

A conversation with Dr. Urmi Bhattacharya, Brendan Eappen, and Nikita Patel, July 20, 2020

Participants

- Dr. Urmi Bhattacharya – Country Director, Fortify Health
- Brendan Eappen – Chief Strategy Officer and Co-founder, Fortify Health
- Nikita Patel – CEO and Co-founder, Fortify Health
- Alex Cohen – Senior Fellow, GiveWell

Note: These notes were compiled by GiveWell and give an overview of the major points made by Dr. Bhattacharya, Mr. Eappen, and Ms. Patel.

Summary

Fortify Health received a [GiveWell Incubation Grant](#) in June 2018 to support its iron fortification program for wheat flour in India. GiveWell spoke with Dr. Bhattacharya, Mr. Eappen, and Ms. Patel of Fortify Health to discuss Fortify Health's progress and future plans. Conversation topics included Fortify Health's organizational updates, mill partnerships, government partnerships, projections of future progress, and current funding status.

Organizational updates

COVID-19

Fortify Health has experienced a significant delay in progress since March, due to travel restrictions put in place to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. Fortify Health had previously invested in hiring a Programme Officer with experience in the milling industry, who has been largely unable to begin performing his major duties securing partnerships with mills during this time.

COVID-19 transmission is also increasing in the region. Currently, the policy within the Indian state of Maharashtra requires that inter-district travelers quarantine themselves for 14 days, with no exceptions for business travel. There is pressure on local governments within Maharashtra to open up business travel for short trips. For example, travelers crossing the border between Pune and Nagpur for a trip shorter than four days do not have to quarantine if they pass a temperature check. Fortify Health is tracking whether or not similar policies will be put in place along the borders of other districts.

Hiring

Fortify Health's strategy has been not to halt expenditures related to hiring during the COVID-19 pandemic, to ensure readiness to resume its core intervention once travel restrictions are lifted. Fortify Health still intends to hire for the three roles it discussed with GiveWell in April, although the hiring process for these positions has been intentionally delayed.

- **Programme Officer** – A Programme Officer will be hired to work on mill onboarding, equipment installation, and maintaining communication with partner mills. The new Programme Officer will be junior to the current Programme Officer and will be based in Nagpur, where Fortify Health plans to establish a regional office. Fortify Health plans to make a final offer for this position in August 2020, while delaying the start date until travel is safe.
- **Partnerships Officer** – A Partnerships Officer will be hired to work on government outreach in Maharashtra and West Bengal. The Partnerships Officer will visit district-level government offices in Nagpur, expand partnerships with the Tribal Development Department, and work on Fortify Health's project to provide fortified flour to Ashram schools. The hiring process for the Partnerships Officer position is currently on hold.
- **Partnerships Manager** – A Partnerships Manager will be hired to work with the state government in Mumbai to try to institute fortification in state government schemes, such as the Public Distribution System (PDS). The Partnerships Manager will oversee the Partnerships Officer. Fortify Health's preferred candidate accepted an offer for this position and will begin on September 1, 2020.

Mill partnerships

Fortify Health has active contracts with five mills. One of the mills has begun fortification, another of the mills has installed its fortification equipment, two other mills are awaiting installation after having received their equipment, and the fifth mill is a newly signed partnership.

Contract signed in Aurangabad, Maharashtra

Since April, Fortify Health has secured a contract with a fifth mill, despite COVID-19-related travel restrictions. Fortify Health has been in contact with this mill since December 2019, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, which allowed it to pursue a contract with the mill sooner than it otherwise would have. Fortify Health's Programme Officer has been a valuable hire in this area, as his previous milling experience has allowed him to communicate with mills more strategically and effectively, even during times of hardship for the mills.

Contract renewal in Mumbai, Maharashtra

The owner of the partner mill in Mumbai, Maharashtra was successfully contacted in June 2020 and has signed a one-year contract extension with Fortify Health.

Equipment delivery in Nagpur, Maharashtra and Purulia, West Bengal

Fortification equipment has been successfully delivered to Fortify Health's partner mills in Nagpur, Maharashtra and Purulia, West Bengal. Once business travel is possible, Fortify Health's first priority will be to install the fortification equipment at the mills.

