A conversation with Advait Deshpande, May 19, 2023

Participants

- Advait Deshpande – Food Technologist, Government of India's Large Scale Food Fortification Program
- Andrew Martin – Senior Research Associate, GiveWell

Note: These notes were compiled by GiveWell and give an overview of the major points made by Mr. Deshpande.

Summary

GiveWell spoke with Mr. Deshpande about iron fortification in India. Mr. Deshpande is a food technologist who has previously worked on up-scaling of staple food fortification in the eastern states of India.

In brief, conversation topics included:

1) The trajectory of government-implemented fortification in India. Fortification started in 1953 but gained momentum in 2016 when the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) published standards for fortified food. In 2021, Prime Minister Modi announced that by 2024 all rice provided through social safety net programs will be fortified.
    - In India, salt, rice, and wheat flour are currently being fortified on a voluntary basis, as well as some processed foods such as cereals and baked goods. Rice and wheat flour are being fortified with iron, folic acid, and vitamin B12, and salt is being fortified with iodine and iron.
    - To implement fortification programs, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) collaborates with various governmental departments, including the Department of Food and Public Distribution, the Ministry of Women and Child Development, and the Department of School Education & Literacy. Additionally, the FSSAI also works in collaboration with international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to ensure the successful implementation of these fortification initiatives.
2) There are various NGOs working on fortification in India such as Food Fortification Initiative (FFI), Nutrition International (NI), PATH, Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN), World Food Programme (WFP), Tata Trusts, and Fortify Health.
    - The NGOs play a crucial role in the fortification efforts in India. They work on up-scaling fortification in Indian states for staple foods and coordinate with various government departments to ensure the distribution of fortified staples in social safety net programs. Additionally, they contribute to capacity building of the food industry by helping them adopt fortification practices, providing technological support, and assisting government departments in effective monitoring. The NGOs also actively promote social behavior change regarding fortification, emphasizing its importance and benefits to the public.

3) Perspectives on fortification in India. The general public in India mostly does not hold strong views on food fortification, but it is somewhat contentious in some circles.
    - Groups who are critical of food fortification in India tend to argue that it is driven by corporate profit-seeking, rather than genuine concern for public health.
    - Some individuals raise concerns about the effectiveness of fortification as a strategy to address iron deficiency and express apprehensions regarding the potential risk of iron toxicity due to overconsumption. However, it should be noted that the fortification standards are so stipulated that iron provided through fortified staples constitutes only one-third (4.5 mg) of the total daily requirement. Mr. Deshpande believes that, in a country where food consumption lacks diversity, supplying iron-fortified rice or wheat flour is a low-cost, safe, and effective approach to combat malnutrition. Notably, since 2000, at least 14 countries, including the United States of America, Canada, and Bangladesh, have been successfully implementing fortified rice programs without reporting any adverse impacts. Furthermore, there are ample studies available in both the global and Indian context that highlight the efficacy of iron fortification in ameliorating iron deficiency.
    - Despite the benefits of fortification, some activists have expressed concerns that iron-fortified foods could potentially harm individuals with thalassemia or sickle cell anemia. In response to these concerns, the government has taken measures to address the issue by mandating the labeling of fortified foods with a cautionary line, advising people with sickle cell anemia to avoid their consumption as a preventive measure. The implementation of cautionary labeling ensures that individuals with specific health conditions are aware of potential risks while still allowing the broader population to access the nutritional benefits of fortified staples.

4) NGOs that receive funding from sources outside of India play a vital role in supporting fortification initiatives. As long as these NGOs adhere to the appropriate rules and regulations in India, they can operate effectively and contribute significantly to the fortification efforts, irrespective of the origin of their funding. Mr. Deshpande believes that funding fortification programs in India is unlikely to pose a reputational risk for the funders; instead, it demonstrates their strong commitment to improving public health and addressing nutritional deficiencies. By supporting fortification initiatives, these external funders showcase their dedication to promoting the well-being and overall health of the population in India.