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SUMMARY BRIEF

Local Solutions to Improve Access to Nutritious and Safe Complementary Foods in Africa

Summary

- Food systems fail to meet the nutritional needs of 64 million African children aged 6-23 months, depriving them of nutritious and safe complementary foods¹ to grow and thrive.
- Locally produced complementary foods offer promise but also face [significant challenges and barriers](#)² in terms of raw materials sourcing, access to finance, infrastructure, technical capacity and business planning.
- A Regional Dialogue in December 2024 convened over 100 stakeholders from governments, private sector, technical agencies and financial institutions to identify solutions to the systemic barriers in the complementary food eco-system.
- The recommended priority actions reflect the urgency and complexity of the task ahead, and underscore the need for coordinated and collective action across countries in 5 key areas:



1

Strengthen knowledge and innovation in complementary foods



2

Strengthen and harmonize policy and regulatory frameworks



3

Mobilize financial and infrastructure resources for sustainable growth



4

Build technical and business capacity of local producers



5

Create demand and expand markets

¹ United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). Child Food Poverty: Nutrition Deprivation in Early Childhood. UNICEF; 2024.

² Micronutrient Forum. Barriers to Improving Access to Locally Produced Nutritious and Safe Complementary Foods in Low and Middle-Income Countries. Micronutrient Forum; 2024.

Introduction

Globally, food systems are not meeting the nutritional needs of young children, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). In Africa alone, nearly 64 million children live in severe food poverty^{1,3}, without adequate access to nutritious and safe complementary foods (CF). This deprivation not only undermines their survival but also stunts growth, cognitive development, and long-term economic potential. Locally produced, certified, nutritious and safe CF could be part of the solution to improve young child nutrition. However, local producers face significant systemic barriers², including sourcing quality raw materials to securing tailored financing and technical assistance, designing effective marketing and distribution strategies, as well as low consumer awareness and demand. As a result, they struggle to compete against imported products and achieve sustained market growth.

On 2-3 December 2024, a Regional Dialogue on **'Improving Access to Locally Produced Nutritious and Safe Complementary Foods in Low- and Middle-Income Countries'** convened over 100 stakeholders from governments, the private and public sectors, technical agencies and financial institutions. Representatives from 16 African⁴ countries came together to discuss and identify solutions to systemic barriers to the local production of CF which are nutritious and safe. This meeting was co-hosted by the European Commission, Micronutrient Forum, the World Food Program, in close collaboration with its partners.



³ Severe food poverty is defined by UNICEF as being fed 2 or less food groups per day out of the 8 defined food groups.

⁴ Stakeholders representing 16 African countries (alphabetical order): Bénin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Madagascar, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Togo.



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Collective and coordinated action for a stronger complementary food ecosystem

Creating a resilient CF ecosystem requires collective action by all: governments, technical agencies, development partners, private sector, and financial institutions. Investing in shared resources, knowledge and infrastructure is required to accelerate access to safe and nutritious CFs. Existing collaborative platforms and knowledge organizations can amplify impact by offering easy, centralized, access to information, evidence, experiences, and capacity strengthening opportunities, while convening diverse stakeholders to facilitate collaboration and policy alignment. Regular multi-stakeholder forums further unite efforts, creating synergies needed to transform food systems and deliver sustainable, equitable solutions to reach the most vulnerable populations.

Localized solutions for sustainable impact

Achieving lasting impact requires long-term planning, structured follow-up, and systematic knowledge transfer that empowers local actors to tailor solutions to their unique contexts. In-depth analysis of existing approaches – including their scope, strengths, and limitations – is a crucial first step toward designing impactful, sustainable strategies. Local players are best positioned to lead this long-term planning, design and implementation of impactful and sustainable strategies.

The Coalition of the African Local Producers of Complementary Foods, formed during the Regional Dialogue, marks a pivotal first step towards a future where every child has access to safe, nutritious complementary foods. The commitment to act together, across sectors and borders, will define progress in creating a healthier and more equitable future.

