

The Administrator

February 29, 2024

BIFAD Chairman Laurence Alexander Chancellor, University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff 1200 North University Drive Pine Bluff, AR 71601

Dear Chairman Alexander,

Thank you for sharing the Board for International Food and Agricultural Development's (BIFAD) helpful findings, conclusions, and recommendations from the BIFAD public meeting *Fed* to *Thrive: Accelerating Action on Nourishing Foods for Infants and Young Children*. We greatly appreciate BIFAD's recommendation that USAID prioritize resources and approaches to improve the affordability of safe and nutritious diets, with a focus on children 6 to 23 months of age.

USAID has been a global leader in nutrition for more than 50 years, and we continue to build on that legacy. BIFAD's recommendations to USAID align with the Agency's priorities and commitments for improving children's diets and nutrition.

As BIFAD's public meeting findings and recommendations reflect, good nutrition in the first 1,000 days—from pregnancy through a child's first two years—sets children up for lifelong well-being and enables children to reach their fullest potential. In short, good nutrition early in life safeguards the potential of future generations. Yet poor diets, and a deficit of affordable nutritious foods in particular, limit children's survival, growth, and development. In low- and middle-income countries, only 18 percent of children under two years of age receive a diet that promotes proper growth and development.

At the 2021 Tokyo Nutrition for Growth Summit, I announced the United States' commitment to invest up to \$11 billion over three years to combat global malnutrition—the underlying cause of almost half of childhood deaths globally. USAID's Nutrition for Growth (N4G) commitments include strengthening interventions to nourish children, such as large-scale food fortification, breastfeeding support, and the prevention and treatment of wasting.

To achieve a well-nourished population, especially among women and children—one of the key objectives of the U.S. government's Global Food Security Strategy (GFSS)—USAID's work focuses on increasing resilience and building strong food and health systems. Improving the quality of children's diets will continue to be a cornerstone of USAID programming. Additionally, USAID's Global Malnutrition Prevention and Treatment Act of 2021 Implementation Plan elevates strengthening nutrition in primary health care systems and increasing dietary diversity and appropriate complementary feeding as central priorities for the Agency's efforts to support proper nutrition for children 6 to 23 months of age.

U.S. Agency for International Development 1300 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW Washington, DC 20523 www.usaid.gov I share BIFAD's commitment to help children around the world not only survive, but reach their fullest potential. Thank you for BIFAD's commitment to, and leadership of, this shared vision.

Sincerely,

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Samantha Power

Enclosure: Agency Response to BIFAD Recommendations from October 19, 2022, Public Meeting

Summary of Responses by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to the Recommendations from the Board for International Food and Agricultural Development (BIFAD or Board) Public Meeting,

Fed to Thrive: Accelerating Action on Nourishing Foods for Infants and Young Children.

BIFAD Recommendation 1. Elevate the improvement of diets for children six to 23 months as central in USAID's multi-sectoral nutrition programming, particularly in USAID's Nutrition Priority and Strategic Support Countries and Feed the Future focus countries. This age range is the most crucial point of entry in a person's life for good nutrition, producing a lifetime of benefits. Prioritizing nutrition should include the following:

a. Support robust research and analysis to understand the key barriers, enablers, and pathways in improving the quality of young children's diets, and identify key actions USAID and its implementing partners can take across food, health, and social-protection systems to address these barriers. This research should aim to better understand the factors, processes, and innovations that are successful (and those that are not) in enabling multi-sectoral action to improve diets for young children. Research should also seek to understand and tailor behavior change communication to local contexts, with consideration of the social norms, caregiver knowledge and confidence, and governance factors that influence affordability of nutritious diets and the adoption of these diets.

b. Integrate indicators of children's diets as key outcomes of multi-sectoral programming, ensuring provision of sufficient resources to fully collect, monitor, and analyze the data required to track achievement of targets.

c. Consider nutrition a central part of USAID's equity agenda. Mothers cannot continue to bear sole responsibility for nutrition. The drivers of malnutrition—time constraints and the lack of access to and inability to afford safe and nutritious foods—all highly align with socio-economic status. Malnutrition is an equity issue.

d. Integrate development and humanitarian assistance. While we need to act now to prevent children from dying, we also need to build for the medium and long term. USAID should work across functions to integrate humanitarian assistance and development programs, focusing on malnutrition and building resilience in the face of future shocks. BIFAD anticipates pursuing a consultative analytical effort in 2023–2024 to understand and put forward recommendations regarding USAID structures, staffing, and resources needed for this level of integration and layering to meet the ambitious nutrition outcomes called for in the GFSS.

