Accelerating Maternal Nutrition through Multiple Micronutrient Supplementation in Pregnancy

The Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies Accelerator

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Key messages

∙ Despite clear evidence of the safety and benefits, progress in delivering multiple micronutrient supplementation (MMS) at scale to pregnant women in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) remains too slow.
∙ Led by the Micronutrient Forum, the Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies Accelerator (a Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation Goalkeepers Accelerator project) aims to expedite the implementation and scale-up of MMS worldwide by reaching more than 17.5 million pregnant women and their newborns in multiple countries, including Myanmar, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Tanzania, Burkina Faso and Madagascar, over the next three years.
∙ With significant new funding and commitments from more than 10 partners across the private sector, academia, civil society and more, this Accelerator will make much-needed progress against Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2 and 3, saving lives and improving the health of millions of women and newborns (see Box 1).
∙ As a follow-up to the launch of the Accelerator, the Micronutrient Forum convened 30 stakeholders from different organizations, including foundations, academia, implementers, the private sector, governments and NGOs, in early February 2020 to identify, inform, align and accelerate activity on MMS.

BOX 1: Accelerator partners

The Micronutrient Forum

DSM

The Eleanor Crook Foundation

Halodoc

Kirk Humanitarian

New York Academy of Sciences (NYAS)

Nutrition International

The Republic of the Union of Myanmar

Sight and Life

UNICEF

Vitamin Angels

Details on the partner commitments can be found on the Micronutrient Forum’s Goalkeepers website at: https://micronutrientforum.org/goalkeepers/
The launch of the Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies Accelerator

Background
While the evidence is clear that MMS for pregnant women significantly decreases the risk of low birth weight and very low birth weight, MMS is still not readily available in LMICs. Only a few countries have switched from iron and folic acid (IFA) supplements to MMS as the standard antenatal care (ANC) for pregnant women.

“MMS is particularly important in LMICs because diets rich in micronutrients are often unavailable or unaffordable for women of childbearing age”

MMS is particularly important in LMICs because diets rich in micronutrients are often unavailable or unaffordable for women of childbearing age. The result is that women in LMICs have a higher risk of poor pregnancy outcomes than women in high-income countries.

To address this inequity, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (Foundation) asked the Micronutrient Forum to lead the Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies Accelerator, in order to advance the introduction and implementation of MMS over the next 3 years. The Accelerator project was launched at the 2019 Goalkeepers event in New York City.

Accelerators
Goalkeepers Accelerators bring together organizations from different sectors – including governments, the private sector, civil society and philanthropy – around common agendas for action, seeking to catalyze investments, expertise and innovation to drive further progress towards the SDGs.

Each Accelerator makes a commitment that goes beyond ‘business as usual.’ The Foundation provides a platform and global stage to catalyze progress towards reaching the SDGs through the Accelerators.

The Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies Accelerator
The Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies Accelerator leverages new investments from the private sector, philanthropies, NGOs and country leadership to: save lives, improve the health of millions of women and newborns, correct inequitable access to MMS and make progress towards the SDGs. From the outset, the Accelerator was building on strong momentum for MMS among donors, implementing agencies and governments who were ready to act.

“The level of commitment and enthusiasm for Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies was almost overwhelming”
Against this background, the Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies Accelerator mobilized nearly US$50 million in financial and in-kind contributions, and will, over the next 3 years, reach more than 17.5 million pregnant women and their newborns in more than 60 countries, through a mix of introductory and large-scale programs. More than 10 partners from the private sector, academia, civil society and the United Nations have already committed to:

- **Increase demand** to help women, providers and governments understand the benefits of MMS, establish markets and provide technical assistance to those considering adoption.

- **Increase supply** to ensure that a reliable, high-quality, cost-efficient and effective source of MMS is available to those who wish to access them.

- **Increase the quality of service delivery** by integrating supply and demand via context-specific solutions to effectively deliver MMS to women globally.

**Progress and next steps**

The next important pieces of work for the Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies Accelerator are to:

1) widen the reach and broaden the scope of the Accelerator with additional partners and commitments;

2) track partners’ progress on commitments; and

3) advocate for MMS around the Accelerator themes of increasing demand, supply and service delivery quality during

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**What went well**

The level of commitment and enthusiasm for Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies was almost overwhelming. As a neutral, convening organization, the Micronutrient Forum was fortunate to work with all partners to bring this Accelerator together in a very short time. Four factors seem to have been instrumental to the Accelerator’s success:

Firstly, the Accelerator was an overnight success years in the making. So many organizations have been involved in conducting research and advocating for MMS adoption for many years – and even successfully exploring the implementation of MMS use in ANC services – that a communal chorus of support had built to a crescendo. A critical tipping point in the acceptance of MMS as a superior intervention compared with IFA alone came with the publication of two definitive meta-analyses outlining the safety and efficacy of MMS.

Secondly, a handful of nimble organizations willing to act fast (and on a large scale) in support of the Accelerator gave other participants the confidence to support the Accelerator.

Thirdly, there were many linkages and a shared sense of respect among the donor organizations. Rather than competing, organizations acknowledged each other’s strengths and focused on ensuring that the Accelerator benefited overall from each organization’s complementary skills and focus areas.

