

Quality Certification of Infant Foods: A Market-Scale Intervention to Improve Child Nutrition in Africa

This one-page concept note describes an intervention to scale up the availability of low-cost, high-quality infant foods in Africa, by certifying the nutritional content of products made from local ingredients by small-scale firms. Quality certification would allow local manufacturers to compete with heavily advertised global brands such as Nestle's Cerelac, at much lower prices.

Today's markets offer few options because infants aged 6-24 months need foods of much higher nutrient density and digestibility than the family diet. These qualities cannot be directly observed, so buyers must either follow very labor-intensive traditional methods of home preparation, or buy an expensive branded product.

The introduction of a product testing and certification service would allow local startups to gain consumers' confidence, and then compete on the basis of packaging, taste and price. Local infant-food producers now exist, often funded by donors to supply health clinics and refugee populations. They can produce high-quality foods but individual buyers have no reason to trust that their products are worth anything at all. As a result, people continue to buy Cerelac and other advertised brands, even if they cannot afford enough of them to avoid undernutrition.

A January 2010 market survey in Ghana found several local manufacturers producing low-cost infant foods, but total volume was very small and their products were not available in many neighborhoods. Laboratory testing showed some samples to be of very high quality, but other samples had dangerously low levels of nutrient density which justifies consumer skepticism.

Previously, a market experiment in Bamako, Mali demonstrated that even illiterate mothers understood the need for certification, and were willing to pay enough for it to be self-sustaining after start-up.¹ There is very little political demand for nutrient certification, however, because undernutrition is a chronic condition affecting the poor. Existing food certification focuses on the risk of contamination, which is less common but affects the wealthy who lobby for it.

A pilot nutrient certification program could be introduced gradually, with a randomized roll-out across market towns. Doing so would provide a rigorous test of efficacy in lowering prices, raising volumes and improving child health outcomes. Results would allow the program to be improved over time and spread across countries, helping families avoid the undernourishment in infancy that now stunts growth and development for over one-third of Africa's children.

¹ The Bamako experiment was published in W.A. Masters and D. Sanogo, "Welfare Gains from Quality Certification of Infant Foods: Results from a Market Experiment in Mali", in *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*, 84(4, November 2002): 974-989. Results from the Ghana market survey and laboratory test results are available in working paper form with photos and other details at <http://sites.tufts.edu/willmasters/research/infant-foods>.