

**Opening Speech by the Minister of Health and Social Welfare
Honourable Prof. David Mwakyusa at the First African Flour
Fortification Initiative Workshop in Arusha, on 17th November 2008**

**Distinguished Delegates,
Officials from various Ministries,
Our collaborating partners,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

First of all, I wish to extend my warm welcome on behalf of the Government of Tanzania and on my own behalf to all delegates to this meeting. We hope that the various preparations we have made will meet your needs and expectations and that you will be able to carry out your deliberations in a warm and conducive atmosphere.

I feel privileged to be part of this important first African Flour Fortification Initiative (FFI) workshop. I am informed that FFI is a network of individuals and organizations working together to make micronutrient fortification of flour produced by large roller mills a reality. It is a network composed of representatives of private, public and civic organizations who combine their resources and collaborate to foster flour fortification. The representatives are farmers, wheat procurement and marketing organizations, millers, mill manufacturers, producers and distributors of flour improvers and fortificants, food industries, non-government organizations, agencies of the United Nations, government agencies and other national entities.

The mission of FFI is to stimulate interaction and partnership between the public and civic sectors and the grain and flour industries to inform and encourage the industries to make fortification of flour a normal practice of their large roller mills.

Ladies and Gentlemen

Micronutrient malnutrition is a problem of public health significance in developing countries including Tanzania. For example, the major types of micronutrient malnutrition in Tanzania are

- Nutritional anaemia which affects about 72% of our children and 48% of women of child bearing age
- Iodine deficiency disorders with prevalence of 7% in school children
- Vitamin A deficiency where the low serum retinol is 24% in children aged less than five years and serum retinol in breast milk is 69% in lactating mothers.

Within African countries, more than 10 million women and children suffer from various micronutrient deficiencies such as iodine deficiency disorders, vitamin A deficiency and iron deficiency anaemia. These are at best conservative estimates but we know that many more are at risk. The economic loss resulting from this situation is estimated to be more than 400,000 deaths annually and almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of a billion USD per year.

Strengthening regional cooperation to accelerate flour fortification, as a key public health intervention, is not only timely topic to focus on health but also a pivotal component of the region's efforts to attain the Millennium Development Goals. We are all aware that malnutrition remains the world's most serious health problem that is associated directly or indirectly with more than 50 percent of all child mortality. In addition, nearly a third of all people in developing countries, suffer deficiencies of micronutrients.

If this picture is seen within the bigger disease burden of this region, one is faced with a frightening scenario where even basic treatment for common illnesses frequently fails mainly due to the poor nutritional status of the patients taking the medication. This further escalates to loss of life. It is therefore significant that forums such as this one continue to call attention for the need to focus on the prevention and control of vitamin and mineral deficiencies. This is an essential part of any effort to fight micronutrient

malnutrition to directly mitigate the effects of the disease burden within the populations of the African countries.

The main approaches used in reducing micronutrient deficiencies (e.g. vitamin A and iron deficiencies) and its associated disorders in vulnerable populations have been mainly the use of massive oral dosages (e.g. vitamin A and folate supplementation), dietary diversification and provision of nutrition education. However, the effectiveness of such methods (e.g. supplementation) in reaching individuals /recipients is limited since it requires a well-established health delivery system, professional and managerial resources which are scarce. In view of that, several efforts have been taking place with a focus of making food fortification becoming a reality.

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Food fortification as cost effective intervention involves the addition of essential micronutrients to selected foods such as wheat flour, sugar, edible oil, and maize flour for prevention or correction of a specific nutritional deficiency disorders in a population or a segment of the population. Additionally, food fortification is becoming increasingly a widespread means of delivering micronutrients to populations in many countries in the world. We all know that healthy and productive populations require adequate amounts of essential vitamins and minerals.

