Unlocking the Potential of Rice Fortification in West Africa

Kesso Gabrielle van Zutphen
Knowledge and Research Specialist, Sight and Life

Outside of Asia, the highest per capita consumption of rice is in Africa. Of the 40.4 million metric tons (MMT) of rice globally traded in 2015/16, 11.7 MMT was exported to Africa. Rice is a growing key staple food in 19 African countries. The prevalence and impact of micronutrient deficiencies in West Africa are significant, and anemia rates, vitamin A deficiency and iodine deficiency remain a concern. Against this background, fortified rice has the potential to reach 130 million people in 12 African countries – none of which are in West Africa.

In the light of this untapped potential, a two-day workshop on ‘Rice Fortification – An Opportunity to Improve Nutrition in West Africa’ took place in Dakar, Senegal, on November 27–28, 2017. Convened by the World Food Programme (WFP) in partnership with the Food Fortification Initiative (FFI), the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN), Nutrition International (NI), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), Hellen Keller International (HKI) and Sight and Life (SAL), the meeting brought together country delegates, and global and regional technical partners to raise awareness and discuss opportunities and challenges around rice fortification and its potential for improving dietary quality and reducing micronutrient deficiencies in the region. Representatives from the following countries were invited: Benin, Cabo Verde, Côte d’Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Nigeria, and Senegal.

Country experiences in the spotlight
Country experiences from Costa Rica, Bangladesh and Mali enriched the debate and provided key insights into implementation enablers and challenges while also giving an overview of the various types of delivery that exist. Participants exchanged thoughts on a variety of topics including the feasibility of rice fortification in the region, the integration of rice fortification into supply chains for cost efficiency, the existing technologies and their respective characteristics, and how to balance a fortified food basket. Country delegates had the opportunity to apply what they had heard to their country’s context and to brainstorm strategies to make rice fortification a reality. The enabling environment of The West African Health Organization (WAHO) and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) shone throughout the workshop, revealing a strong base of technical partners who can provide guidance, share country expertise and become leaders in the field. In a region which already sets great store by fortification and accepts the fortification of other commodities, and in which eleven countries import 5 to 6 million metric tons of rice per year, rice fortification represents a quick and significant opportunity to address micronutrient deficiencies. There is undoubtedly sufficient evidence to move ahead with scaling up fortified rice in West Africa as part of an integrated approach to reduce micronutrient deficiencies.

“There is no bigger opportunity to scale up rice fortification than in West Africa”
Today, there is no bigger opportunity to scale up rice fortification than in West Africa. The current collaborations among regional bodies are encouraging. It is now up to the region to build on its strengths, generate political will, and make rice fortification a priority. This workshop marks a milestone in West Africa’s journey towards scaling up rice fortification and impacting the wider continent. It is hoped that it will plant productive seeds and be the first of many future gatherings at national, regional and global level.

As we have done in the past for Asia and the Latin American and Caribbean region, *Sight and Life* aims to publish a special supplement on rice fortification in West Africa in June 2018. This will be a compilation of original articles from leading regional and international public health professionals.

**Correspondence:** Kesso Gabrielle van Zutphen, Knowledge and Research Specialist, Sight and Life, Wurmisweg 576/241—367, 4303 Kaiseraugst, Switzerland

**Email:** kesso.vanzutphen@sightandlife.org

**References**