Agency Response:

Improving diet quality, particularly for women and children, is a key priority of USAID's work. USAID maximizes impact for young children's diets by bringing together investments in food and health systems, as well as humanitarian responses with a geographical focus in the Nutrition Priority and Strategic Support Countries. USAID's food-system programming focuses on generating consumer demand, improving food safety, and partnering with the private sector to strengthen food processing and fortification—all to support better diets for children by increasing household access to and consumption of diverse, nutritious, and safe foods. Within health systems, USAID aims to improve children's diets by ensuring nutrition services are

available, accessible, and of high quality at all levels of the health system, including through community health workers. This includes supporting improved social and behavior-change approaches that are tailored to individuals and communities, looking holistically at the behaviors and norms needed to improve nutrition in the first 1,000 days. In humanitarian crises, USAID aims to protect children's diets through both general food assistance and targeted supplementary nutrition assistance where needed. The Agency also supports response services, such as the prevention and treatment of child wasting and infant and young child feeding in emergencies. Where contextually appropriate, USAID is aligning with World Health Organization (WHO) wasting-prevention guidelines.

Currently, USAID is investing in research and analysis across systems, including research on low-burden methods to collect children's dietary data, improved feeding of children with disabilities, shifting social norms to improve children's diets, the importance of agency in women and children's nutrition, and building evidence for the implementation landscape for using local foods to prevent moderate acute malnutrition. All USAID-funded nutrition activities are expected to use primary and secondary formative research to understand the broad range of factors that underpin target behaviors.^{5,6} The results of that research shape social and behavior-change interventions, including communications-based interventions, at the individual, organizational, community, and policy levels. USAID has developed tools to help guide partners through each step of this process. Recent USAID-funded work has also focused on better measuring aspects of diet quality to guide programming, including through assessing biomarkers and micronutrient deficiencies. USAID will continue to prioritize work in these areas, and new mechanisms will continue to strengthen the evidence for programming to improve children's diets.

USAID is providing resources to comprehensively collect, monitor, and analyze data required to assess the quality of children's diets. This includes ensuring that rigorous methods are used to collect and analyze dietary data and that all relevant multi-sectoral nutrition programs and policies include dietary indicators in monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) efforts. Furthermore, USAID has developed guidance⁷ for its multi-sectoral programs to better incorporate progress and outcome-level dietary indicators, such as those related to minimum dietary diversity of women and children.

USAID recognizes that improving women and children's diets requires engaging men and women and integrating gender equity across our programs. USAID's food-system programming prioritizes support for women to have increased and diversified income generation, greater agency over the use of resources, and increased time savings. Under the recently announced Agency-wide commitment, Generating Resilience and Opportunities for Women (GROW),⁸

 ⁵ See, for example, the USAID Advancing Nutrition Social and Behavior Change Formative Research Decision Tree. <u>https://www.advancingnutrition.org/sites/default/files/2022-10/usaid-an-sbc-decision-tree-2022.pdf</u>
⁶ USAID ADS 201 A.3

⁷ USAID. (2021, September). Beyond Stunting: Complementary Indicators for Monitoring and Evaluating USAID Nutrition Activities.

https://www.advancingnutrition.org/resources/beyond-stunting-complementary-indicators-monitoring-and-evalua ting-usaid-nutrition

⁸ USAID. (2023, April 17). Administrator Samantha Power Announces USAID's Generating Resilience and Opportunities for Women (GROW) Commitment [Press release].

USAID aims to increase attribution to reducing gender inequities in food and water systems as a means to achieving our development goals. This will entail prioritizing programmatic areas (e.g., food processing) to mitigate climate-change impacts that are worsening inequities in undernutrition in women and children. USAID has also released updated gender guidance^{9,10} for implementing partners that will help our activities better address gender norms that affect the diets of women and children.

