

Fyffes – tackling child malnutrition in Belize



Founded in 1888, Fyffes is a tropical fresh produce business, with a focus on bananas, pineapples, melons and exotic fruit and vegetables. They are the world's largest importer of Fairtrade certified bananas, the largest importer of bananas in Europe and the largest importer of melons in North America. Their head office is in Geneva, but they have offices all over Latin America, North America and Europe. The business has over 14,000 employees, including over 6,000 seasonal workers, with 20 owned farms and over 200 active suppliers in long term partnerships with them.

Summary

Fyffes has implemented an extensive community engagement programme within several of its sourcing countries, for example infrastructure and schools in Costa Rica, hygiene initiatives in Nicaragua and women empowerment projects in Guatemala, Honduras and Ecuador.

In Belize, a country of strategic importance to the company, it has had a particularly significant impact. In partnership with local schools in the communities surrounding its banana farms, Fyffes is donating waste bananas, which is made into flour by the Belize Ministry of Agriculture, to provide nutritious porridge for children. This project is now incorporated into the Government National Feeding Programme, to ensure it is self-sustaining, and Fyffes has plans to expand it to more schools in the next few years.



This case study has been developed with the support of Co-op as part of Co-op's 2024 'Treating People Fairly Awards' at which Fyffes was Highly Commended. The awards celebrate excellence in human rights practice, encourage suppliers to learn from each other and inspire new ways of mitigating current or future risks to worker welfare. Supplier entries were assessed by an independent, expert panel and awards were presented at a Co-op supplier event in May 2024. Click [here](#) and [here](#) to learn more about human rights at Co-op.



Understanding the need

Fyffes has a target to ensure 100% of the communities surrounding their own farms are engaged in resilient socio-economic projects by 2030, in the four areas of education, access to nutrition and health, climate change adaptation and gender equality. Following independent community needs assessments in Belize, covering these four areas, priority issues identified included limited access to fresh food, along with stunting, obesity, and malnutrition.

In Belize, 37% of children under five suffer from malnutrition, which impacts educational performance and therefore their economic future. Fyffes conducted a comprehensive height and weight analysis to select the school for the project and to gain a deeper understanding of the issue. Surveys of children showed that the diet is very heavy on carbohydrates (white rice), processed foods and sugary drinks, with very little fresh produce because it's expensive. This means many students are overweight (52% of children surveyed) as well as malnourished, which can lead to many other health issues such as diabetes and hypertension. At the same time, Fyffes has a relatively high amount of banana waste in Belize resulting from quality specifications and have targets to reduce this waste.

Taking action

During Covid, Fyffes worked with Our Lady of Bella Vista RC Primary School in Bella Vista, Belize, providing flour made by the Belize Ministry of Agriculture from Fyffes' waste bananas to make into nutritious porridge for children. After Covid, the project was so successful, it was agreed to expand it by building a new kitchen and hiring three cooks. It now covers 300 children providing them with breakfast, lunch and snacks throughout the day.

In order to make the project sustainable in the long-term, they reached out to the Department of Education to integrate it into the national school feeding programme. As a result, schools now get a stipend of \$1.50 USD per student per day from the government to continue the work, which together with selling snacks to teachers (which raised an additional \$7,500 USD), is covering the cost of the cooks' salaries and maintenance of the kitchen. In addition, the women entrepreneurs working in the kitchen were also provided with training on how to cook healthier foods.

"Our school has greatly benefited from a feeding program led by Fyffes. Over 300 students now receive nutritious meals daily, resulting in improved attendance, academic performance, and overall health. Fyffes, along with the Ministries of Education, Agriculture, and Health, has played a key role in transforming the lives of our students."

– Mr. Vincent Nunez, Principle of the Bella Vista R.C. Primary School



“Malnutrition is a formidable adversary, a vicious cycle that jeopardizes the very essence of childhood. Our children, grappling with physical ailments, compromised growth, and recurring sicknesses, face challenges in their development and learning abilities. We collectively shoulder the responsibility to break this cycle and pave the way for a brighter and healthier future for our youth. The partnership between the Ministry of Agriculture and Fyffes is not just an agreement; it is a commitment to change lives.”

– Hon. Abelardo Mai, Minister of Agriculture, Food Security and Enterprises of the Government of Belize



Moving forward

Fyffes now plan to build one new school kitchen per year. In 2024 they are building another kitchen near to one of their other farms, with a similar plan to provide the banana flour and integrate it into the National School Feeding Scheme, so that the school gets a stipend per child, to help cover costs. With 10 schools in the area, they plan to gradually cover them all.

Other schools have heard of the success of the scheme and are requesting the banana flour and fruit, which Fyffes are providing, even before they get a kitchen and are integrated to the National School Feeding Scheme.

In 2025 Fyffes aims to start collaborating with the Department of Education and in partnership with The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) to provide education to school children and parents on diet and nutrition and to develop school gardens to grow fresh vegetables. They also plan to build a ripening centre to increase banana consumption in schools and for the local market, to improve access to nutritious food for the community.

Another element of Fyffes’ community engagement programme is healthcare. They have invested in the upgrade or expansion of two health centres so far where nurses and doctors are coming out to service the clinics once a month, with the aim to make it weekly. The hope is that the government will take the health centres over and put doctors there permanently. Fyffes is working to establish a medical outreach programme to tackle the issues of hypertension, diabetes, maternal health, hygiene and teenage pregnancies.

Lessons learnt

- The single most important factor is to achieve buy-in from stakeholders. By ensuring the participation of the Belize government, this project becomes self-sustaining and self-sufficient. Engaging the local primary school, the teachers, the women running the kitchen, and the children were all critical factors in the project’s success.
- The second big learning, is that prior to running a sustainable project, it is often necessary to provide the foundational funding for infrastructure – in this case the school kitchen. Without this, the Government could not endorse entering the school into the School Feeding Programme because it would not have met health and safety standards or technical requirements to provide nutritious meals based on healthy ingredients.
- In countries where resources are limited and organising projects can be a challenge, it takes perseverance to see a project through, overcoming obstacles along the way. However, this is hugely rewarding to see real positive life-changing impact on the ground.

This is a leadership* approach because:

Proactivity

To get a project like this off the ground took a lot of perseverance, in a country like Belize, which is relatively poor, with few local NGOs to partner with. The piloting phase was long and needed a lot of engagement with different stakeholders. It required long-term commitment and determination to achieve the positive outcomes.

Ownership

Fyffes has initiated many projects to benefit not only their workers but the communities where they live, their children and wider families. This has had the impact of real change in lives that is lasting.

Partnership

The project required a lot of engagement with the Ministry of Agriculture (to process the surplus bananas into flour), the Ministry of Education (to ensure the programme was added to the Government funded School Feeding Programme), with the Ministry of Health and Institute of Nutrition of Central America and Panama (to get measurement data and endorse the approach). It also required a foundational collaboration with the school headmaster, the parents and teachers.

*Key behaviours that Co-op champion in its supply chain are proactivity, ownership and partnership. Click [here](#) to learn more about Co-op’s supplier engagement programme. Co-op’s ‘Supplier’s Guide to Ethical Trade’ sets out the standards suppliers are expected to meet.