



Food Aid

Campbell's Nourish brand tackles hunger through Canada's food banks

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Thousands of cans packed with one of the most wholesome, shelf-stable super meals ever created in Canada are rolling off the line at Campbell's Soup, but consumers will have a tough time buying them.

The nutrient-dense products will be introduced not in grocery stores but on the shelves of food banks across the country. If the iconic soup company gets its wish, cans of their Six Grain Vegetable formulation, branded Nourish, will ultimately filter into the hands of the world's hungriest via humanitarian aid organizations, making a dent in global food insecurity.

Developed at the behest of socially conscious staffers, Nourish is the first Canadian private-sector, not-for-profit product tailored to address the growing problem of world hunger. Despite its genuine beginnings, Nourish and the ensuing marketing effort has propelled Campbell's into the midst of a thorny international debate over the future of humanitarian food aid and whether there is a role for a profit-driven food industry in solving hunger.

"I think it's the responsibility of the food industry to do what they can," said Philip Donne, president of Campbell's Soup Canada. "Companies are getting populated with the new generation that really has global awareness. They're challenging and pushing the corporate agenda to manifest both a shareholder focus but also our responsibility as citizens to get involved in food. This is a first step. We'd like to raise the bar for industry."

Officials at the United Nations' World Food Program (WFP), which is based in Rome and is the world's largest distributor of food aid, are in talks with at least a dozen private-sector companies developing ready-to-use foods, including Campbell's Canada. The class of products has, until now, consisted mainly of high-fat, pre-mixed peanut-based pastes that are used solely by organizations mandated to cure malnutrition, such as Unicef. But the onset of food crises around

the world due to political instability and natural disasters has increased food agencies' interest in a broader variety of ready-made products.

“The Haiti earthquake was a real catalyst for us because we realized when those millions of people were suddenly homeless and hungry that we didn't really have the right kinds of foods for that situation,” said Nancy Roman, the WFP's director of communications, public policy and private partnerships. “You're in a situation where there's no water and you don't have conditions to cook some of the things that we traditionally give, like rice or beans. You really do need prepared food,” she said, adding: “And so we really began to look at our opportunities.”

The queue of companies hoping for consideration was already deep. The private-sector foray into the food-aid realm has increased in recent years; global conglomerates PepsiCo and Unilever are both developing products aimed at humanitarian use. It is not clear whether the products are being developed on a for-profit basis. Mr. Donne, Campbell's president, said making money from Nourish would “mess up the intention” of the initiative.

“The reality is if we end up taking this to retail, all net profits from cans sold will go to funding future relief efforts,” he said.

Movement of the private sector into food aid has been met with caution and concern in the humanitarian sphere. Few have doubts about the need for ready-to-eat fortified and nutrient-dense food, which has huge value for post-disaster responses and large-scale refugee displacement. However, there are concerns that food conglomerates are not motivated by an altruistic impulse to help solve world hunger. Instead, critics argue, they could use patented, medicinal foods to break into developing markets; success of their therapeutic food will win consumer loyalty for their broader brand – and other food products developed under it, regardless of nutritional quality.

“Hundreds of millions, and then billions, of people all over the world, initially slim children, most of whom never had anything wrong with them, would consume energy-dense snack products every day. And they would become obese,” argued a recent editorial published in *World Nutrition*, the Journal of the World Public Health Nutrition Association.

Steve Collins, a world-renowned expert in nutrition and the treatment of severe malnutrition, said the concerns about the food industry's end game are valid, but they're not grounds for dismissing industry or their products from the table.

Fast and effective delivery of vital micronutrients to undernourished people is a constant preoccupation in the food-aid community; past reports by the World Bank have connected malnourishment to economic losses and stunted national development.

“These foods can facilitate development through addressing chronic malnutrition and allowing children in the developing world to grow up with brains that work,” Dr. Collins said.

The way forward, Dr. Collins said, is compromise, including the negotiation of a strict international code of conduct to govern the use and distribution of ready-to-use foods. A similar

code exists for infant formula – the introduction of formula to developing nations was controversial. Delivery of the product initially led to decreases in breastfeeding, dependencies on products poor families could not afford and, ultimately, the death of infants.

“In the private sector, there’s got to be recognition that these incredibly vulnerable people are not a normal market that’s going to be exploited for maximum profits,” he said. “From the public sector, there’s got to be recognition that we have to engage with this ... set the framework and ethical parameters for how these products are marketed, produced, tested and ultimately sold and used.”

Ms. Roman, from the WFP, agrees with the need for a cautious approach but said it’s too early to develop a rigid formula to govern use. “We’re at a period where we need to be broad in our thinking and willing to allow governments and companies to try different kinds of nourishing products,” she said.

Agencies and governments should be pushing industry to target multiple needs in developing their products, Dr. Collins said. They need to design recipes not just for consumption in developing countries, he said, but also for production in needy places where local ingredients can be purchased, thereby stimulating economies, agriculture and creating jobs.

“That’s where the battle is,” Dr. Collins said. “The idea that companies will just manufacture these products in developed [countries] and dump them on Africa is such a shame.”

Asked if Campbell’s Nourish could be made in other countries, Mr. Donne said the company would be “100 per cent open” to considering the idea.

“We’re learning as we’re going here and, admittedly, there’s lots of things we can get better at on this,” he said. “Sometimes it takes a big company to jump into some of the risks ... and show others that it might be done.”