

# Vitamin Angels Presents Innovative Model at Micronutrient Forum Conference

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The second Micronutrient Forum Global Conference was held in Cancun, Mexico on October 24–28, 2016, convening over 700 participants from 73 countries and 336 organizations around the world on the theme of “Positioning Women’s Nutrition at the Center of Sustainable Development.”

Vitamin Angels (VA), a US-based non-profit, brought together a group of public health professionals, including high-ranking individuals from a non-governmental organization (NGO) in Mexico, Un Kilo de Ayuda [A Kilo of Help], and the Mexican Ministry of Health, to present on Vitamin Angels’ unique distribution model. Vitamin Angels’ symposia focused on the application of this model in Mexico and how it can be leveraged to scale up multiple micronutrient supplements to at-risk, hard-to-reach pregnant women.

## The Vitamin Angels model

Vitamin Angels’ mission is to help at-risk populations in need – specifically pregnant women, new mothers, and children under five – to gain access to lifesaving and life-changing vitamins and minerals. VA’s model was premised on the reality that not every person has access to national health services, and NGOs can help to fill gaps in coverage by effectively deploying a range of proven nutrition interventions at a low cost and in harmony with national health services. VA supports a range of evidence-based nutrition interventions, annually reaching over 51 million beneficiaries in 57 different countries, through 1,000 locally registered NGOs.<sup>1</sup> VA initiated its vitamin A supplementation program in 2007, and has since refined its model to deliver an expanded range of nutrition interventions, including prenatal multiple micronutrient supplements, interventions to prevent child infections that adversely affect nutritional status, and promotion of optimal infant and young child feeding practices.

“VA’s ‘grass-roots’ model centers on strengthening the capacity of locally registered NGOs to deliver nutrition services”

Globally, multilateral agencies support the implementation of these nutrition interventions using a top-down approach that strengthens the delivery of services through national health systems. In contrast to this approach, VA’s “grass-roots” model centers on strengthening the capacity of locally registered NGOs to deliver nutrition services in a manner that is coordinated, where possible, with national health services. This model focuses on supporting NGOs with existing programs that have local knowledge of the populations they serve and can absorb

**TABLE 1:** Illustration of how Vitamin Angels adds value to national nutrition efforts to close the coverage gap in Mexico

	Vitamin A to children 6–59 months	Deworming to children 24–59 months	Women’s multiple micronutrient supplements
<b>Target population<sup>a,b</sup></b>	8,291,290	4,776,500	191,084 <sup>c</sup>
<b>No   % covered by government (2013)<sup>a</sup></b>	7,454,758 90 %	4,500,900 94 %	7,065 4 %
<b>No   % covered by Vitamin Angels (2016)</b>	256,250 3 %	239,000 5 %	10,439 5 %

<sup>a</sup>Includes the population *targeted* by the Ministry of Health of Mexico for each program, not the total population.

<sup>b</sup>Data used with permission from Centro Nacional para la Salud de la Infancia y la Adolescencia (CENSIA).

<sup>c</sup>Includes Ministry of Health targets for both folic acid and multiple micronutrients (MMNs) for pregnant women. In the future, MMNs may replace folic acid and therefore can be considered a target population for MMNs.

the incremental costs of adding nutrition services to their range of services, or expanding upon existing nutrition services. VA provides NGOs with the commodities and technical assistance needed to ensure that activation of services is consistent with best practices adapted to local conditions.

#### Case study: VA’s model in Mexico

By applying the model described above, Vitamin Angels has successfully worked with NGOs to identify and provide nutrition services to at-risk populations in many countries, including Mexico. In order to create a more locally sustainable supply and distribution platform in selected countries, VA engages a local

“country program advisor.” This person’s role is to facilitate the identification and aggregation of a network of local NGOs to deploy nutrition interventions, determine or verify product needs, facilitate coordination with governmental authorities, and provide and manage a program of technical assistance to our NGO field partners. In Mexico, the local program advisor has worked to target NGOs serving rural and indigenous communities as well as marginalized urban areas throughout the country.

