Amanda Sourry
President Foods, Unilever

There’s no consensus about how best to achieve this, but one thing is crystal clear: the food system cannot continue as it is. For starters, Planet Earth is finite. Already, farming is responsible for two-thirds of all water withdrawals. Over one third of all land is already under the plough. As for modern agriculture’s effects on the climate, around one seventh of all greenhouse gas emissions now comes from meat production alone. This cannot continue.

Second, there’s the food system’s sheer wastefulness. Every year, tonnes of food never even makes it onto the shelves, lost to poor logistics or inadequate storage. This isn’t just a waste of food; it’s a waste of land, energy, water and, of course, business opportunity. Then there’s all the food that never gets eaten. Consumers in industrialised countries throw out the equivalent amount of food per year as sub-Saharan Africa’s entire annual harvest. And this in a world where 800 million people still go to bed hungry every night.

Clearly, something has to change. Responsibility for bringing about that change is widespread. Governments need to start working together more to enact system-level reforms. Farmers and producers need to become more efficient and adopt sustainable practices. And consumers need to be given more choice so that sustainable food and beverages become the norm.

Business also has a critical role to play. For Unilever, that has meant thinking long and hard about what really makes a progressive food company. The result is our new sustainable nutrition strategy. Guided by the vision of ‘Food that Tastes Good, Does Good and Doesn’t Cost the Earth’, it sets out what we consider a company like ours can best do to accelerate progress towards a sustainable food system.

Reassessing our relationship with food is one crucial place to start. In our social media age, it sometimes feels as if digitising food is as important as digesting it. In the UK, more than one in five young adults allow their food to go cold in order to get the perfect Instagram photo. We believe food should be celebrated, of course. We wouldn’t sell it if we didn’t. But what excites us are the very real, very tangible upshots that food can bring, like health and wellbeing, joy and friendship. Which is why, for example, we fortify some of our foods to increase their nutritional content and, among many other measures, we seek to inspire people to cook delicious, nutritious meals, for themselves and others, from ingredients that are good for both them and the planet.

Being a progressive food company involves helping to ensure that such ingredients are widely available, affordable and grown sustainably. Hence all the support we give to training farmers in agro-ecological production and in making the most of modern technologies. Not only is sustainable farming better for the planet, it’s shown to increase yields too, which in turn boosts farmer incomes and enhances food security – a delectable combination. For a food system to be fully sustainable, it means looking beyond the farm gate as well – to the energy, water and other natural resources used when food is transported, stored, processed and consumed. Agriculture, food, nutrition, health, livelihoods, and the environment are all intimately interconnected. Focus on one without the others and the whole system literally collapses. As one of the largest food companies in the world, we can’t afford for that to happen. In fact, the cost of inaction to business is far greater than the cost of action. A sustainable food system has to be the answer. And now has to be the time.
A thirst for knowledge

Tea is the most widely consumed beverage in the world, after water. Millions of farmers and workers around the world play their part in delivering the teabag in your cup.

Nirmala Kundu grew up eating rice and dal. It’s what her mother used to cook, and her mother before her. A tea picker in South India, Nirmala thought nothing of her repetitive diet. And why would she? Rich in protein, dal is a staple dish made from pulses such as lentils, peas and beans. Simple and tasty.

But what have Nirmala’s memories got to do with Unilever? More than you might think. With top-selling brands like Lipton, PG Tips and Brooke Bond, Unilever buys more tea than any other company in the world. So the world’s many tea estates.

Worker wellbeing is therefore essential to Unilever’s business success. If workers like Nirmala aren’t healthy, then their productivity will fall – and with it their own incomes. The result is also lower yields, which will affect business because the tea supply for brands will become less secure.

For a big player in the tea industry like Unilever, it’s both a moral and business imperative to support the wellbeing of workers in our supply chain. Hence, the relevance of workers’ diets. The human body needs a balance of nutrients to remain healthy. While rice and dal are fine in themselves, they need to be part of a varied diet. All too often, they’re not.