No progress in Amravati, Maharashtra

The situation with the partner mill in Amravati, Maharashtra has not changed since April. Fortification equipment has been installed in the mill, but Fortify Health has been unable to contact the owner to discuss when fortification will begin.

Government partnerships

The short-term goal of Fortify Health's government partnerships is to institute wheat flour fortification into India's safety net programs. Fortify Health's long-term goal is to influence the passage of state policy that prioritizes wheat flour fortification in the open market as well.

Fortify Health has submitted proposals to the Additional Tribal Commissioners of the Tribal Development Departments in Nagpur, Maharashtra and Amravati, Maharashtra, which are awaiting approval from the Principal Secretary of the Tribal Development Department of Maharashtra, who is based out of the Secretariat in Mumbai. Fortify Health's local government partners have recommended that Fortify Health meet the Principal Secretary in person to make the case for wheat flour fortification at the state level and pursue approval of its proposals, which will not be possible until travel restrictions are lifted.

Central Food Technology Research Institute (CFTRI) partnership

Fortify Health is seeking to sign a one-year contract with the Central Food Technological Research Institute (CFTRI) to assist with mill onboarding. Establishing a partnership with CFTRI, a reputed milling institute, will give Fortify Health institutional leverage with large mills. Fortify Health hopes to sign the agreement at a time when business travel will soon be possible.

Progress projections

Fortify Health estimates that it was approximately four to six months behind its planned timeline prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and that the pandemic has delayed it another six months. However, Fortify Health believes the investments it's made in hiring and its strategic focus on growth during this time could help it retain its current staff and overcome the barriers it's faced so far.

Fortify Health is unable to formulate a fixed timeline given the uncertainties inherent to the COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant travel restrictions. Fortify Health cannot rule out a second national lockdown in the future, but believes intermittent localized lockdowns are more likely. Fortify Health has planned for two possible scenarios. The first scenario assumes that safe business travel will be possible by September, 2020. The second scenario assumes that safe business travel will be possible by November, 2020. Because mills tend to face wheat shortages and suspend operations during the January to March period, it is important that Fortify Health be able to engage in business travel to visit mills by December.

Scenario 1 (business travel possible from September 2020 onward)

- July 2021 projections
 - Contracts signed with 12 mills.
 - Fortification equipment installed in 10 mills.
 - Fortified wheat product launched in 8 mills.
- September 2021 projections
 - Contracts signed with 12 mills.
 - Fortification equipment installed in 12 mills.
 - Fortified wheat product launched in 12 mills.

Scenario 2 (business travel possible from November 2020 onward)

- September 2021 projections
 - Contracts signed with 12 mills.
 - Fortification equipment installed in 12 mills.
 - Fortified wheat product launched in 10 mills.
- November 2021 projections
 - Contracts signed with 12 mills.
 - Fortification equipment installed in 12 mills.
 - Fortified wheat product launched in 12 mills.

Fortify Health has factored potential complications into its projections, such as lack of demand for wheat flour in the market. Many people stocked up on wheat in the initial phase of India's COVID-19-related lockdown, so demand has now decreased. Because Fortify Health fully subsidizes the fortification of wheat flour in its partner mills, the troubling economic situation in India is unlikely to favor the purchasing of unfortified over fortified products. However, if economic trends continue in their current direction, overall spending on food products, including wheat flour, may decrease.

Fortify Health is also concerned that travel restrictions might be enacted in response to potential surges in COVID-19 transmission in rural areas during the Indian festival season. The festival season occurs between late August and mid-October, and is usually accompanied by increased travel of workers from urban areas to their home villages in rural areas.

Fortify Health plans to continue assessing its projections as more information becomes available. In the meantime, Fortify Health plans to prepare for its next quarterly call with GiveWell by examining its ability to make progress in the months leading up to the call and closely examining its financials to determine when a grant renewal evaluation from GiveWell will be necessary. Fortify Health currently anticipates that GiveWell will be able to perform a grant renewal evaluation of its program in June 2021.

State of current funding

Because of hiring and operational delays, Fortify Health has spent less of its 2020 budget than anticipated so far. Fortify Health is examining various potential scenarios and how each would impact its financials. Fortify Health's full, detailed financial data is currently being audited, but it will be shared with GiveWell once available.

All GiveWell conversations are available at
<http://www.givewell.org/research/conversations>