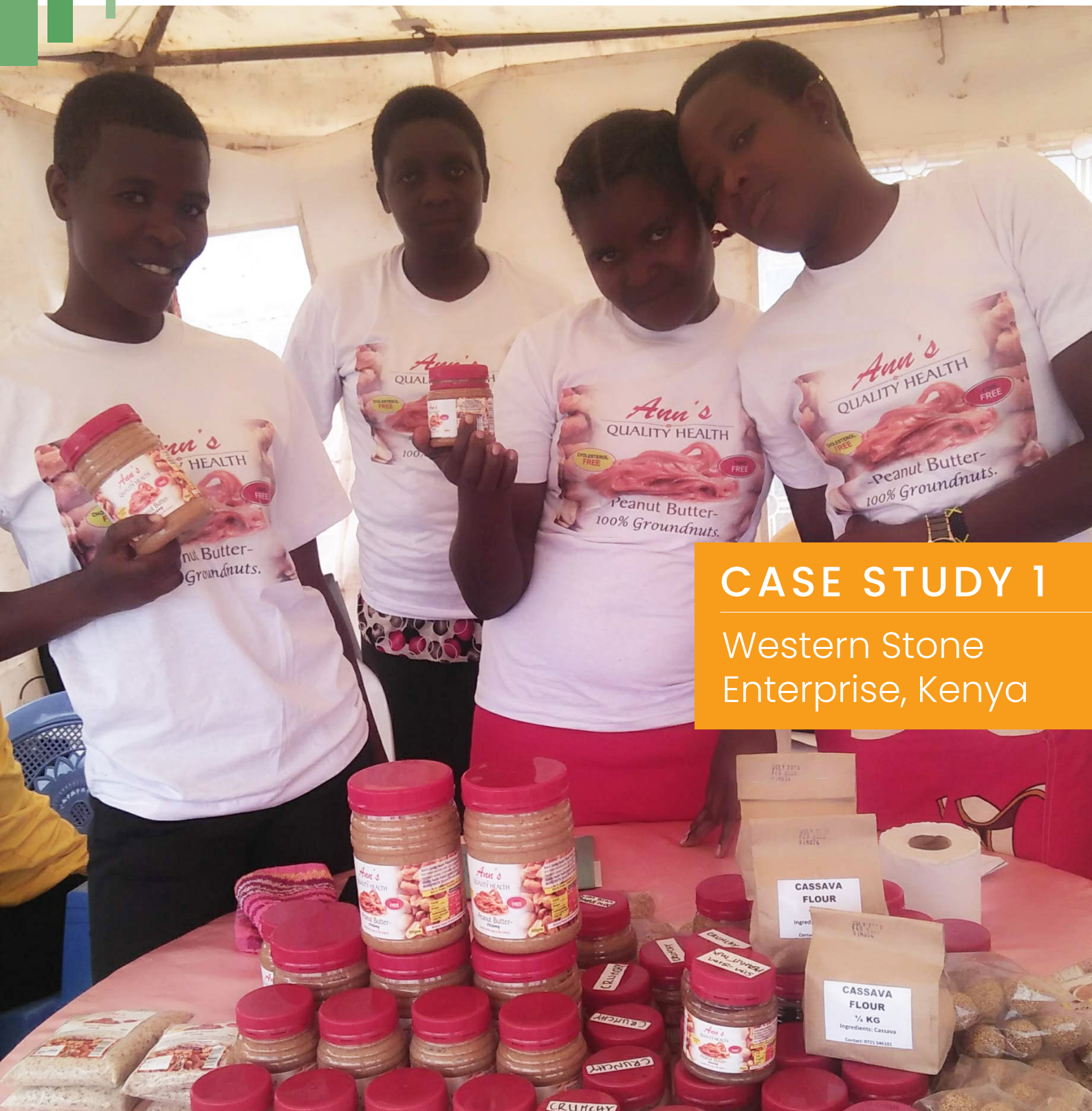


COVID-19 Learning Series

THE ROLE OF ENTREPRENEURS IN SUPPORTING NUTRITION SERVICES DURING THE PANDEMIC



CASE STUDY 1

Western Stone
Enterprise, Kenya

Author

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Designer: Marten Sealby **Cover:** The Western Stone Enterprise team selling their products (Photo: Hannah Ichingwa).

