



15 years - 15 fortification champions

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The Food Fortification Initiative (FFI) celebrated its 15th anniversary on October 24, 2017.

Currently, 87 countries have mandates that require wheat flour, maize flour, and/or rice to be fortified with iron or folic acid. When the Food Fortification Initiative (FFI) had its first public meeting in Mauritius in 2002, only 44 countries had this kind of legislation.

The FFI was established with a mission to encourage collaboration between the public, private, and civic sectors and build partnerships to advance fortification efforts.

“We refer to flour fortification as a ‘public-private-civic sector investment’ because successful fortification requires each of these groups to work together for the well-being of people,” says Scott J Montgomery, who became the FFI Director in 2011 after 30 years of experience in the private sector.

A study of fortification success in three Latin American countries showed that when influential people support fortification, they could facilitate national action. Consequently, to celebrate its 15th birthday, the FFI honored 15 fortification champions from different sectors and parts of the world. The FFI conducted interviews with the 15 selected champions to learn more about successes and challenges with fortification in their countries, and what we can do as a society to improve fortification efforts.

The champions were government officials, industry leaders, researchers, and professors in the nutrition community. Although they come from different backgrounds and cultures, they share the goal of pushing the fortification agenda forward in their countries and globally through partnerships.

One may not expect flour millers to be committed to improving health. However, Abubakar Bakhresa, Executive Director of Bakhresa & Co., Ltd. in Tanzania, believes fortification is a social responsibility to his customers and general population. Bakhresa has favored mandatory flour fortification since the first FFI network event in Arusha, Tanzania in 2008.

He has extended his advocacy for mandatory flour fortification to other countries where his family-owned company operates mills. Tanzania is prioritising fortification through a multi-sectoral approach that includes “stakeholders from manufacturing, regulatory agencies, ministry of health, academic institutions, international organisations and the blessings of the political leadership of the country,” says Bakhresa.

Greg Harvey, CEO of Interflour Group and Chair of FFI’s Executive Management Team, comments, “The role of the flour miller is vital to the fortification process, and I feel it is my professional duty to ensure that flour millers have a ‘seat at the table’ on decisions that are ultimately being made by others on fortification standards, monitoring and government regulations.”

Most of Interflour’s work is in Southeast Asia, where rice consumption is among the highest in the world. To Harvey, milling wheat flour in an area dominated by rice consumption positions the company for a bright future. Since wheat-based foods are growing in popularity in Asian diets, he has an opportunity to encourage countries to fortify wheat flour with essential vitamins and minerals.

Iron deficiency in children limits their physical growth and mental development. Fortifying flour with a bioavailable form of iron – that is, a form of iron that humans easily absorb – can improve iron levels and ultimately prevent many consequences of iron deficiency. In addition, fortifying with folic acid improves folate levels in women and reduces their children’s risk of having brain and spinal defects called neural tube defects (NTDs).

Spina bifida is the most common NTD. Children born with spina bifida often experience paralysis, hydrocephalus, and loss of bowel and bladder control, and can undergo a lifetime of surgeries and rehabilitative services. Spina bifida cannot be cured, but many cases can be prevented if women consume at least 400 micrograms of folic acid daily before conception and during the early stages of pregnancy.

When fortification is appropriately planned, implemented, and monitored, it supplies essential vitamins and minerals to large segments of the population. It is an effective, safe, and economical strategy, as the benefits of fortification far outweigh their associated costs. Fortifying staple foods with iron and



folic acid prevents disease, strengthens immunity, improves productivity, and helps cognitive development.

Fortifying wheat flour with iron and folic acid seems like a no-brainer. But sometimes public health policy makers focus on other issues, and they do not prioritise nutrition programs, such as fortification. As both a flour miller and fortification advocate, Harvey observes, “the challenge of time is immense. Advocating and achieving policy decisions in individual countries move at a glacial pace - at least it seems like that to me – a business professional who moves with quick decisions in a competitive market.”

He adds, “Some countries take 10 years to create fortification policies that are reasonable and achievable. The challenge is how to keep momentum and enthusiasm during such long periods.”

Even though millers may be committed to food fortification and improving public health, they have difficulty doing so if policymakers make decisions that negatively impact flour millers and restrict the millers’ support and willingness to fortify flours.

To move fortification forward despite these obstacles, countries should form national alliances that include the public, private, and civic sectors. The main predictors of a programme’s success are governmental and industry support.

The degree to which government officials and industry managers will comply rely heavily on the work of researchers, professors, and the staff of inter-governmental and non-governmental organisations. Support from gatekeepers in the academic and nutritional communities will bring awareness to the scientific evidence behind the benefits of food fortification. Involving all sectors early in the process prevents key information from being overlooked, and it builds commitment from each group to work toward success.

By working together to improve vitamin and mineral nutrition, we can make people worldwide smarter, stronger and healthier. The FFI would like to thank the fortification champions for their contributions to this campaign and their efforts in advancing fortification. Their outstanding dedication and leadership has left a significant and long-term impact in the field of nutrition.

The full set of FFI questions and answers with 15 fortification champions from the 15th anniversary campaign can be accessed at: http://www.ffinetwork.org/about/15_Years.html.