Vitamin Angels’ partnership with the Mexican non-profit, Un Kilo de Ayuda, exemplifies the success of our model in expanding coverage to the hardest-to-reach populations. Un Kilo de Ayuda integrated VA interventions into their “Integrated Model



Panelists from Vitamin Angels, *Un Kilo de Ayuda*, and the Mexican Ministry of Health present and discuss Vitamin Angels’ unique distribution model, its application in Mexico, and how it can be leveraged to scale up multiple micronutrient supplements to at-risk, hard-to-reach pregnant women.



Odin Rodriguez Peralta from *Un Kilo de Ayuda* answers a question from the audience about how they integrated Vitamin Angels' support into their existing programs to help increase coverage of nutrition-related interventions in Mexico.

for Early Childhood Development,” helping to expand services to the 50,000 children and over 2,000 women they serve in over 1,000 communities in six Mexican states. With VA's support, they incorporated technical assistance and training materials into their activities, training over 100 facilitators in Mexico. *Un Kilo de Ayuda* collaborates closely with local ministries of health, ensuring their activities are coordinated and not duplicative.

### “VA's partnership with *Un Kilo de Ayuda* exemplifies the success of our model”

**Table 1** illustrates the value-add provided by local NGOs, with VA assistance, to national efforts to alleviate undernutrition in Mexico. After only 15 months, Vitamin Angels' local NGO partners reached an additional 3% of eligible young children with vitamin A, an additional 5% of eligible children with deworming treatment, and an additional 5% of eligible pregnant women with multiple micronutrient supplementation.

The success of this model is rooted in the importance placed on coordination between local NGO partners and government authorities. Vitamin Angels worked closely with the national Ministry of Health (MOH) to review state-level maternal and child health coverage rates in order to prioritize VA's outreach and expansion of programs. Once a state was prioritized, the MOH helped to provide introductions between VA and local MOH

and NGO officials, and assisted in facilitating meetings focused on identifying gaps in coverage.

#### Leveraging a proven approach

Using the model described above, Vitamin Angels initiated its flagship vitamin A supplementation program in 2007, and has since scaled up vitamin A distribution globally – expanding its reach from under two million beneficiaries in 2008<sup>2</sup> to over 40 million in 2016.<sup>3</sup> In 2010, VA started to explore large-scale deployment of albendazole through a growing, global platform of NGOs to expand deworming programs for preschool-aged children. By 2016, deworming services among our NGO field partners expanded to reach to over 25 million preschool-age children<sup>4</sup> – giving this platform the distinction of delivering approximately 20% of the total deworming treatments to preschool-aged children globally.<sup>5</sup>

As currently configured, Vitamin Angels' network constitutes a locally sustainable “platform” for delivering selected nutrition services to hard-to-reach beneficiaries, but has demonstrated its potential – as shown in Mexico and beyond – to be broadened with respect to the range of services offered and the numbers of at-risk persons served.

Currently, there is a pressing need and opportunity to improve birth outcomes by connecting increased numbers of pregnant women with multiple micronutrient (MMN) supplementation. MMN supplementation of pregnant women has been shown to have benefits on birth outcomes over use of iron & folic acid alone.<sup>6</sup> Thus, VA has begun to expand its focus on the deployment of this intervention. VA currently reaches approximately

400,000 pregnant women annually<sup>7</sup> with multiple micronutrient supplementation, and is poised to scale up deployment of prenatal multiple micronutrient supplementation for women over the next several years.

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## “VA's network is a locally sustainable ‘platform’ for delivering nutrition services to hard-to-reach beneficiaries”

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### Looking forward

With the expansion of VA's reach through a platform of NGO field partners, and the addition of support for entirely new interventions, VA offers a unique model to reach meaningful numbers of at-risk beneficiaries who have limited access to national health services. Vitamin Angels will continue to: **1)** scale up the provision of proven nutrition interventions for underserved at-risk populations through NGOs; **2)** add support for a broader range of nutrition services; **3)** increase availability of our technical assistance and product resources; and **4)** work more systematically to coordinate activities with multilateral agencies and governmental authorities. Building a larger, locally sustainable, supply and distribution platform will also require Vitamin Angels to engage additional local country program advisors able to facilitate coordination among stakeholders.

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