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Forging Effective Strategies to Combat Iron Deficiency

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Communications Strategies to Advance the Iron Agenda

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A list of our expectations for actions that would move us closer to a world free of iron deficiency would include:

- Policy makers passing legislation to fortify key food products and to protect workers, students, and others who are situated in large institutions.
- Ministry of Health managers planning, implementing, and adequately stocking supplementation programs for vulnerable populations.
- Mothers ensuring that they and their young children take a full course of iron supplements when they are recommended.
- Company executives complying with legislation, or voluntarily fortifying foods, or protecting workers from anemia.

In thinking about the role of communication in programs to reduce iron deficiency each of these expectations must be considered in light of balancing the forces of supply or availability of iron with the demand for it. Communications is an essential tool for creating and sustaining the demand for services and products, and moving those who need to take action closer to taking that action. This is true, regardless of whether we are talking about mothers feeding more of a certain food, a pharmaceutical executive agreeing to supply iron tablets or redesign the tablet, or a policy maker adding an iron-fortified food to a child care program.

For iron deficiency, communication has not been used to its greatest advantage either for advocacy purposes or to promote improved practices for iron. There are the key lessons from programs addressing iron deficiency as well as other health issues that should be applied to strengthen communications on iron:

Bring in communications from the beginning. Don't think of communications in terms of products: flyers, posters, videos...it is a process to ensure demand. A communications professional or team familiar with communication planning, management, and strategy is required from the beginning--not a design person to produce a poster. If communications were left until the end it would be equivalent to deciding on the food product to fortify, and at what levels, before bringing a food technologist to the team.

Conduct research with the intended beneficiaries/participants of the program. The communications team will provide insights into the demand side of the program, noting perceptions and practices, outlining resistances and motivators to new ideas, concepts and practices. The consumer/client perspectives and their needs to adopt certain new practices need to be balanced with the epidemiology of the situation. The pros and cons

of various strategies must be weighed to ensure that both the nutritional and life-style needs are understood and met efficaciously and efficiently.

Use communications strategically. Communications is not about sheer numbers of materials or broadcasts. It is about reaching people and moving them to action. Strategy will depend on the specific culture, goals of the program, and options available. It is about combining an art and a science. The art is the creativity--in how to position a concept to appeal to people. The science is how to use the media--an instructional video, for example.

Ensure that the communications are precise. This is really part of the strategic use of communications. Ask: who is this for? What, precisely, is being said? Is the expectation of what the person will do with the information clear? Is the information provided at a time and place that will be relevant?

Resolve resistances, build on assets. This is also part of the strategy. When you look at communications, don't just check to see that the information is correct but ask: What is the problem and why isn't it being dealt with now? Is this communication convincingly addressing the barriers to action?

The appreciation of these lessons is evident in some iron programs and demonstrates that there are communication strategies ready for broader application.

- Communications was the key factor to success in Indonesia's MotherCare work. In a project in West Java, the more women who received communications about supplement taking took iron supplements, took more pills each month, and took about one month more of pills than women who did not receive any counseling. Lessons from this project demonstrate the important elements of a communications strategy for maternal supplementation programs.
 - Individual counseling is key. With counseling, women overcome common resistances to taking iron tablets.
 - Training in interpersonal counseling and negotiations makes a difference in community and health workers' ability to convince women to take iron tablets and in reported adherence to other anemia related behaviors.
 - Common danger points for dropping out that must be addressed in the communications are: first 4 days when side effects are worse, after a week or 10 days when anemic women feel better, and after a month when supplies run out.
 - Remembering to take the pill is a common problem so reminder materials are a key strategic communications material.
- In Egypt, communications efforts have been at the heart of a successful iron supplementation program for school-attending adolescents. Motivation for participation was provided via television and in the schools; full participation in a school iron supplementation program was achieved. Nonformal classroom education is helping to address dietary changes to control iron deficiency for the long-term.

From the Egypt experience as well as others, a strategy for communications work with adolescents emerges:

- There needs to be information about the supplement (why, when, where) through community channels (meetings, etc.) and through the mass media.
 - Fears about the supplement must be addressed.
 - The supplementation program should be placed in the context of overall diet improvement that requires the identification of precise behaviors that need to be changed.
 - Adolescents should be given tools to make those changes and they should be used as a key medium for diet change at home.
 - Reminders about key behaviors are required.
- For advocacy efforts, recent research has shown that:
 - One message will not be effective for everyone.
 - Policy makers and program managers' concerns vary by their sector.
 - Those concerned with quality of life and livelihood are most open to the iron agenda.
 - Program managers want to be met on their turf, with the debates clarified and the messages operational. They have stayed away from iron because of the confusion they believe exists among experts.

There is enough experience generally and specifically for iron to launch communications program to address iron deficiency strategically, with funders, policy makers, programmers, the public in general, and for consumers of iron products/iron-rich foods. As we develop communications, we are not beginning from scratch. We know about communicating with different audiences from other development program experiences and from previous iron-specific programs. There is enough experience to develop effective and successful communications strategies to move iron deficiency higher on the agenda and to offer guidelines and a few short cuts to program managers. Strategic and creative use of communication is central to turn what we know technically about iron and iron programming into a public health success story.