

Securing healthy futures through food fortification

The Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) has delivered micronutrients to over 600 million people. Louisa Bare explains.



Balanced nutrition is fundamental everywhere but particularly in the developing world for reducing the prevalence of life-threatening diseases, lowering associated healthcare costs, and improving productivity, economic growth, and social development.

Some 870 million people do not have enough food to eat – 850 million of which live in developing countries, according to the World Food Programme (WFP). UNICEF adds that malnutrition in developing countries contributes to 50% of under-5 child deaths.

Until recently, nutrition has been side-lined in the aid community despite the fact that hunger and malnutrition are the number one risks to health worldwide – greater than AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis combined. Nutrition found its way back onto the public health agenda following the food crisis in 2008, when concerns mounted about ensuring food security. Several interventions are widely recognised as being critical to tackling malnutrition, including nutritional supplements, breastfeeding, adequate nutrition for mothers and babies, and food fortification.

Food fortification is an important strategy to reduce widespread malnutrition and the incidence of life-threatening diseases by adding essential vitamins and minerals to everyday foods like oil, flour, and cereals – at a cost of just a few pennies per person per year. Adding iodine to salt reduces the incidence of brain damage, vitamin A decreases susceptibility to malaria, while combining zinc with rehydration therapy can help children to recover from diarrhoeal disease, one of the leading causes of under-5 mortality.

Engagement of multiple stakeholders – including UN agencies, governments, NGOs and the private sector – is vital to successfully introducing and embedding food fortification as part of the fight against malnutrition. Through their field programmes and work with global partners, WFP and UNICEF have paved the way in providing fortified foods in both humanitarian and long-term development settings.

More than a dozen governments in Africa have incorporated food fortification into policy and legislation. Salt iodisation is mandatory in most African countries;

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the fortification of salt, wheat and maize flours is law in Zambia; fortification of sugar and maize flour is legislated in Malawi while regulations for vitamin A fortification in flour, oil, and sugar have been enacted in Nigeria. The Tanzanian government is ensuring compliance and has set deadlines for companies to adhere to its bread fortification regulations.

The Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) is an alliance of government and international organisations that aspires to end malnutrition and provide fortified food to 1.5 billion people in the developing world. To date, it has reached over 600 million people with fortified foods. GAIN works with the private sector to address micronutrient deficiencies by providing fortified staple foods and supplements.

GAIN created the GAIN Premix Facility (GPF) 4 years ago as a centralised supply chain service to improve access to affordable, quality-certified micronutrient premix blends of vitamins and minerals for food producers in developing countries. Crown Agents manages the complete procurement process for the GPF. To date, the facility has set up a global supply network of 16 premix blenders and 30 vitamin and mineral manufacturers and sourced in excess of US\$30 million worth of product for 34 countries in Africa, and Central and Southern Asia. Crown Agents works alongside the certification agent, Intertek, to ensure a pool of pre-qualified suppliers adhere to strict quality guidelines.

With flexible financing and extended credit terms to assist in management of cash flow, the GPF is support-



ing large and small suppliers. In Kenya and Tanzania, the project has set up local warehousing and distribution centres to ensure premix reaches more people while offering value for money to suppliers.

GAIN and the GPF complement multiple other related initiatives, including the country-led Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) movement, launched in 2010 to increase the success of existing programmes by supporting national priorities and aligning resources for improved nutrition. Another is the '1000 days effort' which focuses on the crucial period from conception to a child's second birthday to improve maternal, infant, and young child nutrition and is also exploring the links between agriculture and nutrition.

As we have learned through the fight against HIV/AIDS, combating malnutrition requires a multi-sectoral approach in Africa and the rest of the developing world. With governments, the private sector and related organisations demonstrating their commitment through expanding partnerships, and given the impact of nutrition on economic growth, it is hoped that fighting malnutrition will remain a key focus to improve and maintain the health of generations to come.



Above: One of the global supply network of premix blenders in South Africa and (below) stacking premix sacks in Zambia ready for distribution.



Left: Ugandan children showing the results of improved nutrition



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