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This document is a part of the ENN COVID-19 Learning Series (www.ennonline.net/C19LearningSeries). This series comprises:

1. **A survey report** outlining the results of a survey collecting information from ENN's network on topics still underrepresented within the available learning regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and nutrition services in low- and middle-income countries (www.ennonline.net/C19LearningSeries/ScopingSurvey). The results of this survey informed the following work.
2. **Four case studies and a synthesis document**, focusing on the role of entrepreneurs in supporting nutrition and health services during the pandemic.
 - **Case study 1: Western Stone Enterprise**, a woman-led business that produces peanut paste, sesame paste and other value-added agricultural products in Kenya (www.ennonline.net/C19LearningSeries/CS1).
 - **Case study 2: Adeck Juice Bar**, an all-

natural smoothie bar run by a young entrepreneur in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania (www.ennonline.net/C19LearningSeries/CS2).

- **Case study 3: Sky Brands**, a food processing company specialising in biofortified products in Zimbabwe (www.ennonline.net/C19LearningSeries/CS3).
 - **Case study 4: Solvoz**, an open-access digital procurement platform connecting humanitarian organisations and local suppliers (www.ennonline.net/C19LearningSeries/CS4).
 - **Synthesis report:** a short summary of the key learnings from the four case studies relevant for nutrition practitioners (www.ennonline.net/C19LearningSeries/CS_synthesis).
3. **A report of practitioners' experiences** of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the number and demographics of people accessing nutrition services in low- and middle-income countries (www.ennonline.net/C19LearningSeries/Practitioner_Survey).





Background

This is the first case study in a series of four, focusing on the role of entrepreneurs in supporting nutrition and health services during the COVID-19 pandemic. We hope that these stories can help highlight how nutrition practitioners and organisations working in the nutrition sector and social entrepreneurs can support one another in meeting the nutrition goals of the communities they serve.

Hannah Ichingwa is the founder and managing director of Western Stone Enterprise, a Kenyan food processing company based in the town of Kakamega, about 400 kilometres north west of Nairobi. The company started in 2012 with Hannah producing small amounts of peanut flour in her home blender. When her neighbour expressed interest in buying the flour, Hannah scaled up production and eventually established the company. With a small loan acquired through a local microfinance scheme called Family Circle, Hannah purchased machines to roast and grind peanut butter and sesame paste, and diversified her product range. She also hired staff, eventually employing five people to support with production and sales.

The ethos of Western Stone Enterprise is to provide nutritious, value-added agricultural products that contain no additives or preservatives. By creating energy-dense products that are high in protein and low in saturated fat, Hannah's products aim to make an important contribution to her customers' diets (see Table 1 for nutritional information on Hannah's peanut butter).

Table 1: Nutritional information for Hannah's unsalted peanut butter, according to Kenya Bureau of Standards certification.

Peanut butter, unsalted (average values per 100g)	
Energy	575.95kcal
Protein	23.21%
Total fat	49.0%
Carbohydrates	24.48%
Dietary fibre	3.20%

Hannah started by selling her products through local shops and home delivery, but after receiving quality

certification from the Kenya Bureau of Standards for her peanut butter, she was able to begin selling it in supermarkets. The certification is mandatory for locally manufactured products and indicates that the manufactured goods meet quality requirements, as specified in the various approved standards for Kenya. Appealing to customers in search of natural products, the peanut butter sold quickly and Hannah recounted that this was a successful phase of the business. As a business working to support the improvement of nutrition through healthy energy-dense products, Western Stone Enterprise was eligible to join the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Business Network, and in 2021 Hannah took part in the network's 'Pitch' Competition. She made it to the finals and had the opportunity to participate in a training and mentoring programme to support future pitches for investment in her business.



HANNAH ICHINGWA

Grinding peanut butter (left) to create the final product (above) – marketed under the brand name Ann's

The problem

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic created various problems for Hannah's company. Normally, Hannah would source raw ingredients from Busia, a town in a neighbouring county situated on the Kenya–Uganda border as sesame seeds and peanuts can be purchased in bulk there from local farmers (on both sides of the border) at a better price than in Kakamega. When the border with Uganda closed and government restrictions on movement created logistical challenges, Hannah had difficulties sourcing raw ingredients, which limited production. At

the same time, the cost of locally grown ingredients increased as farmers faced their own production challenges. The government-imposed curfew meant that Hannah's support staff had to leave early to make the journey home before 7pm. Supermarkets reduced their orders and delayed payments to suppliers such as Hannah as their operating hours were also reduced by the curfew. The financial toll of the pandemic meant that customers had reduced buying power. All these effects led to reduced production and fewer sales for Western Stone Enterprise.

