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Building Partnerships

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The business of the food industry is to generate profits based on products that satisfy the needs of consumers, particularly by providing foods that are safe and nutritious. By providing these products, the food industry can contribute to forging effective strategies for iron deficiency control.

There is an initiative that illustrates the potential for building partnerships between industry, governments and the academic community. As president of the Latin American Millers Association, I saw an opportunity to transform this organization from one that was largely social in nature to an organization that would become an engine for promoting the technological development of the milling industry in Latin America and the Caribbean. In undertaking this new role, the Association would place emphasis on promoting standards for food safety, quality control, cleanliness in production sites, and addressing workers issues.

A meeting of the LAAM in Lima, Peru, provided an opportunity to enlist the association in the fight against anemia. A declaration, called the Lima Declaration, was adopted, which recognized the need to intensify the campaign for wheat and corn fortification in Latin America and the Caribbean. The declaration urged each country in the region to assure that the problem of iron deficiency anemia and diseases caused by deficiencies of other micronutrients be recognized at all levels of society. Member companies of the LAAM committed themselves to collaborate to determine whether existing conditions made iron and vitamin fortification a feasible and effective intervention in their countries. Where fortification was determined to be feasible and effective, government authorities, the milling industry, flour importers and distributors were urged to work together to issue legislation making flour fortification with iron and micronutrients compulsory, based on international standards and control measures.

As a result of the commitments made in the Lima Declaration, the leaders of the milling industry advocated their governments on behalf of legislation for flour fortification. A further result was the support by USAID of a three-week long course at the American Baking Institute to train technical personnel from Latin American milling companies in techniques of quality assurance and quality control of fortified products. In order to receive the training, trainees had to have considerable experience as employees of the milling industry in Latin America. Also, the trainees had to agree to be willing to serve as trainers of other technical staff. The possibility of follow-up training efforts were discussed with UNICEF and the World Bank, but further training was not carried out due to lack of funding. On other hand, a majority of signers of the Lima Declaration were successful in pushing their governments to pass legislation to make fortification mandatory.

Several factors have limited progress in achieving fortification goals. One limiting factor has been concerns about the fairness of government regulation and monitoring to assure compliance with fortification laws. Most commonly, infractions to the law arise from inadequate mixing, since the amount of premix is very small relative to the amount of daily production. Because of variations in mixing, procedures for quality control and monitoring need to recognize that a sample of 1 kg cannot be expected to be representative of 100,000 kg of flour production. Inadequate regulation and monitoring practices are a common problem, and one that discourages many millers.

Another factor limiting progress arises from increased market globalization and the smuggling of flour from countries that do not fortify and do not pay tariffs. For example, the LAAM was instrumental in bringing these practices to the attention of government authorities in Bolivia. As a result, the customs laws of Bolivia were modified and the situation is now better controlled.

In seeking to form an effective partnership, the milling industry would ask the academic community to continuously provide the latest scientific information so that industry can help convince skeptics of the benefits of flour fortification in the fight against hidden hunger. In turn, the milling industry will promote fortification, using the argument that fortification is an important marketing tool and that it results in a product with proven health benefits especially for children and women.

In conclusion, the milling industry has the human resources to provide technical support to training and monitoring efforts, but training efforts must be reactivated and continued. Institutions of higher learning should participate in this effort, as well as international agencies, which should provide technical as well as financial support. To achieve greater commitment on the part of industrial millers, the advantages of fortification must be continuously emphasized, highlighting the point that fortification increases sales by improving competition against nonfortified products from other countries.