To better integrate development and humanitarian response, USAID's Resilience and Food Security Activities (RFSAs) are building the medium- and long-term capacities to maintain nutritional status in communities that face recurring shocks. In USAID Resilience Focus Zones (RFZs), RFSAs are an integral part of a harmonized set of activities tailored to the risk context. In these zones, USAID continues to build critical learning on shock-responsive approaches that protect and enhance nutritional status in different vulnerability contexts.

BIFAD Recommendation 2. Organize USAID resources and structures to maximize multi-sectoral integration and long-term efforts. To support attainment of critical nutrition outcomes, USAID resources and organizational structures need to ensure they maximize multi-sectoral and long-term efforts. This includes lengthening program delivery timeframes, which can create cost savings for USAID by spreading out project start-up costs over a longer period and lengthening peak operating capacity of project teams. As codified in the Global Malnutrition Prevention and Treatment Act, internal coordination by USAID is essential to achieving concrete outcomes.

Agency Response:

USAID recognizes the critical importance of internal structures to support our multi-sectoral nutrition efforts. The Agency has established new internal processes and organizations in the past three years and will build on these mechanisms to further improve our coordination. USAID's Nutrition Leadership Council (NLC), established in 2019, provides cross-bureau nutrition coordination for efficient use of human and financial resources across Washington, DC-based Pillar and Regional Bureaus. Some of the many ways in which the NLC is maximizing USAID resources for multi-sectoral nutrition include:

- Providing guidance on country selection and both nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive funding allocations in development contexts;
- Supporting interagency coordination and engaging in external affairs on nutrition issues; and,
- Setting and tracking of Agency-wide nutrition metrics and targets.

In September 2021, USAID's NLC validated a list of 14 Nutrition Priority Countries and

https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/press-releases/apr-17-2023-administrator-samantha-power-announcesusaids-generating-resilience-and-opportunities-women-grow-commitment

⁹ USAID. (2022, August). Working within the Food System: Gender Considerations for Achieving Improved Diets. <u>https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2022-12/USAID_Gender_Considerations_Brief_2022_Final%20(3)_1.pdf</u>

¹⁰ USAID (2023, May). Focusing on Social Norms: A Practical Guide to Improving Women and Children's Diets. <u>https://www.advancingnutrition.org/sites/default/files/2023-07/usaid_an_social_norms_guide_2023.pdf</u>

four Strategic Support Countries.¹¹ This was the culmination of a data-driven, rigorous selection process across multiple USAID Bureaus, including the Bureau for Global Health; Bureau for Resilience, Environment, and Food Security; the Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance; and coordination with our Regional Bureaus. These designations enhance collaboration across USAID, with a particular emphasis on coordinating and prioritizing multi-sectoral financial and technical resources for nutrition. Additionally, these designations were included as part of the selection criteria for the subsequent GFSS Target Country expansion process in an effort to further coordinate and leverage opportunities for technical and financial cohesion across sectors.

Going forward, USAID will further focus its resources and efforts on improving multi-sectoral nutrition programming in Nutrition Priority Countries and Nutrition Strategic Support Countries, as well as the 20 GFSS Target Countries,¹² through implementation of the Global Malnutrition Prevention and Treatment Act (GMPTA).¹³ Recognizing the importance of internal and interagency coordination, the GMPTA codifies the NLC and underscores the importance of leveraging interagency resources through the U.S. Government Global Nutrition Coordination Plan (GNCP) platform.

BIFAD Recommendation 3. Identify and scale up promising solutions. USAID should accelerate its leadership in identifying and scaling up promising solutions to address gaps in infant and young children's diets as appropriate to different settings. Learning from rigorous evaluations and research will help USAID prioritize interventions and modify existing programs. To maximize its impact, we recommend that USAID:

a. Prioritize research and scaling of solutions that prevent malnutrition. USAID should accelerate its leadership in identifying and scaling up promising solutions to address nutrient gaps in infant and young children's diets, as appropriate to different settings, including SQ-LNS, fortified blended complementary foods, and micronutrient powders. While investment in responses that treat severe child malnutrition is necessary, solutions that prevent malnutrition in the first place should be prioritized. Identifying and scaling up these evidence-based and cost effective solutions will reduce the need for acute malnutrition treatments considerably and, more importantly, can ensure optimal child growth and development.

