

National Council for Nutrition seeks increased iodine, iron and vitamin A fortification

FRIDAY, 29 APRIL 2011 15:00 STUART ALAN BECKER



THE National Council for Nutrition has identified iodine, iron and vitamin A as three main fortification priorities for Cambodia's more than 14 million people.

Iodine is commonly added to salt as an essential nutrient around the world, but in Cambodia, where the population still suffers from iodine deficiency, people can suffer both from goiters, or swelling of the thyroid gland in the throat, and cretinism, a type of mental retardation resulting from iodine deficiency.

According to Mam Borath, Permanent vice-chairman of the National Subcommittee for Food Fortification under the Ministry of Planning, while there are three different iodized salt producers in Cambodia, lots of non-iodized salt gets brought in from Vietnam and Thailand.

"Cambodia has long borders," Mam said, "and it is easy to bring salt in."

He added that people don't mind eating iodized salt as long as it is no more expensive than any other salt. UNICEF is a primary sponsor of Cambodia's salt programme.

Another top priority for the National Council for Nutrition is iron deficiency, which results in anemia and opens the door for other health issues for people who don't get enough iron.

A 2005 pilot project in Kampot began adding iron to fish sauce and in 2007 the project was scaled up to include fish and soy sauce fortification in Siem Reap and fish sauce fortification in Phnom Penh, with three manufacturers now adding iron to fish sauce.

There are plans this year to further scale up the programme, which is supported by the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition, a Swiss foundation, and administered through RACHA, the Reproductive and Child Health Alliance.

A programme to add vitamin A to cooking oil is now under development with a Thai joint venture near Sihanoukville. Vitamin A and other micronutrients are also added to flour and instant noodles in government and NGO-supported programmes such as that with the MeePrachnha noodle brand.

One worry for nutritionists is the rising cost of food, which is linked to oil price increases because most



MAM Borath holds up fortified fish source.

Photo by: Stuart Alan Becker

fertiliser comes from the oil industry.

The food price crisis of 2008 is partially to blame for the increasing malnutrition in Cambodia, which increases the urban poor. World food prices are an estimated 55 percent higher now than they were in 2007.

“In Cambodia when food prices go up, the women and children especially do not receive the food they need,” Mam said.

“The most important thing is education. We have a national mission for information dissemination and we need to get the message out to the provinces.”