

# ESTIMATING THE BUSINESS CASE TO INVEST IN WORKFORCE NUTRITION PROGRAMMES: LESSONS LEARNED

## BACKGROUND

Workforce Nutrition Programmes (WNPs) are workplace-based health and nutrition activities that are implemented by businesses. Especially in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), such interventions can address multiple forms of malnutrition—including undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies, and the increasingly prevalent overweight and obesity. This is particularly important as many blue-collar workers come from poor and marginalised backgrounds and spend a significant portion of their day at the workplace. While there is evidence to support that WNPs lead to improved nutrition among vulnerable workers, we do not know whether and how WNPs can contribute to business outcomes for implementing businesses.



To fill this gap, researchers at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS, UK) and Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) aimed to estimate the business case for workforce nutrition programmes (WNPs). Is there a compelling business case for implementing such programmes, offering improved returns for companies through increased productivity, reduced absenteeism, and enhanced employee well-being?

We share the prominent lessons that emerged from the study, for informing future research on this topic and advocating to put in place Workforce Nutrition Programmes.

## KEY LESSONS LEARNED

### Many pathways link WNP and business outcomes

A review of the existing literature shows that WNP generate six outcomes that contribute to benefits of implementing businesses:



#### Reduced healthcare costs:

In countries where employers bear healthcare and/or health insurance costs for employees (e.g. the USA), investing in the work force can reduce these costs.



#### Reduced absenteeism due to sickness:

Healthier workers are less likely to fall ill, thus minimising work disruptions and productivity losses due to absenteeism. This reduces costs associated with overtime payment, temporary recruitment, and permanent staff payroll expenses.



#### Reduced voluntary staff turnover:

WNP can help retain workers, thus reducing the costs of new recruitment and trainings.



#### Increased productivity:

Healthier workers are more focussed and efficient, thus enhancing productivity, increasing revenues and reducing staff numbers.



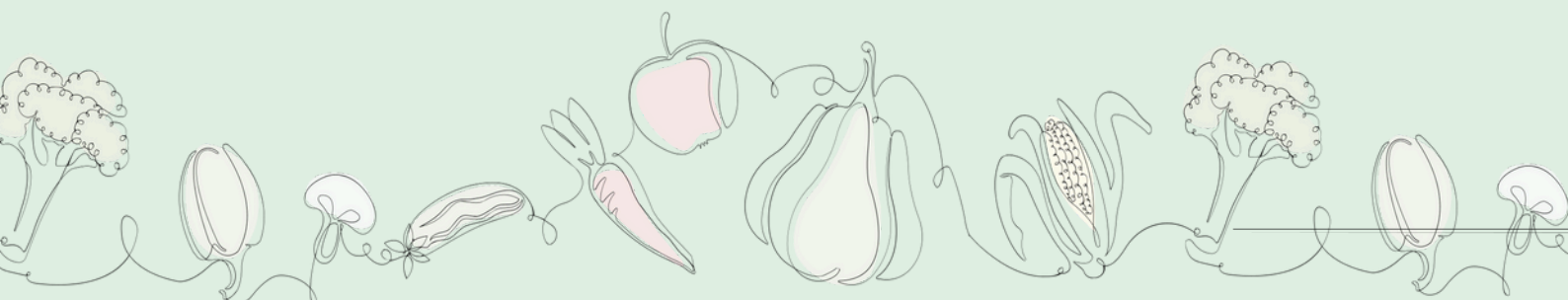
#### Increased employee satisfaction:

