J. G., Anderson, B. B., & Wei-Skillern, J. (2004). *Strategies for scaling up social impact*. Stanford Social Innovation Review.
- [5]. Drewnowski, A., & Darmon, N. (2021). *Public health nutrition and sustainability*. Public Health Nutrition, 24(3), 1–15.
- [6]. European Commission. (2018). *Actions between profit making and aid Improving social entrepreneurship for food security*. Retrieved from <https://nutritionconnect.org/resource-center/actions-between-profit-making-and-aid-improving-social-entrepreneurship-food?utm>
- [7]. Guarín, A., Rivera, M., & Pinto, Y. (2020). *How social enterprises contribute to alternative food systems: Case studies from Latin America*. Food Policy, 95, 101–120.
- [8]. Jenkins, B., & Ishikawa, E. (2010). *Scaling up inclusive business models: How sustainable business models can better serve the base of the pyramid*. International Finance Corporation & Harvard Kennedy School.
- [9]. Kuli Kuli Inc. (2015). *Operations plan: Scaling a moringa-based nutrition social enterprise*. Oakland, CA.
- [10]. Lyon, F., & Fernandez, H. (2012). *Built to scale: A comparative case analysis assessing how social enterprises scale*. Social Enterprise Journal, 8(1), 42–63.

- [11]. Sustain. (2014). *Good food for communities: Community food enterprises case studies*. London: Sustain. Retrieved from <https://www.sustainweb.org/good-food-enterprise/case-studies/?utm>
- [12]. USAID. (2019). *Sustainability and revenue generation in nutrition programs*. Washington, DC: U.S. Agency for International Development.
- [13]. Vellema, S., & Ton, G. (2017). *Unravelling inclusive business models for achieving food security*. NJAS: Wageningen Journal of Life Sciences, 83, 1–10.
- [14]. Weber, C., et al, (2012). *Scaling social impact; A framework for actors in social entrepreneurship*. Journal of Social Entrepreneurship, 3(2), 1–23.