

Micronutrient Initiative Helping in the Fight against Hidden Hunger in Afghanistan



Venkatesh Mannar, President of the Micronutrient Initiative (right side) and Dr. Sadrudin Sahar, Deputy Minister for Administrative Affairs, Ministry of Public Health, Government of Afghanistan (left side) sign an agreement to help MI expand its programs to fight hidden hunger in Afghanistan.

Kabul, Afghanistan – Venkatesh Mannar, President of the Micronutrient Initiative (MI) and Luc Laviolette, Director for MI Asia, completed a mission to Kabul in July 2007 to further MI's work to prevent hidden hunger in Afghanistan. The mission included the signing of an agreement with the Government of Afghanistan that will help MI as the organization establishes a permanent office in Kabul and enhances its programs to protect millions of Afghans against the impairment and death associated with vitamin A deficiency, iron deficiency anemia, and iodine deficiency. These forms of hidden hunger are serious public health problems in Afghanistan and the Afghan government has asked MI to assist with the development of a national plan of action to address them. The MI is funded by Canadians, through the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA).

Since 1999, MI has been working with UNICEF to reduce child mortality in Afghanistan by providing high strength vitamin A capsules that are made in Canada. Vitamin A deficiency causes blindness and impairs the immune system, leaving children vulnerable to diseases and increasing child mortality. Afghanistan has the third highest mortality rate for children under the age of 5 in the world. This year the Vitamin A program is protecting 5.3 million children in Afghanistan.

MI programs are fortifying flour with iron and folic acid to prevent anemia and neural tube birth defects. Iron deficiency anemia mentally impairs children and decreases their scholastic ability. It saps the energy of women of child-bearing age, who are particularly susceptible to anemia, and it can even lead to death in childbirth. Seven of every 10 children in Afghanistan are anemic, as are almost half of all non-pregnant women there. These flour fortification programs are wide-reaching because a round, hard bread made with wheat flour is a key staple food in Afghanistan. MI's flour fortification program will reach 2.5 million people this year, with the possibility of rapid expansion to protect 5 million more people from iron deficiency.

MI is working with the Government of Afghanistan and salt producers to implement national salt iodization programs in Afghanistan. Globally, iodine deficiency is the leading cause of preventable yet irreversible mental impairment. In Afghanistan, 3 in 4 women are iodine deficient as are 7 in 10 children. MI has extensive experience working with salt producers to prevent iodine deficiency by fortifying salt with iodine. During his mission to Kabul, Mr. Venkatesh Mannar, President of the Micronutrient Initiative and internationally recognized expert on salt iodization, met with representatives from 17 salt processing units as part of this process. Salt is recognized as the ideal vehicle for food fortification programs to prevent iodine deficiency because it is so widely used.

“With CIDA’s funding to fight hidden hunger, we can implement the large-scale, low-cost, national food fortification programs that will save and improve the lives of children and mothers across Afghanistan,” said Mr. Mannar. “The Micronutrient Initiative is grateful for CIDA’s support and the ongoing reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan that enable the pursuit of our mission there.”

Passionate about developing and implementing solutions for hidden hunger, MI works in partnership with governments, the private sector and civil society organizations to address this serious problem that affects one third of the world’s population. Governed by an international Board of Directors, MI works in Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Middle East and reaches people in over 70 countries. With headquarters in Ottawa, Canada, MI maintains regional offices in New Delhi, India and Johannesburg, South Africa that manage country offices in Asia and Africa.



An Afghan man makes bread, which is a staple food in Afghanistan. MI programs to fortify the flour used to make bread will help protect 2.5 million people in Afghanistan against iron deficiency anemia with the potential for rapid expansion of the program.



Workers package salt at processing facilities near Kabul. Because salt is so widely used, it is an ideal vehicle for adding iodine to the diet of whole populations. MI’s work to begin salt iodization in Afghanistan is particularly important because approximately 3 out of 4 women there are iodine deficient.