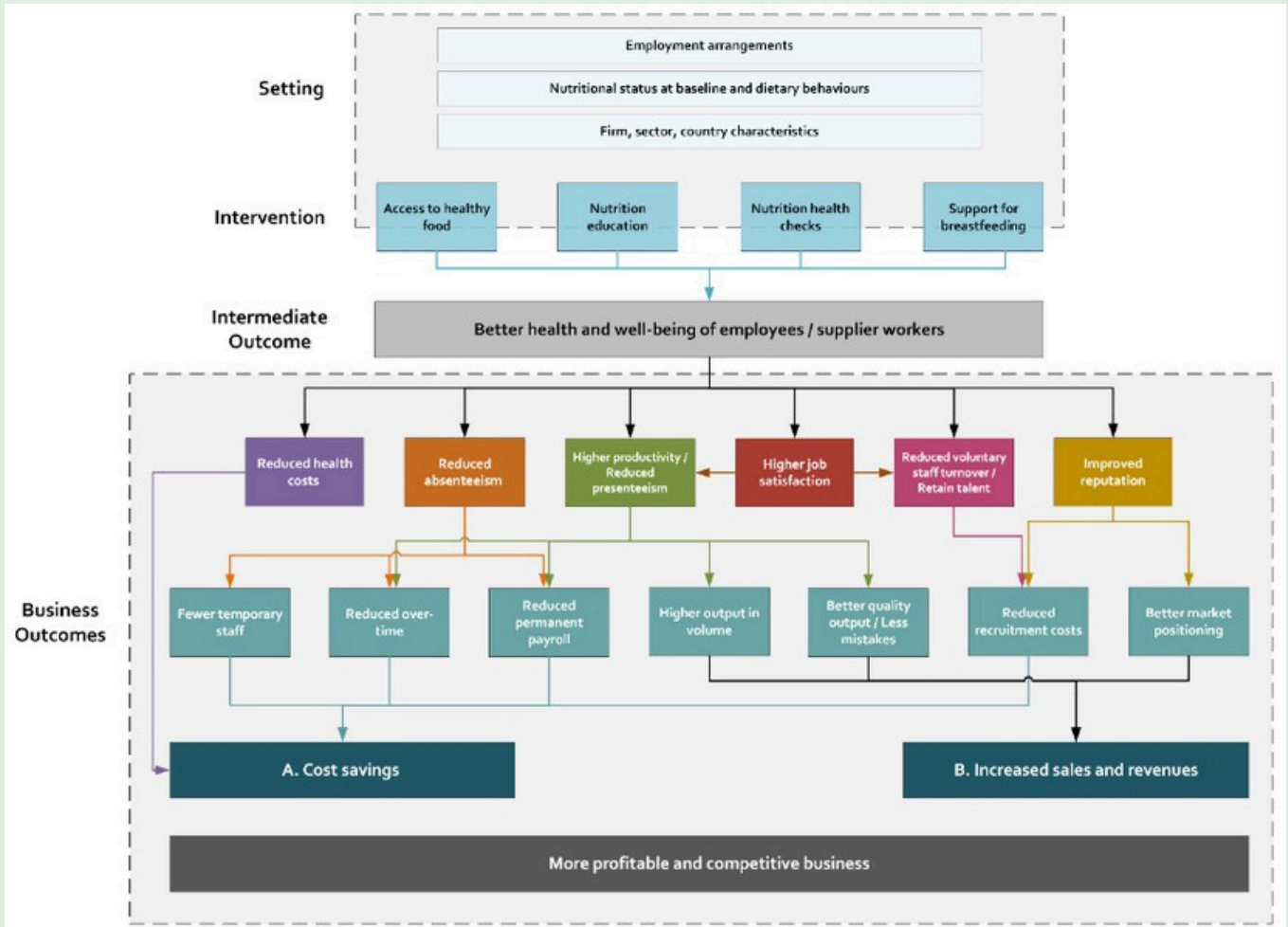
WNP can enhance employee satisfaction, leading to improved productivity, reduced voluntary redundancy, and reduced recruitment costs.



#### Improved company reputation:

Investing in employee health can strengthen the company's reputation, improving its market positioning and reducing recruitment costs.





**Figure 1** How Employee-centric Workforce Nutrition Programmes can benefit company bottom lines

The available evidence in the literature is, however, limited to high-income countries (HICs). As the business environment and nutrition-related priorities and challenges tend to be different between HICs and LMICs, experiences from HICs are unlikely to directly translate to LMICs.



## STRATEGIZING DATA COLLECTION

To explore the business case of WNPs in LMICs, GAIN and IDS partnered with a multinational company (MNC) operating across LMIC contexts. We worked closely with the company's Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) department, and administered a two-page quantitative questionnaire to individual branches, to gather information about their WNPs and business outcomes.

The response rate was poor and many branches did not provide figures on resulting employee productivity from putting in place Workforce Nutrition Programs, as they were considered to be sensitive information. As a result, the research teams of IDS and GAIN concluded it would not be possible in this case to collect monetary data from a sufficient number of companies that could reveal insights on business case of WNPs .

**Three key lessons emerged from our interaction with the company, to successfully estimate business benefits of WNPs.**

### 1. It is essential to get buy-in from the company, ideally at the senior management level

Each company/branch staff needs to be informed about the study prior to being approached by the research team, so as to see the value in participating in the research process. It is critical however to secure the support from senior management for internal coordination. Ideally, this would include securing the buy-in and support from senior management, and a mandate from them for respective business departments to engage in the study. Researchers will likely need a working partner from within the company; in larger MNC companies, the CSR department may be most appropriate as they are more overtly invested in promoting WNPs for staff well-being.

### 2. Data collection must be driven by and from companies

Data required to analyse the business case of WNPs involves multiple departments within a company, thus making data collection a complex and time-intensive process. Researchers typically also require access to data on employment and employee-related data – typically managed by Human Resource (HR) departments – as well as information on productivity and output – managed by Operations or Sales departments. Companies will thus require time to liaise internally to gather all requested information.

In engaging with companies, questionnaires and interviews need to be short and concise. A long questionnaire was perceived to be too burdensome by internal personnel.

### 3. Collecting business/productivity data from companies is sensitive, and not all worksites may participate

In order to estimate business benefits resulting from WNPs, researchers require a representative sample of companies, their branches or business units, including those with and without WNPs in place, to be able to provide information linked to WNPs as well as the related business outcomes – i.e. productivity, redundancy, absence, etc. This proved challenging as some of this data, particularly linked to employee productivity and product prices, were considered sensitive. Buy-in from senior management and/or support from internal personnel may mitigate this issue.

