Mapping and tracking global food fortification efforts


Preventable micronutrient malnutrition, or “hidden hunger,” is responsible for approximately 10% of the global disease burden; it inhibits human development and perpetuates poverty and deprivation. For decades, fortification of common staple foods such as wheat and maize flour, rice, oil, and salt has been instrumental in preventing the devastating consequences of deficient intakes of vitamin A, vitamin D, iron, iodine, and folic acid.

As national food fortification programs are scaled up, we need to track their performance, improve their impact and ensure sustainability. Responding to a call to action for improved data availability and quality, issued at the 2015 Global Summit on Food Fortification in Arusha, a core group was formed in London in March 2016 comprising four organizations working in food fortification: the Food Fortification Initiative (FFI), the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN), the Iodine Global Network (IGN) and the Micronutrient Forum (MNF). Over the past year we have worked together to develop a new Global Repository of Food Fortification, a tool with the following aims:

- Collate fortification data using standardized indicators applicable to multiple micronutrients and food vehicles to provide a comprehensive national and global picture of the current situation and trends;
- Enable visualization of legislation, standards, intake, and program coverage data;
- Improve the availability and transparency of data to enable governments, donors, implementing agencies, and others in the fortification community to make data-driven decisions about policies and programs;
- Improve cooperation and coordination between national/global stakeholders for more efficient and cost-effective program planning and implementation.

IN SUMMARY

Why is the current situation inadequate?
Fortification is a proven intervention for improving health outcomes, but the current state of data collection, availability, and synthesis hinder decision-making. Currently multiple databases report different indicators and use inconsistent terminology and definitions. To enable uniform global monitoring, we need greater alignment across all fortification programs and among all program stakeholders.

What goals will a centralized global repository help to achieve?
The repository will provide a resource for governments, donors, and implementing agencies to make data-driven decisions about fortification policies and programs. It will synthesize available global and country data on the supply and demand for fortified foods and the status of fortification legislation and regulations, using a set of standardized indicators. This will enable harmonized reporting for multiple nutrients and food vehicles, simplify the tracking and analysis of global data, and in turn help evaluate and improve aspects of programs that are not working. This model mirrors the experience from countries, which shows that better alignment and coordination between all program stakeholders makes planning and implementation more efficient and cost-effective.

Who is responsible for the new repository?
Four organizations working in food fortification are collaborating on this project: the Iodine Global Network (IGN), the Food Fortification Initiative (FFI), the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) and the Micronutrient Forum (MNF). All four are equally vested in the successful deployment of national fortification programs. Our work is designed to complement each other’s efforts and the efforts undertaken by other agencies (e.g. WHO and FAO).

Which foods and indicators will be included in the repository?
Initially, we will focus on five major foods: (1) salt, (2) wheat flour, (3) maize flour, (4) rice, and (5) oil and spreads. Later on, we will add soy sauce, sugar, and micronutrient powders. Three of the core agencies will serve as data stewards: FFI (wheat, maize and rice), GAIN (oil) and IGN (salt). There will be 10 core indicators relevant to legislation and standards, fortification vehicle supply and consumption, industry landscape, internal and regulatory monitoring, compliance, coverage and impact.

- Eventually serve as a model that could be used by other interventions to generate robust data, inform program coordination, and optimize strategies to improve micronutrient intake across all population groups.
Key activities to date

**Developing indicators, concept, and structure of the repository**

In this phase, we developed an initial set of core indicators based on available data on the supply and demand for fortified foods, and the status of fortification legislation, regulations, monitoring, and compliance. This was important, as each agency had employed different names and definitions, so standardization was an essential step towards uniform metrics. In parallel, we outlined a process for continuous collection of updated data. The outcomes of these efforts were validated via consultation with the Global Fortification Technical Advisory Group (GF-TAG), an expert food fortification community with over 30 national and global partners. In August 2016, Camber Collective and TenPoint7 were recruited by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to assist us in developing the repository design and building a prototype. The repository was further developed and populated before the core group presented the concept at the Micronutrient Forum in Cancun, in October 2016, and solicited community feedback. A prototype repository was released in March 2017, and feedback from GF-TAG members is being used to inform the next steps.

**Public launch and communication to stakeholders**

We will launch a publicly-available web-based version of the repository in July 2017, with national data for three core indicators (related to mandatory legislation, nutrient levels in standards, and food vehicle intakes). During this period, we will also establish a database management structure to facilitate data entry. The data will be entered into the database by each agency and will sync with the online repository on a regular basis.

To accompany the public release of the repository, communications targeting governments, partner agencies and donors, will be developed which will include technical articles, user documentation and training materials, and presentations at key international meetings, such as the IUNS 21st International Congress of Nutrition (ICN) in Buenos Aires, October 2017.

**Expansion and transition to a permanent host, data collection strategy**

By the end of the final stage (December 2018), the repository will be available through a permanently-hosted site and will include all ten of the core indicators identified via collaboration with the GF-TAG.

A strategy for harmonized data collection of indicators across all fortification vehicles will be developed based on the availability of ‘unified fortification focal points’ at the country level. We see this as an opportunity to strengthen the integration of individual fortification programs at country level and to ensure country level data ownership. These focal points will be identified from national food fortification stakeholders.

Data collection will initially be tested in a small set of countries (with broad representation). Based on the lessons learned from the process, the data collection will be scaled up to more countries, prioritizing large countries with well-established programs and those with mandatory fortification of multiple vehicles. We will meet in August 2017 to plan the harmonized data collection pilot and again in January 2018 to plan scale-up efforts based on the lessons learned.

To find out more about the Global Repository of Food Fortification, please contact Jonathan Gorstein at jgorstein@ign.org