In Tanzania, bottleneck to effective food fortification include lack of regulations and legislations, un-preparedness of some industries, lack of technology know how, and low public awareness to demand fortified products. Of recent fortification standards for wheat flour and maize flour have been reviewed and adopted and regulations are in the process of development.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Member States were challenged to reduce the burden of vitamin and mineral deficiencies at the 1990 World Summit for children in New York, and at the 1993

International Workshop on Nutrition in Rome. These challenges called for virtual elimination of vitamin A and iodine deficiency and substantial reduction of iron deficiency levels by the year 2000. Over the decade of the nineties following that call, Universal Salt Iodization (USI) to virtually eliminate iodine deficiency was taken up by many nations. As a result, households access to iodized salt throughout the world increased from about 10% in 1990 to over 70% today. In Tanzania 83% of our households are accessible to iodated salt.

It is my expectation that this workshop will address several issues such as the opportunities to strengthen communications with public and private sector partners, discuss the need to fortify wheat flour with at least iron, zinc and folic acid, review experiences to address specific issues relating to maize flour fortification, barriers and challenges to flour fortification in Africa and identify steps towards achieving large-scale national fortification

Ladies and Gentlemen

The recent renewed interest on food fortification is largely because fortification is generally recognized as being the most effective and sustainable way to eliminate dietary micronutrient deficiencies, especially where multiple micronutrients mixes (e.g. vitamin A, vitamin B₁, vitamin B₂, vitamin B₆, vitamin B₁₂, niacin, folate, iron, and zinc) are used. Additionally food fortification is socially acceptable, requires no change in food habits, does not change significantly the characteristics of the food, has readily visible benefits, relatively easy to monitor and cheapest intervention programme for the government with a greater sustainability. Although fortification is less common in developing countries, it is nevertheless an important intervention and globally it has done much to correct significantly what were once common micronutrient deficiencies and their resultant disabilities.

The costs incurred in food fortification are only additional costs of fortifying the food vehicle. In general the operational and quality control costs in food fortification are small when compared to the recurrent costs of micronutrients and the social costs of their deficiencies. For instance, economic analysis of returns on fortification of foods with vitamin A, iron and iodine has shown that fortification is cost-effective in all cases. According to World Bank figures, it costs less than 1 US\$ per year to protect an individual against deficiencies of vitamin A, iron and iodine in food fortification. A major constraint in food fortification is the demand of the program on foreign exchange in relation to procuring fortificants. It is imperative, then, to consider the feasibility of obtaining fortificants at local or regional level while efforts are being sought on how the food fortification program can be subsidized by government to reduce the costs/taxes related to importation of fortificants.

Successful fortification of a staple foods reaches everyone, including the poor, pregnant women, young children and populations that social services can never cover them completely. Also, fortification may have benefits outside the immediate target group, because it can reach secondary target risk groups, such as elderly, the ill, people living with HIV/AIDS, and those who may have an unbalanced diet for whatever reasons.

Ladies and Gentlemen

In light of the above, the success of food fortification requires a high participatory approach, with multiple partnerships and joint strategies by governments, the private sector, and other industry players. This is well articulated by Objective five (V) of the African Regional Nutrition Strategy of the AU which seeks to define mechanisms for collaboration and cooperation among the various actors concerned with food and nutrition problems at national, regional and international levels.

It is in this context that this initiative by the Flour Fortification Initiatives network, reflects the essence and spirit of this activity in our region. The initiative and other similar

initiatives deserve our sustained support to achieve impact. It is only through concerted efforts to coordinate regional and national strategies, that we can reduce duplication of efforts deploying our very scarce resources towards cost-effective tested interventions that addresses micronutrient deficiency as a major public health concern in the region.

I would like to reiterate the need for closer partnerships among the stakeholders represented here to harness fortification opportunities both within the region and nationally, mobilize necessary resources and focus attention on vulnerable groups particularly women and children. This way, we will be directly contributing to the broader continental efforts to combat malnutrition. We hope that your active participation and the deliberations from this workshop will help us re-define our approaches and methodologies while at the same time draw experience from other countries.

It is my wish that despite your heavy workload, you will find sometimes off to visit our country and meet our people. I particularly welcome you to visit the National Game Parks in Arusha, which are the largest, most exotic and populous in the world. Most of you will have seen the film “Serengeti shall never die”. Moreover for those interested in mountain climbing, Mt. Kilimanjaro, Africa’s highest point is also closeby.

With these remarks, ladies and gentlemen, it is my honour to formally declare this workshop officially open.

Thank you for your attention.