b. Engage the agriculture sector and local research and development partners. Work to identify solutions should engage the agricultural sector, with USAID encouraging sustained local investments in research and development and with explicit objectives to improve the nutrition of children six to 23 months of age. The Feed the Future Innovation Labs are well positioned to engage local research organizations and other food-systems stakeholders in research. When evaluating nutrition outcomes of scalable innovations, Innovation Labs and other USAID implementers should disaggregate results to identify and explicitly target potential impacts among the six-to-23-month age group.

¹¹ USAID. (n.d.). *Nutrition Priority Countries*. <u>https://www.usaid.gov/nutrition/countries</u>

¹² Nutrition strategic support countries are those that did not meet the rigorous needs and opportunity criteria established for Nutrition Priority Countries but merit continued prioritization due to critical policy and technical considerations.

¹³ Global Malnutrition Prevention and Treatment Act of 2021, H.R.4693, 117th Cong. (2021). <u>https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/4693/text</u>

Agency Response:

USAID is undertaking a research agenda to identify cost-effective, contextually appropriate solutions to improve children's diets. For example, a large body of evidence has shown that large-scale food fortification (LSFF) substantially benefits young children and women. A study conducted in Indonesia demonstrated that large-scale fortification of oil with vitamin A resulted in increased daily value of vitamin A consumption in children 12–24 months old and improved the vitamin A content of lactating mothers' breast milk.¹⁴ During the 2021 United Nations (UN) Food System Summit, USAID Administrator Samantha Power announced that the Agency would expand its efforts to scale LSFF as a key intervention to address dietary inadequacies around the world. To lead our LSFF programming and deliver our commitments, USAID launched the USAID Advancing Food Fortification Opportunities to Reinforce Diets (USAID AFFORD) Activity in September 2022 as one part of our approach to improve the diets of young children, women, and other vulnerable populations.

USAID is examining other cost-effective ways to supplement children's diets to prevent malnutrition. Programming with specialized food products, such as Small-Quantity Lipid-Based Nutrient Supplements (SQ-LNS),¹⁵can be an important component of a package for preventing malnutrition and warrants further operational research, in both development and humanitarian contexts. USAID will continue to work closely with governments to determine and use a variety of solutions that are contextually appropriate and financially sustainable. Feed the Future (FTF) Innovation Labs are also generating evidence that will help scale interventions to improve children's diets. Due to the focus on at-scale solutions, Innovation Labs operate at a systems level. The newly launched FTF Food Systems for Nutrition Innovation Lab (FSN IL), at the Tufts University Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy, will test and promote innovative practices and technologies to protect nutrient-rich foods during transit, improve food safety, and reduce food loss. Its ultimate aim is to support improved diet quality, nutrition, and resilience, especially for women of reproductive age and young children.

In the health sector, USAID prioritizes strengthening local capacity for nutrition research and monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) through existing and forthcoming activities. The Agency also supports implementation research to continually review and improve on ways to treat and prevent wasting at scale, including maternal, infant, and young child nutrition in both emergency and nonemergency settings. One area that USAID supports is global research and learning efforts to improve breastfeeding and complementary feeding in emergencies, as well as ongoing efforts to examine livestock programming for nutritional improvements in children under five. These research efforts aim to identify evidence-based solutions that can be scaled to address the nutritional needs of vulnerable populations in humanitarian crises.

USAID programming aligns well with the recommendation to engage agriculture and local partners in the effort to reduce child malnutrition. For example, many FTF Innovation Labs,

¹⁴ Sandjaja, Jus'at, I., Jahari, A. B., Ifrad, Htet, M. K., Tilden, R. L., Soekarjo, D., Utomo, B., Moench-Pfanner, R., Soekirman, & Korenromp, E. L. (2015). Vitamin A-fortified cooking oil reduces vitamin A deficiency in infants, young children and women: results from a programme evaluation in Indonesia. *Public health nutrition*, *18*(14), 2511–2522. <u>https://doi.org/10.1017/S136898001400322X</u>

¹⁵ Small-quantity lipid-based nutrient supplements (SQ LNS) are food-based supplements designed for the prevention of malnutrition in children 6–24 months of age.

including the FSN IL and Livestock Systems Innovation Lab, among others, have human health, food safety, diets, and nutrition as major areas of inquiry, given that animal-source foods are recognized as the best source of high-quality nutrients for children 6 to 23 months of age. Where relevant and feasible, data will be collected and assessed to determine the impact of Innovation Labs on the diets of children in this age range.

