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**Cote d'Ivoire launches national food fortification project to combat vitamin and mineral deficiency**

A national food fortification project designed to improve the health of at least 14 million people in Cote d'Ivoire was launched today in Abidjan.

The project, announced by Cote d'Ivoire Minister of State, Minister of Health and Population Dr Albert Toikeusse Mabri, is supported by a US\$3 million grant from the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) and contributions by the private sector and government in Cote d'Ivoire, and will be implemented by Helen Keller International, Cote d'Ivoire.

Despite a difficult political situation, the project aims to deliver fortified vegetable oil and wheat flour to 80 percent of Cote d'Ivoire consumers, including poor and at-risk populations in all areas of the country within three years.

"GAIN has been working with a broad-based national fortification alliance for the last two years to support a project that can deliver the maximum benefit to the people of Cote d'Ivoire," said Chairman of the GAIN Board of Directors Mr Jay Naidoo.

The public-private-partnership project involves fortification of palm and cottonseed vegetable oils with vitamin A, and fortification of wheat flour with iron and folic acid, and is included in Cote d'Ivoire's national micronutrient deficiency control program.

The grant will fund the purchase of vitamin and mineral premix in the project's first year, provide part of the technical assistance to the country's three main oil processors and single flour miller, strengthen public quality control systems, support a campaign to raise awareness of the value of consuming fortified food products, and meet management and monitoring costs.

Vitamin A deficiency, which affects 40-60 percent of children under five across the developing world, compromises immune systems and leads to a million deaths globally each year. Iron deficiency is the world's most widespread health problem, impairing normal development in about half the infants born in the developing world, sapping the health and energies of 500 million women and leading to more than 60,000 deaths during childbirth a year. Folate deficiency is responsible for 200,000 severe birth defects every year in developing countries.

Vitamin A deficiencies affect 31 percent of children under five in Cote d'Ivoire, mainly those in rural, poor and disadvantaged peri-urban areas. If no appropriate action is taken for the control of vitamin A deficiencies, more than 50 000 children under five, which represents 18 percent of the age group death rate, will die by 2006. Anaemia due to iron deficiency affects 60 percent of pregnant women, half the women of reproductive age and about 45 percent of pre-school and school children. If appropriate measures are not taken

to control mother's anaemia, 3 400 mothers will die by year 2006. Folic acid deficiencies will be responsible of a high number of neural tube defects (spina - bifida).

“Fortifying commonly consumed foods in Cote d’Ivoire and other countries offers incredibly good value for each development dollar,” Mr Naidoo said. “Benefits can be delivered to the poorest consumers outside the traditional health sector, through the actions of food companies.”

Market leaders in food processing in Cote d’Ivoire are Unilever, Cosmivoire, Trituraf, and Grands Moulins D’Abidjan. The project aims to achieve fortification of all vegetable oil and wheat flour produced in the country by the end of the three-year project, which should provide 50 percent of a person’s daily needs for vitamin A and 30 percent for iron and folic acid.

As well as food industry representatives, the national fortification alliance in Cote d’Ivoire comprises government agencies, responsible for regulation, standards and public information, research institutes, and civil society organizations, committed to raising community awareness about the fortification program.

The United Nations and other development agencies recognize the importance of adequate nutrition, particularly vitamins and minerals, for the achievement of development goals such as poverty reduction, educational achievement, gender equity, child and maternal health, and helping combat diseases including HIV/AIDS and malaria.

The recent report by the Commission for Africa, chaired by British Prime Minister Tony Blair, stated “reducing vitamin and mineral deficiency, through supplements and fortification, has minimal costs with big impact” and estimated a US\$0.2 billion investment by donors per year for five years would give comprehensive protection against vitamin and mineral deficiency for up to 380 million African women and children at risk.

Cote d’Ivoire is the sixth country to launch a grant funded by GAIN supporting the national fortification program. Neighboring Mali has also received a grant, and grants for Burkina Faso, Ghana and Nigeria have been approved and are in the process of appraisal and final negotiation. The expansion of fortification programs across West Africa is important due to the high degree of cross-border trade in commodities such as vegetable oil.

With the current high level of international interest in development assistance to Africa, GAIN supports a Special Initiative for Food Fortification in Africa. This would include a rapid scaling up of the number of national food fortification programs from the eight currently funded by GAIN in Africa, investment in relatively simple fortification technologies in the rapidly expanding wheat flour, maize meal and vegetable oil processing sectors, and further research and development in fortification of African foods such as cassava flour, sugar, salt and rice.

The initiative reflects the food fortification approach of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) Nutrition Strategy, adopted by the Comprehensive African Agricultural Development Program.

The official launch of the Cote d'Ivoire national food fortification project was hosted by the President of the National Fortification Alliance, Minister Dr. Albert Toikeusse Mabri, and was attended by GAIN Senior Portfolio Manager Françoise Chomay and Mr. Shawn Baker, Regional Director for Africa of Helen Keller International.

**Note for editors:**

The Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition is a leadership and service hub for public sector, private sector and civil society partners committed to ending vitamin and mineral deficiencies through fortification of staple foods and condiments.

More than 2 billion people throughout the world suffer from vitamin and mineral deficiencies, debilitating minds, bodies, energies and the economic prospects of nations. The problem can be brought under control in a relatively short time and at relatively low cost.

GAIN is a not-for-profit Swiss Foundation, based in Geneva, Switzerland, with partners and projects around the world.

Currently GAIN supports 15 national food fortification programs worldwide. It encourages voluntary fortification initiatives by food companies and estimates that its programs to date have stimulated a ten fold investment by the food industry.

Its goal is to improve the nutritional status of one billion people and over the next three years, new projects will be funded which scale will reach 700 million of whom are at risk of vitamin and mineral deficiencies.

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