Insights and opportunities

Meeting discussions revealed valuable insights and led to the identification of opportunities for action to overcome existing challenges and enhance access to locally produced, nutritious and safe CF across Africa.

Wealth of local knowledge exists, but much remains undocumented

The Regional Dialogue underscored the wealth of knowledge and best practices in tackling systemic barriers in the CF ecosystem across Africa. These locally driven approaches hold transformative potential, yet much of this valuable information, particularly case studies on innovative route-to-market strategies and successful business cases, remains undocumented and inaccessible, or siloed, limiting its ability to inspire replication and scale impact. While current platforms, such as the SUN Business Network (SBN), provide valuable technical resources and stakeholder networks, there is an urgent need for robust documentation and communication, centralized access to knowledge resources, and systematic dissemination of insights and lessons learned.

Existing regulations offer a foundation, but remain fragmented

Inconsistencies exist in regional and international product standards across countries, regulatory enforcement capacity is limited, and guidance on what constitutes a nutritious and safe CF and what is appropriate promotion remains unclear. This leaves local producers confused about compliance, complicates cross-border trade, and ultimately undermines consumer trust. For example, the ECOWAS initiative to harmonize CF standards for products like infant flours, snacks, purees, and meals is a promising step and should be fast-tracked. By streamlining standards and strengthening regulatory systems, countries can create a level playing field, open up regional trade, and increase consumer confidence in locally produced CF.

Local producers need financing, but sector-specific solutions are scarce

Local production of nutritious and safe CF requires significant investments, especially to meet the quality standards and overcome weak public infrastructure (such as roads, electricity).

However, the financial sector does not fully grasp the unique needs and social impact of CF and food processing sector in general, and currently lacks tailored products for it. Meanwhile, local producers often remain unaware of existing funding opportunities or find it hard to meet the investment requirements. By working more closely together, financial institutions, technical agencies and producers can bridge this gap, leading to the development of more tailored financing solutions and enabling necessary investments in collective infrastructure.

Technical assistance and resources are available, but underused

Limited technical expertise, inadequate infrastructure, production inefficiencies and weak business planning, constitute challenges along the entire CF value chain in supplying consistent, high-quality, nutritious and safe CF. Vocational training programs rarely cover sector-specific topics such as food production and food safety while capacity strengthening services provided by agencies such as GRET and Technoserve, are frequently underutilized due to limited awareness. Local producers requested improved access to existing resources, trainings tailored to their needs, and stronger regional coordination.

Limited awareness on CF benefits constrains demand for local products

Limited consumer awareness of nutritious foods, combined with intense competition from multinational brands, limits market development for locally produced CF. Public health campaigns tend to emphasize home-prepared meals for child feeding, leaving local producers with the challenge of showcasing the nutritional benefits of formulated CF. Closer alignment between the public sector messages and the private sector marketing could more effectively shape social norms and appropriate feeding behaviours, foster consumer trust, and responsibly increase demand for locally produced CF.

Priority actions



Strengthen knowledge and innovation in complementary foods

- a **Strengthen the evidence and experience base** by systematically documenting lessons learned and case studies on effective approaches in CF production, distribution, promotion and business models.
- b **Establish a comprehensive regional knowledge hub** as part of an existing platform to provide access to normative guidance, regulatory and financial information, technical briefs, and business case studies.
- c **Amplify knowledge dissemination** by supporting networks such as the Coalition of African Producers of Complementary Foods, and organizing regular online and in-person meetings to share and learn.
- d **Develop and implement an accountability framework** integrating CF business and systemic metrics into one dashboard to drive accountability, transparency, and track progress in improving CF access.