BIFAD Recommendation 4. Focus social assistance programs to target households with women and children in the first 1,000 days to improve access to and uptake of nutritious diets for infants and young children. Where USAID is involved in direct implementation of social assistance programs or supporting partner governments' efforts to design and implement such programs, investments should be made in understanding how these types of programs can be best leveraged to improve diet and nutrition outcomes for infants and young children. This can be done by partnering with strong research partners and investing in comprehensive evaluations where program variations can be tested. Interventions should be considered in the context of development-oriented programming and humanitarian assistance programming, as many of the aspects will also apply to emergency contexts. Some of these variations could include varying the size, duration, and composition of transfers; packages of interventions (such as including different types of behavior change communication approaches, linkages to health care services, or combining individual-level with household-level interventions); and/or adjusting the targeting and/or timing of the transfers (such as targeting pregnant women and children in the first 1,000 days). Investing in comprehensive evaluations can help elucidate the most effective and cost-effective options for using programs to improve diet and nutritional status outcomes of infants and young children.

Agency Response:

USAID implements large- and small-scale social assistance programming that targets the most vulnerable food-insecure households to improve access to and availability of food—largely through implementing partners and existing government social safety-net programs. Over the past decade, USAID has shifted to more fit-for-purpose approaches to address food-assistance needs. In recent years, emergency partners have been selecting food-assistance modalities that consider nutrition outcomes, given the increased recognition of the importance of dietary diversity and guality and building on the traditional focus on macro- and micronutrients. USAID partners currently implement Resilience Food Security Activities (RFSAs) in 12 resilience focus countries.¹⁶ RFSAs often incorporate food-assistance transfers using various modalities and, in alignment with USAID programming more generally, integrate nutrition across adjacent sectors, such as water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH); health; livelihoods; and gender and youth programming to address the underlying determinants of malnutrition. USAID programming incorporates considerations for the nutritionally vulnerable by targeting households with pregnant and lactating women and children under two years of age with specialized nutritious foods (e.g., Super Cereal Plus) or, where contextually appropriate and in partnership with host-country government social programs, cash and vouchers to prevent malnutrition.

¹⁶ The 12 resilience focus countries include Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Mali, Madagascar, Mozambique, Niger, Uganda (closing in 2023), and Zimbabwe.

Building on past cash-benchmarking research through rigorous monitoring and evaluation, new USAID awards will be used to strengthen social assistance programs to have a greater positive impact on nutrition. Further work should place social protection cash transfers as a core approach, and exploring whether low-cost add-ons (such as "labeling" or targeted information provision) can augment the cost-effectiveness for key nutrition outcomes even further.

BIFAD Recommendation 5. Leverage USAID's knowledge assets, convening power, and influence to bring about essential policy change:

a. Position young children's right to nutritious diets as an essential priority in national development agendas. To undergird the centrality of nutrition, USAID should use its considerable influence and convening power to help position young children's right to nutritious diets as an essential priority in national development agendas and to ensure that the U.S. Government—Congress, the White House, the Department of State, and other federal agencies—recognize good nutrition as essential to development and foundational to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Nutrition should be included whenever food security, agriculture, and development in general are discussed.

b. Partner with host-country governments and international bodies to improve the policy and regulatory environment for children's diets, including standards for specialized complementary foods and related products. These efforts can leverage the considerable technical expertise and convening power of USAID and its implementing partners to inform and encourage policies that enable regulatory bodies to test products and to set and enforce standards in partnership with experts and industry, public health, nutrition, and regional authorities. Standards should cover nutritional content, labeling, and marketing claims. Mechanisms must be established and supported to ensure monitoring and enforcement of regulations.

c. Support development of an enabling environment for food industries, particularly smalland medium-scale enterprises, including improving access to financing and technical assistance, and providing incentives for them to produce affordable, safe, nutrient-dense foods for children six to 23 months of age. An ecosystem or enabling environment approach can harness the power of the market with healthy competition and a diversity of suppliers. The private food-processing sector has a significant role to play in increasing the availability, affordability, and convenience of safe, nutritious foods for infants and young children. USAID should better use its convening power to incentivize production, distribution, and retail of these products.