Finally, there was a clear call to action with a deadline, creating a sense of urgency. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

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Stakeholders brought together by the Micronutrient Forum in Washington, DC, on 5–6 February 2020 to discuss the acceleration of the use of maternal micronutrient supplements
Goalkeepers event is a wonderful advocacy opportunity, and motivated Accelerator partners to prioritize and execute this important work.

It was fortuitous that these factors came together to enable the Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies Accelerator; the Forum will continue to foster collaboration and seek complementarities in its work, and will strive to achieve this level of impact in other areas.

**MMS Stakeholder Consultation: Summary findings**

On 5–6 February 2020, the Micronutrient Forum, with funding from Kirk Humanitarian, convened 30 stakeholders from various organizations, including foundations, academia, implementers, the private sector, governments and NGOs to identify, inform, align and accelerate activity on MMS for pregnant women.

The objectives of the MMS Stakeholder Consultation were to:

1. achieve a greater understanding of current MMS evidence, advocacy, policy and program implementation experience;

2. identify factors that impede MMS implementation (including implementation research), viewed through the lenses of supply, demand and delivery;

3. develop an agenda that aligns donor interests and priorities with gaps in advocacy, policy and MMS implementation (including implementation research); and

4. achieve a greater shared understanding of the upcoming advocacy opportunities for MMS vis-à-vis the Micronutrient Forum 5th Global Conference and N4G 2020.

The consultation participants reviewed the evidence, supply, policies, program experiences and advocacy opportunities to scale up MMS for pregnant women.

“There is robust evidence of the benefits and cost-effectiveness of MMS for improving pregnancy outcomes”

Thanks in part to two recent meta-analyses outlining the safety and efficacy of MMS, there is robust evidence of the benefits and cost-effectiveness of MMS for improving pregnancy outcomes. Importantly, there is recent evidence that MMS can be produced at price parity compared with IFA. This evidence has not yet translated into strong normative guidance or broad adoption at the country level. However, the policy landscape is shifting as WHO ANC guidelines, including the recommendations on MMS, are currently under revision, and countries are increasingly exploring MMS as the standard of care. Because of this increasing demand, the global production of MMS will soon be insufficient. Efforts are underway to improve international and local supply and access to the UNIMMAP formula.

Experiences from case studies in Bangladesh, Haiti and Indonesia showed a range of context-specific approaches to scale up MMS in each country. These case studies also contained commonalities, including the importance of having clear and consistent safety evidence, cost-effectiveness and affordability, all of which are important for local advocacy. The success of MMS depends on the success of ANC services, and highlights the need to improve these programs. There is a growing effort to create awareness and demand on a global scale, but this can only be achieved at a country level when national stakeholders, institutes and policymakers are involved in these efforts, recognizing that there are many competing priorities.

Upcoming global advocacy efforts for MMS include the November Micronutrient Forum Global Conference in Bangkok, Thailand, and the December N4G Summit 2020 in Tokyo, Japan. Donors, including governments, foundations and the private sector, are expected to make significant commitments during the N4G event. MMS stakeholders must ensure that micronutrient nutrition generally and MMS specifically are on the agenda at the N4G Summit. Although global momentum for evidence-based, implementation-ready, nutrition interventions is growing, it is important to frame MMS within the context of maternal nutrition in general, focusing on the comprehensive package of interventions, not just a single product, and to link it to the need to improve ANC platforms in the context of ‘universal health care.’

During the consultation, participants discussed a road map for the scale-up of MMS, and prioritized the following actions for the coming year:

1. Translating the compelling evidence for impact and cost–benefit ratio, as well as interpreting the evolving WHO ANC guidelines with a view to global, national and local advocacy.

2. Continuing the development of compelling advocacy and planning tools to demonstrate the low cost and high return associated with MMS investments.

3. Creating an implementation toolbox for scale-up, building on country experiences to help share lessons learned on improving adherence and delivery and increasing supply, while acknowledging the importance of context.

4. Developing financing mechanisms to increase supply from both the public and the private sectors. Ensuring registration in the essential medicines list has the potential to open up opportunities for different funding mechanisms.
5) Recruiting new partners with strong commitments to the Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies Accelerator. Leveraging major global moments this year, including the Micronutrient Forum in Bangkok and the N4G Summit in Tokyo. Engaging country leadership.

To further facilitate dialogue and collective action on this agenda, the Micronutrient Forum, together with partners, committed to: further build, formalize and lead the MMS Stakeholder Group; add local and country representatives; monitor progress on the agreed actions; share learnings; and help to bring maternal nutrition and MMS to the global advocacy space.

The Micronutrient Forum prepared the following four concluding statements based on the dialogue during the MMS Stakeholder Consultation:

1) MMS is a superior product to IFA in terms of pregnancy outcomes, including low birth weight, small-for-gestational-age birth and preterm birth.

2) Maternal nutrition and ANC must be prioritized globally, and MMS programs present valuable opportunities to strengthen maternal care and ANC.

3) The nutrition community is committed to partnering with national government entities and other relevant stakeholders to develop effective and context-specific programs.

4) With key advocacy events occurring in 2020, all MMS stakeholders, with support from the Micronutrient Forum, will continue and strengthen advocacy efforts to build on the current momentum for MMS.

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References


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