



LEADERSHIP CASE
NUTRIVIDA

There was a long line snaking towards the table where Gisela Sánchez and her team were distributing Nutrivida products at a neighborhood promotional event. The people were poor, and the food was welcome. But what really made Gisela smile was the behavior of the children. “The kids kept cheating. Every time they got to the front, they went back and joined the line again because they found the food so delicious!”

This was a vindication of one of the principles that drives Gisela: if the end-user is treated with respect in all your research and all your thinking, your work is going to hit the spot.

Gisela is no stranger to poor communities: she grew up with poverty and she knows its priorities: “The most important thing is to have food on your table,” she says. But beyond the need to fill the bellies of the family, is the battle for adequate nutrition. She tells the story of her own mother being proud of having fed her baby with condensed milk diluted with water, because it tasted so good. Here, a caring mother with the best of intentions but a lack of basic nutritional knowledge, lovingly filling her baby’s tummy with what is effectively sugar water.

“ I HAVE THE KNOW-HOW, THE CONTEXT, THE NETWORK AND THE STRATEGIC ALLIES TO HELP NUTRIVIDA SUCCEED. IT’S A SWEET SPOT. ”

When Gisela started thinking about her Fellowship venture as part of the Aspen Global Leadership Network, she knew almost immediately what she wanted to do: “I thought about what I deeply care about. It is children, and giving them a good start. The best thing I can do with my life, in addition to looking after my own children, is to also look after other children.” It was an area in which Gisela was well-placed to make an impact. As an executive with Fifco, a food company known for its sustainability practices and high credibility, Gisela had excellent networks to draw on for intelligence, insight and practical support; and as a trained engineer, she has a strong foundation in manufacturing.

It took Gisela just two years to go from the idea for her venture to action. Those years were intense. Gisela had already thought about nutritionally fortifying food products when she came across Professor Muhammed Yunus’ work along similar lines—micronutrient-fortified yogurt—in Bangladesh: “I looked at what he did right and what he could do better with his social businesses and learned from both.” Her research took in endless hours of background reading and benchmarking. She determined that what very poor people supplement their staple rice-and-beans diet with when possible, is dehydrated soup and cool drink mixes. That refined her thinking in product line terms. There were hours

ABOUT GISELA

Director of Corporate Affairs at Florida Ice & Farm Co (Fifco).

A 2015 McNulty Prize Laureate.

Industrial engineer and a graduate of the Kellogg Graduate School of Management at Northwestern University.

Mother of two boys.

A Central America Leadership Initiative (CALI) Fellow of the Aspen Global Leadership Network.

of meetings and collaborative work with other NGOs, government health officials, food manufacturers, marketers and nutritionists. There were failed prototypes and resource challenges and closed doors. And then there was the slow climb of refinement of the successful prototypes, for quality, taste and nutrition.

In 2013, through sheer determination, hard work and smart footwork, Nutrivida was founded as a joint venture between Fifco and Professor Yunus, with seed capital from Fifco and Gisela herself. In the first month, a disappointing 2,000 units were sold. But with persistence, sales grew exponentially. Today, monthly sales are 350,000 units, and Gisela is able to talk confidently about her expansion plans to other territories in the region.

Nutrivida is a case study in the kind of systems thinking that social entrepreneurship demands. The distribution network of community saleswomen, for instance, is designed to deliver social benefits beyond affordable enhanced-nutrition foods. Along with the products, this now 520-women-strong workforce raises educational levels in their communities by dispensing nutritional information to their customers; and along with the independence that their new income delivers, the women of this sales team, most of whom have severely limited options, gain the unquantifiable value of self-esteem.

Moving from the start-up phase through the mid-project phase to the maturity Nutrivida now exhibits had its own set of leadership challenges. "There are many skills I need now that I don't have; I have to rely on others," Gisela says. Always collaborative, Gisela has entrenched a network around Nutrivida of more than 35 NGOs, government institutions and companies; and she has involved many of her peer Fellows of the Central America Leadership Initiative: "A lot of other people have joined me—not giving money, but giving their skills pro bono."

She has now also appointed a general manager.

How is that working for her?

"I find it difficult to let go!" she laughs. "I said to my GM: 'I'm giving you Nutrivida as a stepmother.' It's super-difficult to detach: I can't. I can't! It's not a project, it's my life."

But the realities of Nutrivida's success and pending expansion mean she is preparing to let go more. "I think I can. I can be more of a sounding board," she muses. Gisela also lives the philosophy

ABOUT NUTRIVIDA

- Nutrivida is a social business in Costa Rica. Its mission is to **eradicate under-nutrition** and reduce malnutrition in Central America and Haiti.
- Nutrivida produces a line of **micro-nutrient-fortified** products endorsed by the Ministry of Health. This includes cereals, soups, fruit-flavored drinks, a complete "nutripack" meal and a spicy mix that can be used to enhance the flavor and nutritional value of any meal.
- These products are sold **close to cost price** via a network of community saleswomen, convenience stores, and the main supermarket chain in Central America targeting people below the poverty line.
- Nutrivida aims to be a **zero solid waste**, water-neutral and carbon-positive manufacturer. Currently, it has a **recycling mechanism** in which Nutrivida packaging can be exchanged for more food.

that good leaders are those who surround themselves with people who know more than they do; she has great confidence in her team.

