



AFRICA The importance of flour fortification

A report from the Africa networking meeting

by Tom Blacker, Milling and Grain magazine



The purpose of fortification or enrichment (adding micronutrients and vitamins to food) is to improve health, reduce illnesses and progress populations to be smarter, stronger and healthier.

Millers have a role in play in achieving these goals by ensuring the products are effectively fortified to ensure products destined for human

diets such as baked goods, breads and more are delivering healthy benefits as well as sustaining life.

Smarter Futures is made up of the following supporting organisations: Food Fortification Initiative (FFI), AkzoNobel, Helen Keller International, International Federation for Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus (IFSBH) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands. The aim of Smarter Futures is to improve health in Africa through the enrichment of wheat and maize flour with essential vitamins and minerals.

On Tuesday December 2, 2014, in Cape Town, South Africa the opening reception for the Africa Networking meeting took place. Speakers for the following day such as Lieven Bauwens – Secretary General of the IFSBH, Scott Montgomery from the FFI, Greg S. Garrett from the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN), Anna Verster from Smarter Futures, and others were all present to meet attendees.

National government programmes across Africa have meant that many countries now fortify wheat and/or maize flour, when

only two did in 2004. The attendees were from across Africa, representing fortification working groups, the UN World Food Programme, and health and nutrition experts.

At the evening reception, annual leadership awards were presented to Peter Muni, Executive Director of Bakhresa Grain Milling in Malawi and Mozambique. He accepted the award on behalf of the Food Fortification Initiative for his colleague, Abubakar Said Salim Bakhresa of the Bakhresa Group for a commitment to flour fortification in Africa.

Another leadership award was presented to Dr Mady Shehata, Nutritional Advisor for the World Food Programme in Egypt.

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He was noted for his role in public health in Egypt’s path to mandatory fortification, working with both governmental and non-governmental groups.

The following morning, Lyn Moeng, Cluster Manager for Health Promotion, Nutrition and Oral Health on behalf of the Department of Health of South Africa opened the meeting with a positive message of celebration of hard work paying off and much of Africa enjoying benefits of fortification in foods that had never been achieved before. “Colleagues, we are here to

90
Years



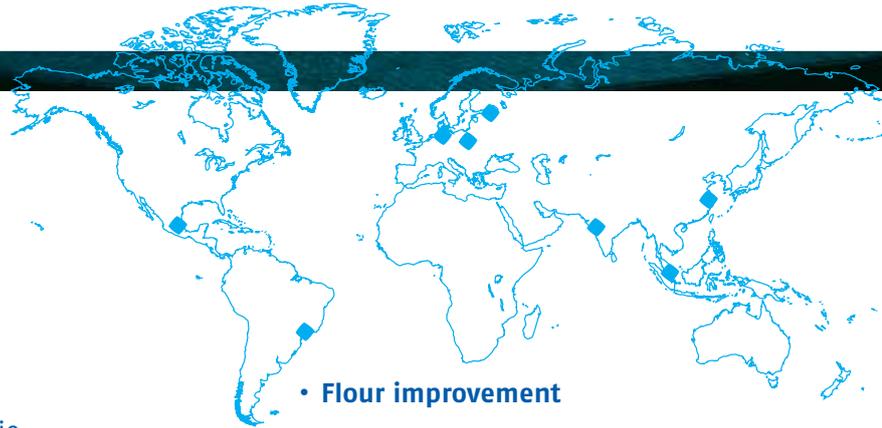
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celebrate 15 years of trial and error – the road has been bumpy but we are getting there.”

Her remarks truly reflected that so far, this has been a challenging journey, one that has required co-operation between research, lobbying, political will and more. This means that even the smallest of celebrations or fewest numbers of individuals benefitting from such changes should be celebrated and applauded. One day was not enough for Lyn to truly enjoy the fruits of the progress and many agreed.

Following this, Dr Graham Fieggen of the Red Cross Hospital in Cape Town presented a scientific approach to justifying fortification. He focused on folic acid fortification being an essential step in milled food to prevent neuro-tube defects, spina bifida and hydrocephalus. For eight weeks ahead of birth delivery, folic acid dramatically assists in lowering the risk of spina bifida by 70 percent. This means that milled flour or other cereal products already with folic acid added directly helps in healthier babies with nearly a three out of four chance of avoiding spina bifida. He also said that a 1000 day programme should be followed by pregnant mothers.

The picture is not wholly positive and points for progress were given: the US FDA and others worldwide were highlighted for classing folic acid as a drug, not a supplement; the 1000 day programme of folic acid for pregnant mothers should be compulsory and missing target groups should be educated and included so that the benefits extend to all.

The agenda moved to partnerships and perspectives from all sectors. This was the private sector, governments, civil society and public-private partnerships. Millers were also there in order to voice the opinion of the industry. Peter Cook, Chairman of the National Chamber of Milling in South Africa importantly said that, “Without the milling industry, we cannot achieve the fundamental need of fortifying food to address vitamin and mineral storage that may be typical in a country. I think this is our role, to actually be the means to this end.”

Flour milling and innovation was also represented in the interested audience members such as Muehlenchemie’s Head of Research of Development, Dr Lutz Popper and Nicolas T. Tshikhakis of The Modern Flour Mills & Macaroni Factories Co. in Jordan. They networked and questioned speakers and spoke to other delegates throughout the day.

Questions also followed, Hans-Jurgen Hanke, a miller from Namib mills, Namibia asked Mr Quentin Johnson, FFI Training and Technical Support Coordinator about storage of fortified grain and flour products in hot and dry conditions. The answer was advice of air-conditioning the premises; movement of it and monitoring it regularly was given.

Scott Montgomery, former miller with Cargill and now at the Food Fortification Initiative said that, “he and the FFI wants to turn the world blue” (to mandatory fortification of wheat and cereals). He also aims for awareness, the sharing and transparent exchange of education and experiences to spread further. For Scott, fortifying foodstuffs means more than just folic acid, the more the merrier by all counts is meant. This aims to follow the precedent set by the high example of countries outside of Africa such as Jordan, which has been fortifying milled flour with iron sulphate, vitamin B, vitamin D, zinc and folic acid for the last ten years.

Recent news since the meeting from the Food Fortification Initiative is that Djibouti has mandated wheat flour fortification. This proves that progress and advancing Africa’s fortification of flour and food is still an important issue. There is much more to discover for the future of this exciting story. The state of play is rapidly changing. This is the future for us all, and it’s only on the way up! ☺