

# Collaboration Helps Improve Nutrition in Africa

— Ajinomoto Promotes New Baby Food —



Mr. Nakao, on a visit to the project locale, with Ghanaian children (Photo: Yozo Nakao)

In 2005, Yozo Nakao launched the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Department at Ajinomoto Co. Inc., and he currently serves as its associate general manager. Back then, Mr. Nakao wondered if there was a way for the company to make a real contribution to society through projects. He was inspired by the efforts of Unilever, one of the global manufacturers of daily necessities. Unilever had managed to sell its products while improving public health in rural India, where hand washing was not customary, by having local female entrepreneurs sell small soaps.

From 1995 to 2007, Ajinomoto conducted experiments to demonstrate the effects of lysine, a type of amino acid, on human nutrition in Bangladesh, Ghana and three other countries facing nutrition problems.

The poor nutrition of infants in Ghana is demonstrated by high mortality rate of 51 per 1,000 infants under one year of age (WHO World Health Statistics 2010). Mr. Nakao proposed creating business that would improve the nutritional condition of infants in Ghana based on the results of successive verification tests. In 2009, Ajinomoto launched the Ghana Nutrition Improvement Project as one of its activities to mark the 100th anniversary since its founding. The traditional baby food for infants over six months of age in Ghana is KoKo, a porridge made of fermented corn. KoKo is lacking in food energy and protein, making it a factor that can cause stunted growth in children. This project called for the development of a highly nutritional supplement to mix with KoKo. This soy-flour-based supplement would add protein, amino acids, vitamins and minerals to KoKo to promote the healthy growth of Ghanaian infants by providing them with nutrients they had been missing.

Working hand-in-hand with various social sectors as partners was a huge departure from Ajinomoto's past way of doing business. "Many aid agencies, NGOs and other



A child trying some corn porridge with KoKo Plus added to it (Photo: Yozo Nakao)

organizations and groups endorsed and understood the objectives of the project because the efforts tackled the social issue of improving infant nutrition," Mr. Nakao said of the reason for the change. "We would achieve our goals by dividing responsibilities, not as a single corporation solving every problem. We thought we could create business through cooperative relationships."

First, Ajinomoto cooperated with the University of Ghana and American NPO with whom they had cooperated on the project involving experiments with amino acids. Next, Ajinomoto entered an agreement with the Ghanaian Ministry of Health to receive official cooperation. Japanese and American government institutions also supported this project; JICA chose the project for a Preparatory Survey for Base of the Pyramid (BOP\*) Business Promotion, a public private partnership project to survey development aid, and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) granted funds and know-how for Ajinomoto to carry out a research and develop a distribution model.

By September 2012, Ajinomoto had provided technical guidance to local food companies and arranged a system for manufacturing nutritional supplements to be added to KoKo. In the future, Plan Japan and CARE International Japan will cooperate with Ajinomoto to survey the effects of nutrition and build networks to distribute products named "KoKo Plus" in rural areas that contain high percentages of the poorest segment of society.

Product distribution is slated to begin at the end of 2013. Ajinomoto expects that their collaboration with NGOs and other organizations will spread the news by word of mouth. It is seeking to save on advertising costs in order to keep prices affordable for the poorest segment of society. "Mothers share the desire to give their children food that is good for them," Mr. Nakao said of the significance of this business. "Whether we can actualize this potential demand or not is the key to whether or not we can engage in this business. Coordination will take some time because we have worked together with many different groups and tried to produce results with a small investment. There are many difficulties; for example, we are trying to keep prices low, but we need to use safe packaging materials, which are costly, to avoid negatively affecting the product. That said, we are working with the belief that if we can get our product into circulation, it could spread to neighboring African nations and become a huge innovation of the Ajinomoto Corporation above all others."

Ajinomoto has looked upon developing countries as a market for over 100 years. The company is a pioneer in BOP business and is trying to demonstrate a new type of business that integrates and supports development in Ghana.

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