The response

Hannah made several key adaptations to the running of her company to overcome the pandemic-related challenges. First, she made products available in smaller quantities so that customers could continue to buy them despite the financial difficulties brought on by the pandemic. For example, she began to sell peanut butter in 60g sachets, whereas previously the smallest jar of peanut butter available was 250g. The small cost of these portions meant that families could afford to add essential nutrients to meals on a day-to-day basis even on a reduced income. Mothers of young children were frequent customers as small amounts of peanut butter could be added to children's meals to improve the nutritional quality of the diet.

Although Hannah's products continued to be available in local markets during the pandemic, she also introduced door-to-door sales within Kakamega to make up for reduced supermarket sales. Despite being limited to selling within curfew hours, this approach nonetheless allowed her to make up the shortfalls in income. Hannah also stepped in and did more of the processing work herself to accommodate gaps in staffing. Later in the pandemic, Hannah began advertising her products through WhatsApp groups, including community groups and business groups with members from all over Kenya. WhatsApp also offers a version of the app targeted at small business owners; WhatsApp Business is available for free and

allows businesses to create a catalogue of products and services and connect with customers effectively by using tools to automate, sort and respond to messages. Business group members could message Hannah with orders, which increased the reach of her advertising and provided a new sales modality, although there was no charge for deliveries within Kakamega. Together these approaches allowed her to keep the company afloat through a challenging time.

To increase the resilience of her business to future shocks, Hannah plans to strengthen relationships with local farmers to ensure a sustainable supply of raw ingredients and avoid reliance on more distant suppliers. She also plans to increase her social media engagement and develop a website to facilitate marketing and ordering once her brand is officially trademarked.

Lessons learnt

For nutrition practitioners and policymakers, there are valuable lessons to be learnt from Hannah's experience running her business through the COVID-19 pandemic. First, ensuring that food items are available in quantities that families can afford on a day-to-day basis helps to ensure access when resources are constrained. Hannah's 60g sachets of peanut butter cost 30 Kenyan shillings (approximately £0.20), making them an accessible and nutritious snack for school-aged children and/or a nutritious addition to complementary foods for younger children.

Second, adopting new sales tactics and distribution platforms is essential to maintaining access to customers or beneficiaries in this new pandemic-era environment. Shifting to door-to-door sales not only allowed Hannah to maintain her company's income during a period when storefront sales were limited, but also facilitated access to nutritional products for customers who suddenly had reduced access to markets due to COVID-19 restrictions. Provided that

basic infection control measures and food safety standards are observed when selling door-to-door, this approach can contribute to household food security and maintaining a good nutritional status, especially for those who are vulnerable and self-isolating. Using WhatsApp as a messaging platform to reach large groups allowed Hannah to advertise her product widely and to receive sales orders at little to no cost. Technologies such as this represent the future of digital marketing and nutrition practitioners could benefit from leveraging similar technology to connect with beneficiaries in a dynamic way.



HANNAH ICHINGWA

Western Stone Enterprise peanut powder marketed under the brand name Ann's.

Conclusion

As Hannah's story demonstrates, small actions by businesses have played an important role in mitigating the adverse effects of the pandemic by safeguarding and promoting access to nutritious, safe and affordable diets. By making nutritious foods accessible in smaller quantities, switching to door-to-door sales and marketing through WhatsApp groups, Hannah's adaptations to her business supported food security in her community and beyond. Given the essential role they play in nutrition, small businesses

that are focused on selling affordable nutritious products deserve greater recognition from not-for-profit nutrition practitioners/organisations and further exploration of the potential for beneficial collaborations. For example, supporting small businesses to navigate the quality certification process or to communicate the nutritional value of their foods could facilitate better access to nutritious foods for vulnerable populations for the remainder of this pandemic and during future crises.

For more information about Western Stone Enterprise please contact Hannah Ichingwa at westernstoneenterprise@gmail.com or hannahichingwa@gmail.com



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