

ALMATY FORUM 2001: IMPROVING NUTRITION OF POOR WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN CENTRAL ASIA AND NEIGHBORING COUNTRIES (Project financed by Government of Japan)

After four days of deliberation, participants from six neighboring central Asia nations, attending a regional roundtable on salt and wheat flour fortification from 8-12 October sponsored by the Asian Development Bank, the United Nations Children's Fund and the Kazakh Academy of Nutrition and funded by the Government of Japan through the Japan Fund for Poverty Reduction, agreed on the following set of principles, strategies and actions (to be supported by the Japan Fund through 2002):

We recognize:

In recent years the nutrition status of women and children in our region has deteriorated badly with negative consequences for children, families and nations - iodine and iron deficiencies are the most serious, but other essential nutrients need to be addressed;

that the damage to the learning capacity of our children from iodine deficiency in pregnancy is irreversible;

that iron deficiency is causing serious damage to social and economic development through poorer pregnancy outcomes, impaired cognition especially in young children, reduced work capacity and increased morbidity from infectious diseases;

that zinc deficiency is associated with lowered immunity, slower growth and increased risk of heavy metal poisoning in contaminated environments;

that folic acid deficiency in women who become pregnant contributes to congenital abnormalities of the central nervous system of the newborn and is an independent risk factor for coronary heart disease; and

that the key B-vitamins thiamin, riboflavin and niacin are removed during milling along with most iron and folic acid contributing to micronutrient malnutrition among populations whose diets are heavily dependent on bread and other flour-based foods.

We affirm:

that the addition of potassium iodate to all salt sold for human nutrition is a well established method for eliminating iodine deficiency as a societal problem;

that the KAP Komplex formula, developed by the Kazakh Academy of Nutrition for Central Asia, is an appropriate and safe basis for wheat flour fortification in the populations of the region to prevent deficiencies of thiamin, riboflavin, niacin and folic acid and reduce iron and zinc deficiency. This formula is freely available to any enrichment mix producer;

that people of the region should have access to affordable, safe, and efficacious fortified foods as a permanent commitment to the elimination of micronutrient malnutrition;

that there are no capacity constraints for private producers to achieve significant progress in providing affordable fortified salt and flour to consumers in the region;

that the consequences of not implementing fortification programs at national level will be poor child development, low educational achievement of children, and decreased earnings and economic growth; and

that the initiative, supported by the Japan Fund, will contribute to fulfilling commitments made by the participating governments to universal protection of children.

Therefore, we pledge:

that all salt for human consumption will be fortified with potassium iodate and to the maximum extent achievable wheat flour will be fortified with micronutrients using the KAP Komplex formula.

This will require:

that food laws and regulations be reviewed and amended to ensure they support and enable the addition of all essential micronutrients in appropriate food carriers;

that public policies and regulations that constrain or impede investment in food fortification to reduce micronutrient malnutrition be reviewed and amended and that all nations collaborate to produce uniform or consistent standards based on international best practices that will smooth the trading of foods;

that customs protocols and trade regulations will be revised or enacted to ensure the import and export of certified and safe fortified foods at agreed levels of fortificants;

that the cost of food fortification must ultimately be borne by the producer and the consumer, but a transition period of cost -sharing between the public and private sectors may be necessary;

that efforts be continued to inform the public of the benefits of fortified salt and flour to the learning and earning capacities of the region's children and that the interests of NGOs, especially women's federations and consumers' rights unions, be fully included in future activities jointly conducted by the nations; and

that food fortification must be a part of a comprehensive strategy of anemia prevention and control that includes supplementation, dietary diversification, breastfeeding promotion and other public health measures.

NATIONAL ACTIONS

National actions to achieve this will require the following coordinated actions at national, oblast and local levels:

Pass and effectively implement mandatory salt iodization laws in all countries and move forward the consideration of flour fortification laws in a timely fashion.

Urge the elimination of tariffs and value-added taxes on inputs to fortification and fortified food products, imported or domestically processed, to promote sustainability.

Avoid excessive price increases for fortified products that may discourage consumer preference.

Initiate cost-sharing by public and private sectors of the costs of producing fortified salt and flour and strengthen the capacity of the private sector to be fully self-reliant shortly after the Japan Fund project completion.

Establish a monitoring framework to assess progress in the percent of salt and wheat flour fortified during production and families with access to fortified food products.

Integrate fortification programs into national strategies and policies to reduce poverty, raise the quality of human resources and support the survival, growth, psychosocial and cognitive development of all children, especially those of early ages.

Promote an expanded public sector-private sector dialogue on fortification of salt and cereal flour and organize advocacy events to increase program and donor support.

Develop and implement a communication strategy and campaign to raise public awareness and improve the child caring skills of parents on the importance of fortified salt, wheat flour and wheat flour products and promote increased consumer demand for these products. These activities will be led by non-governmental organizations in collaboration with the private sector, national experts, the media, local authorities and communities.

Promote mechanisms to exchange information and experiences within and across the countries of the project using the world wide web and other modern communication tools.

Obtain, update and disseminate information on the prevalence of micronutrient deficiencies by including micronutrient-related data collection into Demographic and Health Surveys, Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys and other nutrition, health and education surveys.

REGIONAL ACTIONS

Develop a framework for drafting and proposing harmonized regional and international trade standards and guidelines for fortified foods.

Develop regional activities such as roundtables, joint reports and cross country training focusing on legislation, communication strategies and partnerships among the civil society and private and public sectors.

Demonstrate through regional policy dialogue to economic planning agencies and the general public the large economic damage caused by poor nutrition and the proven low-cost solutions available to the region.

Advocate resource mobilization by governments from domestic budgets, public and private, and strategic investments from development partners, and share country experience in regional forums.

Review and recommend financial and capacity building incentives to sustain food fortification and its expansion to other essential foods widely consumed by the poor.

Set up sentinel sites in at least three project countries to monitor progress of continuing efforts to fortify all salt and wheat flour.

Create communication mechanisms, including a web site, that allow project countries to share advocacy, technical and promotional activities among themselves and with the global community.

Include micronutrient malnutrition issues into the agenda of regional expert group consultations such as associations of pediatricians, nutritionists and reproductive health specialists.

Prepare progress reports toward elimination of micronutrient malnutrition to the Regional Health Ministers Council.