Strengthen and harmonize policy and regulatory frameworks

- a **Update and adopt harmonized standards for CF** through ECOWAS and other regional authorities to ease cross-border trade and shared accountability, while aligning the regulations with international frameworks such as Codex Alimentarius and WHO guidelines, to ensure quality and compliance.
- b **Strengthen and streamline national certification, approval and enforcement processes** across relevant government departments, creating a unified, user-friendly regulatory framework for nutritious and safe CF that supports compliance with product standards, accurate labelling, and responsible marketing.
- c **Strengthen food safety and quality assurance and enforcement systems** by establishing accredited laboratories capable of comprehensive analysis in line with national and international food safety and quality standards, building monitoring and reporting platforms, and strengthening skills of inspectors.
- d **Provide financial incentives for producers of certified CF** through national tax exemptions (e.g. of premixes), subsidies, and procurement of locally produced certified CF in social protection programs.
- e **Expert review** of the WHO '[Guidance on ending the inappropriate promotion of foods for infants and young children: implementation manual](#)' ensuring appropriate promotion of locally produced, nutritious and safe CF is compliant with global guidance on marketing of breastmilk substitutes.





Mobilize financial and infrastructure resources for sustainable growth

- a Strengthen collaboration between finance institutions and CF producers**, strengthening their mutual understanding through briefs, tools, trainings, and clarify the risks, benefits and social impact of CF.
- b Expand sector-specific blended finance mechanisms** that combine grants, concessional loans, and private investment, to provide tailored financial solutions for CF producers.
- c Explore innovative structures** such as use of guarantees, layered capital funds, and specialized credit lines to strengthen operations, support capacity building and enable scaling.
- d Provide interest rate subsidies** in partnership with governments, central banks, and development partners to implement subsidized interest rates for CF-specific loans.
- e Organize and leverage deal rooms** at stakeholder forums that connect local CF producers with investors and provide technical support during pre- and post- investment stages.
- f Provide financing options to develop collective infrastructure and operations** specifically, subsidies and co-financing for collective or cooperative use of equipment upgrades, such as cold chains.



Build technical and business capacity of local producers

- a Provide access to a centralized information hub for technical assistance through an existing network** to connect producers with service providers, identify specific training needs, and offer mentorship or access to onsite/online trainings.
- b Partner with** regional and national regulatory bodies, technical experts for product quality training tailored to the needs of local CF producers.
- c Deploy investment readiness program** that strengthens the CF producers' skills in business management, financial planning and forecasting, helping them meet investor requirements effectively.
- d Support farmer cooperatives** with capacity building initiatives and improved agricultural practices, ensuring a reliable supply of high-quality raw materials and reinforcing the entire CF value chain.
- e Integrate sector-specific courses in vocational curricula** covering modules on food processing, safety standards, production processes, through national education systems.



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Create demand and expand markets

- a Adopt a consumer-centered approach**, designing multi-channel, aspirational campaigns that align the health and nutrition benefits of CF with the wants and social norms of different market segments.
- b Collaborate on awareness and education campaigns** across public and private sectors integrating messages on locally produced nutritious and safe CF benefits, with general infant feeding messages.
- c Promote trust in local brands** using tools such as logos, seals and quality labels to differentiate certified nutritious and safe CF products from inferior alternatives.
- d Enhance affordability and expand rural access** by integrating CF into social protection programs, partnering with institutional buyers and government schemes, and leveraging cooperatives, small retailers, and community networks – alongside investments in last-mile logistics.
- e Harness regional trade opportunities**, providing targeted guidance to help local CF producers expand their market reach, such as under the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA).



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For more information on the Regional Dialogue and the Micronutrient Forum's work on child diets, please visit our website at <https://micronutrientforum.org/emerging-initiatives/child>. The organization of the Regional Dialogue and this brief was generously financed and supported by the European Union and Expertise France through their EU4SUN project.

The Micronutrient Forum is the central global platform for evidence, collaboration, and advocacy to improve micronutrient health. We are a group of experts bringing leaders together to help build and strengthen the evidence base on micronutrient deficiencies and interventions, build consensus, and ultimately drive collective action to create stronger policies, programs, and systems to protect the health of vulnerable communities.

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