

Helping eliminate 'hidden hunger' with micronutrients

FRIDAY, 29 APRIL 2011 15:00 POST STAFF



An interview with Dr Andreas Bluethner, Global Coordinator - BASF Micronutrient Initiatives

The Micronutrient Initiative is an international organisation based in Ottawa, Canada, that supports food supplementation and fortification to more than 500 million people in 70 countries. The UN Global Compact is a policy platform and framework for companies committed to sustainability and responsible business practices. With more than 8,000 signatories in more than 135 countries, it is the world's largest voluntary corporate responsibility initiative. BASF is the world's largest chemical company with 105,000 employees that produces nutritional products as well as pharmaceuticals and aroma chemicals and is engaged in improving nutrition in developing countries through its food fortification initiative. Andreas Bluethner is part of BASF's Food Fortification Team, and he took time out to talk to *The Phnom Penh Post*.



Q: What is your personal motivation to work on food fortification?

A: It's the beauty of combining doing good and good business sense with a topic that has been identified to be among the very best investments into humankind. It feels rewarding, if your own company acts responsibly, enables others to do so and can remain committed and scale-up its engagement – and one can take part in such a success story. Also the great team we have motivates day-by-day to invest energy into ending under nutrition in the countries we work with.

Q: What's the thing about micro-nutrients that most people are unaware of? That it only takes a tiny amount of them to stave off health problems?

A: Symptoms of micronutrient under-nutrition are not as visible, as if you would starve. Under-nutrition with micronutrients is therefore often referred to as "hidden hunger". But the consequences are widespread and severe, including severe health problems, birth defects, health system costs and decreases in productivity and educational opportunities. Many people are unaware of the need of micronutrients for a healthy productive life and the problems deficiencies cause. We are also working towards better awareness for fortified foods, such as palm oil, being a sustainable, practical and affordable solution.

Q: When you look around the world, beyond Cambodia, what nutritional challenges do you see for the world's population? How are those challenges being addressed according to your study?

A: One of the major challenges is food and nutrition security in times of growing populations and increasing staple foods prices. New usage of crops and oils for fuel production shorten the supply and limit accessibility to food by the poor. Fortification, namely adding essential micronutrient to those foods, can help to raise the nutritional intake for persons with less access to food. However, food fortification can only be a complementary measure contributing to food and nutrition security.

Q: Do you see micro nutrient fortification as an “invisible” way to improve public health?

A: Food fortification has to be a visible contribution to improve the nutritional status of the people. A logo or clear labeling by producers should help the consumers to choose foods with added nutritional value. Scaled and effective fortification also depends on awareness raising and social marketing by governments and developmental organisations as to assist food producers in their efforts and keep consumers informed and aware about how to fulfill their nutritional needs.

Q: How have your previous humanitarian and professional engagements contributed to your involvement in micro nutrition and how are BASF’s requirements as a global company enhanced or improved by involvement in micronutrients?

A: In my past professional life my work with the German government, the UN and in particular GAIN, the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition, helped me to understand the great potential of public-private partnerships for delivering developmental solutions, in particular in nutrition. It’s not the public sector producing food, it’s the private sector. My time with BASF taught me that well-designed corporate social responsibility strategy enables companies to engage sustainably at scale – lessons we now are sharing with our corporate partners in Cambodia.

Q: How in your opinion could the Cambodian government constitute itself such that the nutritional challenges of the population are best served?

A: It’s not up to me or the private sector to advise the government about their priorities. However, we observe growing interest of the government to drive a nation-wide nutrition and fortification programme and stand ready to support the public and private sector partners with our technical and analytical expertise. In other countries it has proven to be important for governments to unite different ministries to speak with one voice and to incorporate the private sector into a national fortification alliance based on a mutually owned strategy.

Q: This labeling certification, the acknowledgement that a certain food is fortified according to accepted standards – how can the government ensure that private companies use that labeling honestly?

A: A well-protected, credible label for fortified foods is a cornerstone of a sustainable market framework for fortified foods. In most countries the food authorities monitor label claims and labeling to ensure the quality of fortified foods, including the nutritional value claimed. BASF has developed test kits for quick spot analysis of the vitamin A content in foods and we stand ready to share those tool kits and our expertise with participating food companies and Cambodian government once needed.

Q: What role do you see the NGOs playing in the advancement of food fortification and nutrition in Cambodia?

A: Food fortification is based on multiple partners’ engagement, including civil society. International NGOs, prominently GAIN, is granting countries and partners to develop domestically-owned fortification programmes. At the country level, NGOs often participate into advocacy towards the broader public and provide input into developing political processes. But also academia is an important partner, eg through research and scientific advice and mutually agree on sound fortification levels.

Q: What roles do you see the private sector playing in fortification? Do you think it is a sound business choice for companies to choose to fortify their instant noodles, their cooking oil and their drink products? Why?

A: Fortification makes sound business sense, if seen as a two-fold strategy for food companies. First and foremost, fortified products offer essential added nutritional value to customers. Companies that manage to properly market this added value can differentiate in domestic and versus import competition, in particular in favourable market environments created by the government. On top, companies can realise strategic benefits from acting responsibly at the heart of their core business, producing healthy foods, once properly communicated. Benefits from leadership in affordable nutrition include increased employer branding, employee motivation, partnership opportunities and relationships with government and other stakeholders. In Indonesia, one of our partners was just awarded the Indonesian Superbrand Award for his fortified oil, which shows it works.

Q: Finally Andreas, when you stack up Cambodia alongside other parts of the world, how challenged is Cambodia in nutritional deficiencies? Are there places with greater nutritional problems? Can you cite examples of how other countries have addressed micro nutrient needs successfully in models that Cambodia can copy?

A: Cambodia is not a bad place". During my numerous visits I really enjoyed the friendliness of the people I met and the stunning beauty of the country. Nutritional challenges, however, remain highest in Southeast Asia, but we are optimistic that the food fortification partnership formed will help to overcome the challenges and not only contribute to economic growth and improved standards of living, but will help to make growth more inclusive by providing opportunities of a healthy productive life to even more Cambodians in the near future.