

■ Conference report: Optimizing infant nutrition

A review sponsored by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in 2000 identified complementary foods for infant and child growth as one of the nutritional priorities for regional development. In response, ADB initiated a regional technical assistance with six countries (India, Indonesia, Pakistan, People's Republic of China, Thailand, Vietnam) to develop an appropriate strategy.

The workshop on fortification of complementary foods, which ADB and the International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI) Southeast Asia Region, in collaboration with the Keystone Center, organized in Singapore on June 25–27, 2002, brought representatives from the six involved countries, ILSI, ADB and the Keystone Center together with invited international experts. After this meeting, the countries will prepare long-term plans for investing in essential fortification.

A crucial period

The period between the ages of six months and 2 years is particularly critical to child growth and development, because there is little chance of reversing any retardation later on. Just as exclusive breast-feeding for the first six months of life is essential to protect infant health and immunity, so is complementary feeding (with fortified foods or micronutrient supplements in addition to breast milk and home-prepared foods) imperative between the ages of 6 and 24 months, to meet infants' micronutrient requirements. Objectives of the meeting were therefore:

- to provide an update on the current scientific and technical understanding and issues related to early child nutrition and development;
- to share information on feeding practices, available products and programs, and potential for processed complementary foods;
- to define technical, financial, market and policy barriers to investment, and design strategies to overcome obstacles;
- to achieve a consensus on how to address food and nutrition problems of young children, and improve communication and public/private collaboration;

- to identify future needs for technical support and investment.

Learning from existing programs

Presentations and discussions focused on the contemporary issues surrounding young child nutrition, complementary foods and public-private partnerships. Representatives from the member countries reported on existing programs for manufacture, fortification and appraisal of complementary foods. Specific topics included strategic options and issues in complementary feeding, recommendations for nutrient composition, public health interventions and technical issues in food preparation. Speakers from Latin America reported on ongoing programs in Chile and Peru, and numerous successful child feeding programs, interventions and complementary food types were available for consideration and discussion.

In panel discussions and workshops, participants considered policy, standards, technical, research and marketing issues, specific strategies for communication, and how to integrate partnerships to maximize resource benefits. They also evaluated complementary foods for specific nutrition disorders and deficiencies. In individual country sessions, participants addressed complementary feeding programs, as well as associated problems and benefits, to work toward a consensus for the proposed country investment plans.

An important opportunity

After much deliberation (to be sure that everybody understood the implications) a draft consensus statement was prepared (Optimizing Child Growth and Development through Improving Complementary Feeding including Use of Fortified Processed Complementary Foods).

Consensus was achieved in four general areas: problem recognition, affirmation, activities, and proposed actions.

Problem recognition: The numbers of underweight, stunted and micronutrient deficient children in Asia are the highest in the world. Most malnutrition occurs around 6–24 months. Processed complementary foods represent an important opportunity to meet the high requirements for micronutrients during

the child's first two years. Complementary foods should be developed with adequate standards for quality, safety, efficiency and cost (according to Codex Alimentarius and UNICEF/WHO guidelines) and made widely available at an affordable price.

Affirmation: The integral contribution of complementary foods as a component of nutrition programs for young children is recognized. Addition of micronutrients to complementary foods according to Codex Alimentarius and UNICEF/WHO guidelines can be achieved efficaciously and at an affordable price. Collaboration between public, private and civic sectors is critical to create an environment that enables production and distribution of appropriate foods. Substantial investments are required to provide access to affordable and appropriate fortified complementary foods.

Activities: Activities required to increase the priority of fortified complementary foods as a component of child nutrition programs include:

- Refine a regulatory environment that supports complementary foods and breast milk as equally important components for the health and nutrition of children under two years.
- Continue multisectoral advocacy to build support at all levels of government for investment in early child nutrition.
- Establish national goals for production and distribution of affordable complementary foods.
- Minimize barriers to expansion of small and medium scale enterprises through public policy.
- Integrate investment, production, distribution and promotion of complementary food programs into child nutrition strategies.
- Include fortified complementary foods in public distribution and food subsidy programs.
- Collect information and conduct technical research on nutritive value, safety, cost, accessibility and acceptability of fortified complementary foods.

Proposed actions: The following set of actions was developed to provide guidance for coordination at national,

provincial and local levels:

- Develop technologies, products and strategies dedicated to the population at risk for foods, supplements and education at the local level.
- Expand public/private partnerships to trade and fiscal policies.
- Provide guidelines to ensure that labeling and advertising are appropriate and in compliance with accepted standards.
- Conduct comprehensive social communication and marketing programs to increase consumer awareness and demand for fortified complementary foods, and establish acceptable feeding practices.
- Inform and train health care providers to support proper use of fortified complementary foods.

It is clear that these actions are complex, and need widespread public and private sector participation. Research may also be needed to ensure that the production and distribution of fortified complementary foods is implemented effectively – *George A. Purvis, PhD, Consultant, The Keystone Center* ■

