

A CURE FOR HUNGER OR JUST A GIMMICK?

A Silicon Valley food start-up best known for its vegan mayo thinks it can cure malnutrition in Africa. Some experts are not so sure. Caitlin Dewey bags both sides of the story

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When Bill Gates called flashy food company Hampton Creek the “future of food” he was presumably referring to products like its much-hyped vegan mayo. The company, which last year changed its name to Just, says its brand of mayonnaise shows it’s possible to produce plant-based foods Americans love at prices they can afford, without relying on the egg, meat and dairy products that take such a toll on the environment.



Just has far grander ambitions than turning the US food market on its head, however. Last month it launched a product in Liberia, sourced locally from small-scale farmers, that affects “2.1 billion people

around the world”: malnutrition.

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Just Power Gari is a fortified cassava porridge, cheap to produce, popular with consumers and tailored to the exact dietary needs of the market where it’s sold, the company says. Just believes its product will increase Africans’ intake of critical vitamins and minerals by including them in a product that tastes good and is sold at retail in slick branded bags, unlike the fortified foods currently offered by development organisations.

In limited trials in Liberia, where Just has been quietly developing Power Gari for the past two years, the porridge has earned the approval of local schools and non-profits, which say it delivers

good nutrition and is popular with kids.

But the company's claims have also raised eyebrows among development experts, who say that other, larger food companies have attempted almost identical projects, without success. Many questioned the originality of Just's approach and expressed doubt that an American tech firm could succeed where so many others failed. The company expects Power Gari to succeed where similar initiatives have failed

It's a debate that has haunted Just from its launch, when the company first began promising that Silicon Valley techniques could shake the foundations of an outmoded food system. Critics continue to question whether Just has actually launched any revolutionary products – or simply marketed itself better than the competition.

None of this has dissuaded the company's founder, Joshua Tetrick, who predicts Power Gari will be on sale in 15 African countries within two years.

“I want to make Liberia a big success – success defined by solving the micro-nutrition problem there and making sure kids have dignity in what they eat,” he says. “But we certainly didn't start this just for Liberia... This needs to be a model that we get right and we take everywhere.”

Power Gari itself isn't much to look at: a faintly sour, starchy mush the colour and consistency of soft polenta. The porridge is made from cassava, red palm oil, sugar, salt, a soy protein concentrate and a vitamin/mineral mix, most of which are sourced in Liberia.

More importantly, from a nutrition standpoint, Power Gari contains high concentrations of Vitamins A, D, C, B6 and B12, plus iron, zinc and 12 grams of protein.

Those are valuable assets in a country where roughly one third of children under five are stunted and almost two-thirds have anaemia, according to USAID. The local diet is heavy on rice, cooking oils, and dried meat and fish. Generally speaking, fortified foods have become a common way for governments and non-profits to address deficiencies.

“If fortified foods are not available, helping them get into the market affordably is a valuable role for the private sector,” says Challiss McDonough, a senior spokeswoman for the World Food Programme.

Just may seem like an odd private firm for the job. Since Tetrick and a childhood friend founded the company in 2011, it has become known for its plant-based mayos, dressings and cookie doughs, which are sold at retail and widely used in food service.

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The company has attracted \$310m (£225m) in investments from some of Silicon Valley's largest venture capital firms, including Khosla Ventures and the Founders Fund. It has also been plagued by several wellpublicised scandals and a string of internal intrigues, the latest of which culminated in the entire board's resignation, minus Tetrick, last summer.

But Tetrick and his colleagues have dismissed their sceptics for failing to understand the company's full potential. And that potential includes changing the diets of billions in the developing world, says Tetrick, for whom the Liberia project is personal.

Before founding Just, the 37-year-old entrepreneur worked in Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa and spent a brief stint employed by Liberian President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf. The experience convinced him that socially minded, for-profit businesses could change the lives of poor consumers by developing specialised products for them, potentially having even a larger impact than dedicated development organisations.