Agency Response:

USAID is positioning children's diets in national agendas by convening and coordinating with other U.S. government agencies and efforts on nutrition through the FTF GFSS, the GNCP, and the new GMPTA of 2021. The GNCP demonstrates the U.S. government's continued commitment and leadership for nutrition by convening a range of interagency stakeholders and prioritizing investments and evidence-based interventions designed to address the root cause of malnutrition. Programmatic priorities targeting infants and children in the plan include maternal

nutrition, breastfeeding, complementary feeding, micronutrient sufficiency, and the prevention and management of child wasting. USAID is a key contributor to GNCP, serving in the roles of Senior Facilitator, Co-Chair for the interagency technical working group and Chair of the Senior Nutrition Champions group, as well as leading and actively participating in multiple sub-working groups.

Under the GFSS, the 20 Target Countries will develop new GFSS Country Plans. These plans must articulate how FTF programming will improve diets. In addition, the prevalence of women of reproductive age consuming a diet of minimum diversity (MDD-W) will be monitored and assessed as an initiative-wide performance indicator for FTF.

USAID also supports host-country governments and institutions directly in a variety of ways. For example, USAID has been supporting the Tanzania Food and Nutrition Centre to become a center of leadership, training, and service in the East Africa region on the following areas: estimation of the nutrient adequacy of the diets using traditional 24-hour food recalls as well as estimating apparent intakes through secondary data analysis of Household Consumption and Expenditure Surveys; estimation of micronutrient deficiencies using biomarkers; and a national study of taboos and dietary practices that interfere with the consumption of nutritious and healthy diets.

Additionally, the Agency leverages existing partnerships with other governments and donor organizations. These include the governments of Canada, the United Kingdom (UK), and Japan, as well as philanthropies such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Eleanor Crook Foundation. USAID collaborates with the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the World Food Programme (WFP), and other nongovernmental organization stakeholders via regular coordination meetings to support standardization, research, and innovation for nutritional products that prevent and treat malnutrition. This partnership convenes to discuss nutritional content, labeling, packaging, and innovations, which have led to the harmonization of product specifications and new product and formula development.¹⁷ USAID also actively participates in global discussions on the UN Global Action Plan on Wasting to improve the quality and scale of wasting treatment in emergency and nonemergency settings.

Private-sector actors—from the smallholder farmer to the street vendor to the largest multinational food and beverage companies—play a critical role in global and local food systems. USAID is actively engaging these actors to drive improvements in food safety and nutrition and reduce the potential for unhealthy foods to displace nutritious foods in markets. Under the FTF Initiative, USAID is pursuing innovative financing models to enable small and medium enterprises producing safe, nutritious foods to scale their businesses and increase the affordability of more nutritious foods, particularly for low-income populations. In strategic alignment with UNICEF and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, USAID is also investing more than ever in LSFF, investing \$38 million over five years in LSFF scale up through global leadership, context-specific expertise, and partnerships with government, private sector, and

¹⁷ See the Interagency Coordination and Harmonization Work Stream of the Food Aid Quality Review. <u>https://foodaidquality.nutrition.tufts.edu/focus/harmonization</u>

civil society¹⁸. USAID will work with food processors, policymakers, and civil-society organizations to scale and sustain LSFF.

Going forward, improving children's diets will be further elevated through the recent enactment of GMPTA, in which USAID is leading the development and operation of the GMPTA Implementation Plan and Annual Report. USAID will work to improve reporting on diets and outcomes in the annual report.

¹⁸ Global Nutrition Report Nutrition Accountability Framework Tracker at https://globalnutritionreport.org/resources/naf/tracker/commitment/expand-large-scale-food-fortification/