Gisela defined leadership in just these terms: "Leadership is to dream high, as high as you can imagine," she said. "Work hard... and try to invite and energize as many people as possible. It will be nice to do it yourself, but much better if you can enlighten other people to join you and create a greater impact."

There are, of course, some things Gisela would do differently, if she knew at the beginning what she knows now: "In the beginning, I misunderstood the competition—I thought people would be supportive of a social business. But Nutrivida was designed to be appealing on the supermarket shelves, and so other manufacturers were intensely competitive, to the extent that they undermined us by removing products from shelves. Also, we didn't have a budget for a marketing campaign, and that cost us a lot."

Equally, there are things that have gone right, of course. For instance, other manufacturers have bought into the idea of fortified products, exponentially increasing the impact of Gisela's work.

And Gisela has a good relationship with her learning curve: "I've been learning what I don't know, and finding out how to plug these gaps." Also, that most fundamental of networks—her own children—has been brought along on the journey, and is supportive of the time she needs to take away from them. Their understanding of the greater good is an inspiration in itself to Gisela.

She knows that her mission—to eradicate under-nutrition and significantly reduce malnutrition in the region—is bold. But in the face of hunger, she sees it as the only ethical path. "Not one child should suffer," she insists. As long as infants and children are hungry, or are deprived of the nutrition necessary to give them a fair start in life, Gisela and Nutrivida have urgent work to do.



HUNGER FACTS

800
million

Approximately
800 million
people worldwide
currently suffer
from **malnutrition**.

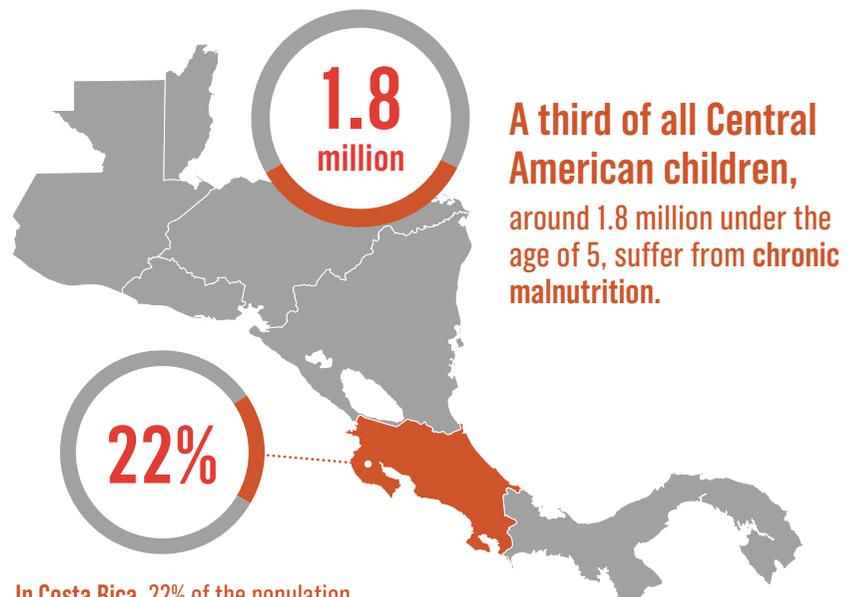


Across the world, nearly half of all
deaths in children under the age of five
are related to malnutrition or under-nutrition (i.e. the lack
of critical dietary micronutrients).

The effects of malnutrition—
especially in the “thousand-day window”
between the beginning of pregnancy and the
child’s second birthday—are irreversible.



They include **decreased cognitive ability**,
increased susceptibility to disease and
lower physical capacity.



IN HER OWN WORDS: WHAT GISELA HAS LEARNED

Resilience comes from a sense of purpose.

“It was more difficult than I could have known. But when disappointments came, something else would go right, or more inspiration would come. That’s what keeps you going.”

Build on what you know.

“I’m an engineer, so I know about manufacturing; and my day job is in the food industry, so I have the know-how, the context, the network, the strategic allies to help Nutrivida. It’s a sweet spot.”

The right support is invaluable.

Having Muhammad Yunus on board, a Nobel Peace Prize winner and pioneer of the social business model, remains a highlight. The other key partner whose credibility Gisela could leverage was Fifco, her employer and an established food business.

Stay humble.

“Things will go wrong. You need people to support you.” And, of course, it’s the little things that bring joy: “The first time I saw Nutrivida products on the shelf at a mom-and-pop store, I was so excited. I sent pictures to my family!”