HEALTHIER FARMERS, HEALTHIER FUTURES

Seed of Prosperity is one example of how Unilever is taking proactive responsibility to protect workers’ wellbeing. A joint initiative with the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) and IDH, the Sustainable Trade Initiative, the programme focuses on encouraging tea farmers and their families to eat a more balanced, nutritious diet.

Central to the programme is a nine-week course during which participating tea workers learn about different food groups and how to incorporate these into their cooking. Families are also given the means to grow their own kitchen gardens.

“Farmers don’t always eat the right foods so we have developed a concept that is easy for them to understand and apply,” explains Dr. Birgitte Weilgmann, a special adviser at GAIN, Unilever’s Vice-President of Global Partnerships and Advocacy. “The best thing is that social impact and the business case are completely linked. Through this important programme we’re helping make the future of tea supply more secure by taking workers’ nutrition seriously.”

She also adds: “For Unilever, improving the health of the farmers in our value chain secures essential supplies, expands the market for our products, and increases the resilience of our business model.”

Unilever and its delivery partners are now in the process of rolling out the Seeds of Prosperity initiative to tea farming communities in Assam as well as in Kenya and Malawi. The company’s ambition is to share knowledge and best practices with partners that can only be achieved through deliberate, participative solutions – like those Unilever is rolling out at the grassroots of the global tea industry.

PROTECTING THE ENVIRONMENT, SECURING INCOMES

Another Unilever-backed initiative designed to improve the wellbeing and incomes of tea producers is the Farmer Field Schools. First launched in 2006 in Kenya, the world’s third largest tea producer, Farmer Field Schools aim to train tea producers in sustainable agricultural practices.

They thinking behind the programme is simple. Smallholder farmers are responsible for around three-fifths of Kenya’s tea production. Due to a lack of knowledge on best practices, however, they sometimes use traditional methods that can damage the environment and lead to lower yields. Both problems can be corrected through the adoption of more ecologically-smart and efficient agricultural techniques.

To that end, the Farmer Field Schools are run over 12 months, where participants learn everything from how to reduce herbicide use and improve soil management through to better methods of pruning and picking. Unilever tea procurement team are instrumental in getting the programme off the ground in Kenya, running it hand in hand with the Kenya Tea Development Agency (KTDA) and IDH, the Sustainable Trade Initiative.

From the start, this partnership approach has been a critical aspect of the programme’s success, according to Arjip Mudhunge, Vice-President of Tea Procurement at Unilever. “It is a great example of working efficiently with partners that share common goals and values.”

As part of its Sustainable Living Plan, Unilever has pledged to help at least 500,000 smallholder farmers improve their agricultural practices by 2020. It’s an ambitious target that can only be achieved through deliberate, participative solutions – like those Unilever is rolling out at the grassroots of the global tea industry.
Unilever’s new vision for sustainable nutrition – ‘Food that Tastes Good, Does Good, and Doesn’t Cost the Earth’ – got the folk at Hellmann’s thinking.

What could they do to reflect this ambition? Sharing consumers’ growing concern about food waste, the marketing and procurement teams worked together and did some digging. The stats surprised them. Take Latin America. Half of all the fruits and vegetables grown in the region perish before ever reaching anyone’s plate.

“People’s relationship with food is changing these days. They used to just care about how it tastes and how much it costs. Now they also want to know how it’s produced as well,” says Rhiannon Lines, Brand Manager, for Hellmann’s.

“So we started looking back at our supply chain to see if there was any unnecessary wastage and, if so, what we could do about it.”

The main ingredient in ketchup is – as you would expect – tomatoes. Red tomatoes, more specifically. Not green tomatoes. So come the harvest season, only the red tomatoes would get collected up and sent off for processing. Meanwhile, the tomatoes that didn’t meet industry standards would be discarded – left to rot uneaten in the field.

“This has been standard practice in the industry for years,” explains Victor Rubio, Sustainability Manager at Unilever’s Spanish tomato supplier, Agraz. “In the production of tomato paste, the usage of green tomatoes is generally limited due to the hardness of the fruit.”