1. Only 19 out of 60 branches returned completed questionnaire.

2. To conduct econometric analysis, one would require a few hundred observations depending on the population of interest.

## QUANTIFYING BUSINESS OUTCOMES

In **Figure 1**, we observed that only Productivity and Voluntary redundancy could be quantified, as indicators like Employee satisfaction and Company reputation are less tangible to measure. Due to the difficulty in obtaining productivity-related data, our analysis focused on estimating Voluntary redundancy. **This indicator was calculated as:**

$$\text{Voluntary redundancy} = \frac{\text{\# of workers who voluntarily resigned}}{\text{Total full-time equivalent (FTE)}}$$

As seen above, we normalised Voluntary redundancy with the overall FTE to avoid penalising larger branches. While our study lacked long-term observations (less than a year time span ?), ideally future research would estimate excess redundancy by dividing this figure further by an Average voluntary redundancy over a long (5-10 years) period of time.

**Further, we calculated Economic loss from voluntary redundancy as follows:**

$$\text{Loss} = (\text{\# of workers who resigned}) * (\text{Recruitment costs})$$

As we were able to gather data across LMICs owing to the broad geographic coverage of the MNC company we partnered with, we converted different currencies used to the global standard of USD, while using the international currency converter (published by the World Bank). Due to data unavailability, we did not factor in Costs emerging from lost productivity (due to temporary loss in workforce).

For WNP implementation, we asked questions pertaining to its perception as well as actual costs associated with its implementation. Our experience was that actual costs more accurately reflected in the more mature WNPs.



## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCHERS

Based on our experience with one MNC company operating across LMICs, we make the following recommendations for researchers interested in further understanding the business case of WNP.

### 1. CONSIDER COLLECTING WORKER-LEVEL DATA OVER COMPANY-LEVEL DATA

Collecting business-related data, i.e. on productivity and costs, is challenging, as companies may consider such data to be sensitive to their business operations leading to their reluctance in sharing. It may be more realistic to engage with a small number of companies or company branches that are willing to invite a research team to collect worker-level data. Depending on the status of WNP implementation, researchers can organise the study in **two ways**.

**Option 1: Randomised Controlled Trial (RCT) Approach** Researchers may select one company and enable the benefits of a WNP to some of its employees, but not the others participating in the study. This will allow a randomised controlled trial (RCT) to take place at the workplace. This option works well if WNPs have not been implemented at the company, so the programme implementation can be closely controlled by the research team. On the contrary, an RCT will not work well if the intervention cannot be isolated to the 'treatment group' (e.g. if healthy food is provided through a common canteen, it may not be an isolated experience for those subjected to the study). This option will require a longer time frame – ideally a few years – to see the changes in employees' health and productivity. Key benefit of this approach is that it provides strong causal evidence on the impact of WNPs on employees' health, nutrition and productivity.

**Option 2: Quasi-experimental Approach** Researchers may select a few worksites, ideally in similar geographical and/or legislative contexts, half of which are already advanced in implementing WNPs and the other half not. This will allow a quasi-experimental approach and the research team will need to carefully control for location/business-specific factors that can influence business outcomes. This option will require less time than Option 1 as the research team does not set up the experiment themselves.

### 2. GATHER BROADER DATA ON THE COMPANIES

This includes gathering baseline data on key indicators (e.g. productivity, employee demographics, salary) before WNPs interventions are started. A perception survey with employees may be administered prior to conducting quantitative data to generate hypotheses.

### 3. AGREE ON RESPONSIBILITIES AND EXPECTATIONS WITH PARTICIPATING COMPANIES PRIOR TO THE RESEARCH

Researchers need to clearly communicate with the participating companies what the study entails, what their responsibilities are in contributing to the success of the study, and what departments within a company need to engage with the study. Estimating a business case will require cooperation from various company departments. Therefore, it is critical for you to clarify what is expected from each department and ensure buy-in for the study, prior to starting the research.

Also, it is critical to generate buy-in for the WNP study across the company, particularly from senior management. Communicate this need within the participating company, and specifically your colleagues in HR, your counterpart. Having the support from company's senior management will likely speed up the data collection process and improve the quality of data.

If you struggle to gather data even after careful planning, you can reach out to your counterpart and ask for their support. Internal personnel are key to facilitating data collection, and they will be able to help with, for instance, sending emails to other departments or key personnel that could support data collection.

## CONCLUSION




Workforce Nutrition Programmes (WNPs) present a promising and co-owned, pathway to improve employee health and nutrition while potentially delivering meaningful business benefits. This study explored the feasibility of estimating the business case for WNPs in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) and uncovered key insights for future research. Crucially, building strong partnerships with companies — especially securing senior management buy-in — is essential to navigate data collection challenges and ensure cross-departmental coordination.

While this study highlighted the complexity of quantifying the economic impact of WNPs, it also demonstrated that with the right partnerships, study designs, and clear expectations, it is possible to generate a financial business case in particular contexts. Moving forward, researchers and advocates must support businesses in understanding that investing in workforce nutrition is not just a social responsibility but can be a sound business strategy.

**Healthier Diets. For all.**

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