

GLOBAL AID AGENCIES CALL FOR GREATER INVESTMENT IN LIFE-SAVING VITAMINS AND MINERALS

New Report Shows Micronutrients are Best Low-Cost Solution to Improved Health in Developing World

May 12, 2009, BEIJING, CHINA –Seven of the world's leading development agencies are calling on governments and other partners around the globe to demonstrate their commitments to children and families in developing countries by increasing investments in life-saving vitamins and minerals.

This call to action is detailed in a new report, "*Investing in the Future: A united call to action on vitamin and mineral deficiencies*," released today. The report, released at the 2009 Micronutrient Forum in Beijing, details the scope of under-nutrition in the developing world due to a lack of vitamins and minerals and provides tangible recommendations to improve the delivery of supplements and fortified food and improve the health of women and children around the world.

"Pregnant mothers and children are especially vulnerable to the deficiencies caused by not having adequate amounts of vitamins and minerals. Simply increasing the amounts of nutrients in their diet can help entire communities maintain good health," said Venkatesh Mannar, President of the Micronutrient Initiative. "The global community agrees that the best low-cost way to achieve this is by ensuring people in developing countries have access to vitamins and minerals. That is why we are calling on governments and partners to support our efforts to scale-up delivery of micronutrients."

The report was prepared by the Micronutrient Initiative, in partnership with the Flour Fortification Initiative, USAID, GAIN, WHO, The World Bank, and UNICEF, with support of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). It is the first time that the world's leaders in developmental nutrition have come together to produce a joint call to action for increased investments in vitamins and minerals.

With the global economy in recession, it is the world's most vulnerable citizens, especially children in developing nations, who struggle without access to the nutritious food they need. As a result, millions of children and entire communities do not get enough iron, iodine, vitamin A, folic acid and zinc. They are at risk to illness, blindness, preventable mental disorders and, too often, death: vitamin A deficiency annually claims the lives of almost 670,000 children under five; iron deficiency anaemia during pregnancy is associated with 115,000 deaths each year, accounting for one fifth of total maternal deaths.

"Providing these vitamins and minerals, also known as micronutrients, either through supplementation or food fortification, is a proven solution that costs just a few cents to save lives and help children grow healthy and strong," said Mannar.

With the low cost of micronutrient interventions and the high returns, the benefit:cost ratio of micronutrient programming is unmatched by any other large-scale health or economic intervention. Research by leading health economists has determined that every dollar spent on vitamin A and zinc supplementation programs creates benefits worth more than \$17. As the global financial crisis unfolds, there are fewer donors offering less funding for developmental assistance. It is critical now, more than ever that these investments yield the highest results. Micronutrients are proven to achieve this.

Significant progress is already being made in reducing many vitamin and mineral deficiencies. For example, between 1993 and 2007, the number of countries in which iodine deficiency disorders were a public health concern reduced by more than half – from 110 countries to 47. These striking results are clearly linked to expanded salt iodization. Vitamin A supplementation has played a key role in the reduction of annual under-five child deaths to less than 10 million.

More....

While these figures show what progress is possible, the report shows significant gaps in coverage remain and continue to undermine children's health and the progress of entire communities.

Experts are calling on governments, NGOs, donors, aid agencies, foundations, industry, community leaders and the agricultural sector for increased investments, renewed commitments and expansion of existing vitamin and minerals supplementation programs. Recommendations in the report include:

- Scaling up the delivery of integrated health services, including twice yearly vitamin A supplementation for children between six months and five years
- Enacting mandatory legislation to ensure all salt is iodized and provide adequate resources to enforce this legislation
- Setting and monitoring national standards for food fortification programmes
- Scaling up availability of multiple micronutrient supplements, such as Sprinkles, for in-home use in specified regions
- Scaling up iron and folic acid supplements for all women of child bearing age, with a special focus on pregnant women
- Incorporating zinc supplementation into national diarrhoea management policy and ensure zinc supply

The report details the proven success that micronutrient programmes have had. What is needed now is the political will, along with sufficient resources and supplies to make sure that all children, especially those in the world's poorest communities, have access to these life-saving micronutrients.

The report was released at the Micronutrient Forum being held in China between May 12-May 15. The Forum brings together the world's leaders working in micronutrient research and programming.

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For more information, please contact:

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Aynsley Morris
Communications Manager
The Micronutrient Initiative
Ph: (613) 218-8427
Hotel: (86-10) 84985588
E-mail: amorris@micronutrient.org

IN CANADA

Karen Snider
Media Relations Consultant
Ph: (416) 277-7907
E-mail: karensnider@hotmail.com

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