“Folks who live on under two dollars a day shouldn’t be looked at as victims or people who just deserve our worst food or our charity,” says Tetrick. “Because when we shift the lens a little bit and we actually look at them as empowered consumers ... you can end up doing things that are a lot more powerful than just a typical nonprofit.”

Power Gari will be the first of Just’s products to test that premise. In Liberia, the company has partnered with a local producer, who pays a recurring licensing fee in exchange for the porridge recipe and logistical support and consultation.

Just has helped its producer contract with local women farmers to source cassava, for instance. And it has also helped get Power Gari into two major street markets and several schools, including the Monrovia Football Academy, a non-profit academic and athletic institution that has sought to improve the nutrition of its students.

“The classic Liberian diet leaves out a number of vital nutrients,” says Will Smith, the co-founder and executive director of the school. “When [Just] described Power Gari to us, we were immediately like, ‘When can we get this?’ And so far it’s been awesome. The kids love it.”

Given feedback like this, Tetrick is optimistic that both retail and institutional sales of Power Gari are poised to explode. The company’s operational lead in Liberia, Taylor Quinn, has already been in touch

with the local divisions of several major aid organisations that buy food for schools, including Save the Children and the World Food Programme.

By the end of the year, says Tetrick, Just will sell seven million servings of Power Gari in Liberia, and plans to expand to Ghana, Nigeria and Ethiopia after that.

“In the next two years, I’d like to see us in 10 to 15 countries, hundreds of millions of meals being served, and partnerships with some of the biggest institutions globally to get this out,” says Tetrick. A pot of Power Gari is prepared at a football training ground in Liberia

But development experts are sceptical that Just could scale its Liberian operation up so quickly – or that Power Gari will make a meaningful dent in chronic malnutrition.

Major institutional players, such as the World Food Programme, already serve fortified porridges, typically wheat and soy or corn and soy blends. America’s development agency USAID has funded the production of a local, fortified cassava porridge called “Super Gari” in Liberia for several years.

And larger companies, including DuPont, Pepsi and Danone, have attempted to launch dozens of fortified foods in low-income markets, says Erik Simanis, a market-development consultant to several global corporations. Almost all failed so completely that the companies never publicised them – a casualty of the marketers’ inability to persuade low-income consumers, including many who can’t read, to switch to unfamiliar products with unclear health benefits.

“You don’t have to scratch very deep below the surface to find the skeletons of past initiatives like this,” Simanis adds. “It’s a great thing to put in your annual sustainability report. But there’s no business logic behind it.”

Even if Just were to crack this business model, nutrition experts disputed the idea that Power Gari could somehow “solve” malnutrition. While fortified cereals can be an important source of vitamins and minerals for many populations – particularly young children, adolescents and pregnant women – they are not a new idea in Africa, says Georgia Beans, the vice president of quality and compliance at ACDI/VOCA, a USbased development organisation with projects in Liberia.

To further complicate matters, the worst and most irreversible health effects of malnutrition occur between birth and age two, when children need particularly high doses of micronutrients like Vitamin A, zinc and iron. That means a product designed for the general population would not adequately address issues like stunting and wasting, says Marie Ruel, the director of the Poverty, Health and Nutrition Division at the International Food Policy Research Institute.

“I don’t see what’s miraculous about this product,” says Ruel. “It’s not going to be a magic bullet.”

But Just is not dissuaded by sceptics – the company has always had its fair share. Taylor Quinn, who heads the Liberia initiative, acknowledges that other companies have tried and failed to market similar products before. And Power Gari is less a cure-all than a step in the right direction, he says.

Ultimately, however, Quinn expects Just to succeed where others have failed because its new porridge tastes pretty good. That is, after all, how Just sold Walmart and Dollar General shoppers on the merits of vegan mayo.

“At the end of the day, we could fail like everyone else,” he adds. “But I think we’re set up for success.”