

Meeting Report: Ministry of Health, Fiji and Global Health Institute, Sydney Suva, Fiji 4 February 2011

Overview

The meeting conducted on the 4th of February 2011 in Suva brought together a small group of representatives from the Ministries of Health, Agriculture, Industry and Trade and Finance and the National Food and Nutrition Centre, Fiji, and the Global Health Institute, Sydney. The meeting was a planning meeting, primarily to exchange ideas and discuss Fiji's commitment to improving food security and health, following its adoption of the Framework for Action for a food secure Pacific at the Food Summit in Vanuatu in April 2010, and its subsequent endorsement at the Pacific Minister's meeting in August 2010. The main focus of the meeting was on food fortification efforts, particularly Fiji's interest to fortify rice with micronutrients and to align its fortification of flour to the revised World Health Standards.

A summary of the points of discussion is laid out below:

Points of discussion

- **Wheat flour fortification**
 - The MoH is ready to align flour fortification to WHO standards with the exception of fortification with zinc. It would also like to retain the iron fortificant (electrolytic iron) it is currently using until the results of the latest micronutrient survey are released. The Government to talk to FMF and Punjas to have the flour fortified to recommendations.
 - While it is important to encourage Pacific populations to eat healthy, balanced meals, a dietary diversification strategy alone may not deliver the required micronutrients for optimal health. Phytates present in plant foods are major inhibitors of iron and zinc absorption.
 - With fortification, no change in diet is required. However, cost of fortified flour (and other foods) must be kept affordable.
 - There was a discussion on who would monitor flour fortification levels. The food companies are responsible for maintaining records of quality assurance, usually obtaining a certification of their product by an independent company. The premixes used are also generally of a high standard and accompanied by an attached certificate of quality.
- **Rice fortification**
 - It was agreed that though fortifying rice was an immediate opportunity to address vitamin and mineral deficiency among rice eating populations in the Pacific, it was still in its early stages of development. Four Pacific countries – Fiji, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Samoa - are keen to move ahead.

- Since Fiji imports rice, it may be good to focus on fortifying imported rice at a common point of entry rather than try to fortify locally grown rice that is milled in small quantities by farmers.
- Punjas and FMF want to start fortifying immediately as it is 'a simple process' but there needs to be government endorsement, action, and regulation to ensure that it is done correctly. The Government could consider reopening the rice mills.
- Costs to fortify rice are negligible when compared to price fluctuations of retail price of rice in the local market.
- New technologies have resulted in the development of high quality fortified rice kernels that can retain micronutrients post washing and cooking.
- The Rice Fortification Resource Group has come out with 'Frequently asked questions and answers' on rice fortification. It will be a useful resource for policy makers in Governments and Agencies.
- A cost benefit analysis of fortified rice on the health and productivity of the Fijian population would help promote this intervention.
- **Development of national and regional standards for fortification and food control systems**
 - The Government was interested in standards available to fortify rice. Fiji went ahead with fortification of flour before WHO standards were developed. Until international guidelines are formulated (the process has been initiated and is expected to be complete in 2012), Fiji can use standards used by other countries fortifying rice. Eg. PNG, the Philippines. For the present, the fortification levels can be closely aligned with flour fortification levels.
 - As for rice fortification, relating to all food control measures there needs to be a national or regional standard.
 - Concerns were raised about the poor quality of rice entering the market because of poor food control systems. The Food safety law needs to be implemented. Inspections and enforcement by the Trade Departments could be tightened.

Summary

- There is good interest to fortify rice in Fiji. However, standards need to set up and the Government will have to inform industry on requirements for rice fortification..
- The need for criteria and frameworks on rice fortification from other countries can be adapted and used for implementation in Fiji, until global guidelines are available.
- It was agreed that a level playing field could be achieved through legislation on quality assurance and enforcement.

Attendees

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