

Providing Micronutrients to the Most Vulnerable Deemed “World’s Best Investment”

Micronutrient Initiative at the forefront of investment in vitamin A and zinc supplementation to save lives and improve child health

Ottawa, Canada, June 4, 2008 – The Micronutrient Initiative (MI) welcomes the conclusion of the 2008 Copenhagen Consensus Conference that combatting malnutrition in undernourished children, specifically providing vitamin A and zinc, provides the most beneficial return on investment in an examination of economic solutions to ten of the world’s biggest challenges.

In Denmark last week an expert panel of eight top economists assessed the work of more than 50 economists who presented their solutions to ten of the world’s biggest challenges. In her study of the benefits of providing micronutrients for 80% of the 140 million children who lack essential vitamins they need to survive and live full and productive lives, economist Sue Horton of Waterloo, Ontario’s Wilfrid Laurier University concluded that an annual investment of \$60 million would yield yearly benefits of more than \$1 billion. Every dollar spent on vitamin A and zinc supplementation programs creates benefits worth more than \$17. The panel concluded that supplementation should be the world’s top priority.

“Vitamin A supplementation is recognized as one of the most cost-effective interventions that improves children’s resistance to disease and infection,” says Venkatesh Mannar, President of the Micronutrient Initiative. “Reducing child mortality and improving child health will result in reduced healthcare costs immediately and increased earnings in the future. Since 1997, MI has provided almost 100% of the vitamin A required for supplementation programs in developing countries – more than 5 billion capsules and oral doses of vitamin A. Zinc has also been proven to strengthen the immune system to enable young children to survive infections and MI has significantly increased its programming in recent years to provide additional zinc to children most in need.”

In addition, the third top priority of the economic experts in Copenhagen was micronutrient fortification of food items such as iodizing salt and fortifying flour and rice with iron. Iodine deficiency can lead to goiters, cretinism, deafness and speech defects. A child with even a mild iodine deficiency can have an IQ 13 points lower than the average population. The easiest and most effective way to ensure adequate iodine is to iodize salt. “While we have made significant strides globally in Universal Salt Iodization, approximately 30% of the world’s population is still not consuming iodized salt,” explains Mannar. “These are the hardest to reach but MI is leading efforts by working with small, local salt producers in providing simple and easy iodization techniques to reach those households that are still not consuming iodized salt.”

Iron deficiency is a key risk factor in the deaths of more than 100,000 annually. It undermines the health, energy and productivity of many millions more. “Fortification of food with iron, along with folic acid and other essential vitamins can help improve the quality of life for women, helping them to bear and nurture children as well as generate household income,” continues Mannar. “MI offers its knowledge and technology to the food industry to add nutrients to food cost-effectively without affecting its quality or taste. MI plays a key role in mobilizing national plans and actions to address the vitamin and mineral deficiencies that effect millions of people.”

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Micronutrient Initiative is an international not-for-profit organization dedicated to ensuring that the world's most vulnerable - especially women and children - in developing countries get the vitamins and minerals they need to survive and thrive. Its mission is to develop, implement and monitor innovative, cost effective and sustainable solutions for hidden hunger, in partnership with others.

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For more information or to arrange interviews, please contact:

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Visuals available:

Stills of children receiving vitamin A supplementation
Stills of women fortifying flour
Footage of women and children lining up for vitamin A supplementation in Nepal (UNICEF footage)
Stills of vitamin A capsules, fortified rice and salt double-fortified with iron and iodine
Stills of small salt producers iodizing salt