

FORTIFYING FUTURES



Celebrating 20 years of preventing global vitamin & mineral deficiencies through flour fortification

by Rana Sulieman, Food Fortification Initiative, USA

Since its inception in 2002, The Food Fortification Initiative (FFI) has grown to be a major advocate for global cereal grain fortification, addressing the pressing burden of nutritional deficiencies and their life-changing effects on health, such as birth defects of the brain and spine.

By engaging with public, private, and civic partners, the Food Fortification Initiative has helped countries around the world establish sustainable fortification programs and improved millions of lives.

To celebrate its twentieth birthday in October 2022, FFI is honoring 20 Fortification Champions, individuals from various sectors and parts of the world that have been game-changing advocates for food fortification.

The 2022 FFI Fortification Champions represent the partnerships and tireless efforts that have helped approximately 55 countries adopt mandatory cereal grain fortification legislation between 2002 and 2022.

What is the Food Fortification Initiative?

FFI provides technical assistance to governments, regional bodies, food producers, and implementing agencies to plan, implement, and monitor fortification of industrially milled wheat flour, maize, flour and rice.

FFI is the only global group that focuses exclusively on these three commonly consumed grains as a means of addressing the global burden of vitamin and mineral deficiencies. FFI is also the only organisation that tracks country and global progress in grain

fortification.

The idea for FFI was born on October 24, 2002 at a policy planning forum in Mauritius that was co-hosted by Nutrition International (formerly the Micronutrient Initiative) based in Canada and the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The forum was held in conjunction with a regional meeting of the Association of Operative Millers, later renamed the International Association of Operative Millers (IAOM).

By 2003, the global effort to build wheat flour and maize flour fortification programs was called the Flour Fortification Initiative. In time, industrially milled rice was added to FFI's work, and in 2014, the name was changed to the Food Fortification Initiative.

Wheat, maize, and rice are the most commonly consumed grains worldwide, and the fortification of each represents tremendous opportunities to improve global health.

Food fortification, the process of adding small amounts of nutrients to food as its processed, is one nutrition strategy to help people and nations prosper. Iron, zinc, folic acid, and other B vitamins are commonly added to foods to prevent health consequences like anemia, impaired cognitive development, and birth defects of the brain and spine called neural tube defects.

Fortification is a safe nutrition intervention proven to benefit individuals at every point in life – from conception to aging.

Food fortification champions

Nominated by their peers, the 2022 FFI Fortification Champions were selected based on their dedicated advocacy and efforts to advance food fortification and save lives. FFI sat down with each champion to learn about their experiences supporting or implementing fortification programs, the challenges and triumphs of their work, and the role of fortification in their respective regions or countries.

The conversations reflected the dynamic nature of advocacy work as it pertains to health and nutrition. “Working in nutrition gives you the opportunity to be a servant for your country, and to make a contribution for the development of society.

“If you have a dream and you want to make a difference, nutrition gives you this opportunity,” says Dr Nelly Zavaleta, 2022 FFI Fortification Champion and Senior Investigator at Instituto de Investigación Nutricional in Peru, highlighting the role of nutrition in her own work.

The champions are influential players in the realm of food



Pictured at one of FFI's first meetings, the 2003 IAOM meeting in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, are, from left to right: MG Venkatesh Mannar, then President of the Micronutrient Initiative (now Nutrition International); Abe Parvanta, then leader of the micronutrient team at the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; Tim Burtleigh, FFI Industry Liaison; and Essa Al-Ghurair, President of Al-Ghurair Foods in Dubai, who was an early champion of flour fortification.

fortification, providing real-life lessons learned from working on or supporting national fortification programs. Councilor Lyall Thurston of the Bay of Plenty, a 2022 FFI Fortification Champion, has a son who was born with spina bifida and hydrocephalus, two types of neural tube defects that can be caused by micronutrient deficiencies.

This ultimately led him to be involved in advocacy efforts that helped create New Zealand's mandatory wheat fortification legislation. "The New Zealand campaign was a long, protracted, collective effort which drew on support, relentless encouragement, and endless optimism from some of the greatest child health advocates, communicators, researchers, and members of medical and disability organisations worldwide."

Two decades of robust collaborative work

Twenty years of FFI represents two decades of robust collaborative work, reaching several faces of global nutrition. And yet there is still much for FFI and its partners to do to ensure that every country has a fortification program that addresses the nutritional needs of its people.

"We have to convince people that food fortification is a good public health strategy for which we should continue to be tenacious in our advocacy, and we should also be prepared to sustain support for countries to build and implement good quality food fortification programs and address the implementation challenges," adds Fortification Champion Dr Rajesh Mehta, summarising the future of fortification.

Integrity and sustainability are two of the core characteristics that drive FFI and the champions nominated in the campaign's work, emphasising the need to collaborate in order to have substantial impact.

The Fortification Champions align with FFI's vision to 'champion effective fortification of industrially milled flour and rice globally through multi-sector partnerships,' and their efforts have been key to creating programs that build a better future.

Celebrating 20 years

In the last 20 years, FFI has grown from an idea to a key player in the global effort to fortify the world against micronutrient deficiencies. In that time, building strong partnerships with government officials, industry managers, civic sector organisers, researchers, neurosurgeons, staff of non-governmental organisations, and others passionate about creating fortification programs to prevent micronutrient deficiencies have been a core part of FFI's strategy.

Even during FFI's most formative stages, champions across many sectors and disciplines played an integral part in building a healthier future through food fortification.

The progress of the work sustained by FFI and its global partners has had a direct impact on the number of countries with mandatory cereal grain fortification legislation. As of July 2022, 92 countries have legislation to mandate fortification of at least one industrially milled cereal grain. When FFI was founded in 2002, only 37 countries mandated fortification of wheat flour, maize flour, or rice.

The 2022 FFI Fortification Champions will be highlighted on FFI's social media platforms and website throughout the month of October, leading up to FFI's twentieth anniversary on October 24, 2022. Each champion will be introduced on Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and Twitter, so be sure to follow FFI and keep up with the hashtags #FFI20 and #20Champs.

Congratulations to the 2022 FFI Fortification Champions!