After discussions with the team at Hellmann’s, Agraz agreed to an innovative experiment. Instead of separating the fruit as usual, it would turn off the colour-sorting machine and send all the tomatoes, whatever their colour, to the processing plant instead. The test proved a success, with one or two minor technical challenges at first, but nothing that couldn’t be easily resolved, says Victor:

“The only issue is a slight alteration to the taste of the final tomato paste. Hellmann’s used this as an opportunity to use their culinary expertise again, fashioning the new-look ketchup with a mix of fresh-tasting herbs and spices. The result – Hellmann’s Ketchup Made with Red and Green Tomatoes – was launched in the UK and Greece in May. Latin America is due to follow later in the year.

“The combination of green tomatoes, herbs, and spices gives it a really unique, fresh flavour,” says Rhiannon at Hellmann’s.

Beforehand, around ten percent of the whole harvest was rejected. Thanks to the change in processing methods, an estimated 2.5 million tomatoes every year will now be saved from going to waste. That translates into a more efficient use of land and agricultural inputs, plus higher revenues for Spain’s tomato farmers.

In terms of Unilever’s sustainable nutrition ambition, the new Hellmann’s ketchup formula makes for a perfect fit. Initial feedback from consumers indicates that the product tastes as good as ever. It’s doing good for Spain’s tomato growers. And, as green tomatoes would say if only they could talk, it doesn’t cost the earth.

Hellmann’s is now looking across its portfolio to see how else it can strengthen its long-term competitiveness and keep in touch with consumer demand through similar sustainable innovations.

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“...No-one likes to see perfectly good food go to waste. Step up Hellmann’s unique new ketchup. With every squeeze, consumers are doing their bit to keep perfectly good tomatoes from going uneaten.”
Launched in Nigeria, Knorr’s Green Food Steps programme runs cookery classes for mothers and their daughters, showing them how to increase their health and wellbeing by preparing tasty meals with iron-rich ingredients.

**WHAT STANDS OUT FOR YOU ABOUT THE KNORR GREEN FOOD STEPS APPROACH?**

It’s such a simple yet wonderful way of adding value to the lives of women, girls and their families. I see nutritious cooking as an investment — a human investment. It’s all about teaching us how to eat right and respect our bodies.

**THE FEEDBACK FROM PARTICIPANTS HAS BEEN VERY POSITIVE, WHY DO YOU THINK THAT IS?**

I think the special bond between mothers and daughters has a lot to do with it. I mean, which mother wouldn’t be overjoyed to teach her daughter something so useful and fun that she in turn can pass on to the next generation?

**LIKE-MINDED PARTNERS MOBILISE TOGETHER WILL THERE BE A STRONG BASE FOR SUSTAINED CHANGE?**

There’s a lot more that needs to be done. But it’s a step in the right direction. And I believe that if we keep on working together, we can make a difference.

**WHAT IS NUTRITION AN IMPORTANT ISSUE IN NIGERIA?**

Iron deficiency is a big problem in Nigeria. About half of Nigerian women have anaemia because of it. The frustrating thing is that it’s so easily preventable. If we can reach out to people about the importance of having iron-rich foods, and fortifying foods where necessary, we could save millions of people from anaemia.

**IS COOKING SOMETHING YOU PERSONALLY ENJOY?**

Yes, very much so! It helps me relax. As a Nigerian, I love cooking our national dishes. But I follow a wide range of other cultures as well. I love there to be lots of colours on the plate. So I enjoy cooking with red peppers and various spices too. It makes the food tastier and increases its nutritional contents.

**WHAT IS THE KNORR GREEN FOOD STEPS PROGRAMME?**

It’s basically a way of doing just this — improving nutrition levels by teaching people about cooking nutritious meals using iron-rich ingredients.

**THE PROGRAMME ENCOURAGES MOTHERS TO PASS ON NUTRITIOUS RECIPES TO THEIR DAUGHTERS. IS THAT A GOOD APPROACH IN YOUR OPINION?**

For sure. It’s a way of passing on knowledge from generation to generation, and I think that’s very important. As a mother now myself, I’ve taught my daughters and my son to cook too. Because women are the primary nurturers and caregivers, it’s through mothers and daughters that you reach the whole family.

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