



STRENGTHENING WORKFORCE NUTRITION AND FOOD FORTIFICATION POLICIES IN NIGERIA

Introduction

On March 27th and 28th, 2025, France hosted the Nutrition for Growth Summit (N4G) in Paris. Launched in 2013 in London, N4G is a flagship international conference aimed at securing concrete political and financial commitments to combat malnutrition in all its forms.

N4G brings together governments, international organisations, philanthropies, businesses, NGOs and other key stakeholders at a global and regional level to elevate nutrition as a key development agenda and accelerate progress against malnutrition.

In preparation for the 2025 Nutrition for Growth (N4G) Summit, the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) and the Civil Society Scaling Up Nutrition in Nigeria (CS-SUNN) hosted a Stakeholder Nutrition Dialogue in Nigeria to support the Government of Nigeria in defining the commitments to be presented at the upcoming summit.

The dialogue brought together participants from diverse sectors such as farmers' groups, healthcare professionals, academics from national universities, private sector organisations such as food producers, food retailers, and premix suppliers, financial institutions, development organisations, consumers and key government representatives. The dialogue focused on identifying solutions for implementing Workforce Nutrition Programs as a priority across public, private and informal sectors in Nigeria. Indeed, the workplace is recognized by the World Health Organisation as a priority environment for shaping dietary behaviors, as individuals often spend up to two-thirds of their waking hours at work. Many adults spend one-third of their adult lives in workplace environments, which significantly impact their access to and choices of food. To improve workers' productivity and well-being, various strategies can be employed, including enhancing nutrition, sanitation, education, health promotion, workplace safety, and overall population health. In America, workplace nutrition interventions have been shown to have the strongest positive effects on nutrition and health behaviors, as highlighted by the American Heart Association. However, despite their proven benefits, Workforce Nutrition (WFN) programs are not widely implemented in Nigeria.

- 1 World Health Organization: Global action plan for the prevention and control of noncommunicable disease 2013-2020. 2013. [cited 2020 March 3]. Available from: www.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/94384/1/9789241506236_eng.pdf [Google Scholar] [Ref list]
- 2 Van Horn L, Carson JAS, Appel LJ, et al. Recommended dietary pattern to achieve adherence to the American Heart Association/American College of Cardiology (AHA/ACC) guidelines: a scientific statement from the American Heart Association. *Circulation* 2016;134:505-29. [DOI] [PubMed] [Google Scholar] [Ref list]



Additionally, the Nutrition Dialogue explored strategies for food fortification to address the high burden of micronutrient deficiencies within the country. Micronutrient deficiencies are closely linked to birth defects, as inadequate levels of essential vitamins and minerals during pregnancy can lead to congenital anomalies. For example, sufficient folate intake is crucial in early pregnancy to prevent neural tube defects—serious congenital conditions affecting the development of the brain and spinal cord. The National Food Consumption and Micronutrient Survey reported alarmingly high rates of red blood cell folate deficiency: 91% among adolescent girls, 95% among women of reproductive age, and 85% among pregnant women.ⁱ These findings, alongside an estimated birth prevalence of neural tube defects at 3.82

per 1,000 births in Nigeria, suggest a major public health challenge. Experts believe the actual prevalence may be even higher, as fewer than 40% of women give birth in health facilities, limiting accurate reporting.

The NFCMS showed that a large percentage of Nigerians do not consume fortified foods. Rice is a staple consumed daily by the majority of Nigerians across all socioeconomic groups, with an average per capita consumption of 32 kg. This positions rice as an ideal vehicle for fortification with folate and other vital micronutrients. Results from the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition's (GAIN's) Promoting Rice Fortification in Nigeria³ project point to acceptability of fortified rice and its potential for enhancing micronutrient intake.

i Federal Government of Nigeria (FGoN) and the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA). 2024. National Food Consumption and Micronutrient Survey 2021. Final Report. Abuja and Ibadan, Nigeria: FGoN and IITA.

Context:

With over **230 million** people, Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa.



The population is growing at an annual rate of **2.6%**, while the urban growth rate is **4.3%**: today half of Nigeria's population lives in an urban area.⁴



The country faces several socio-economic challenges including **poverty, hunger, unemployment**, and the **burden of disease**, all of which have taken a significant toll on national productivity.



Compounding these challenges, the country's **limited data infrastructure** hampers effective policy implementation, leaving many vulnerable populations without adequate support.



Malnutrition trends over recent years show a worrying lack of progress with widespread undernutrition among young children, and high rates of **overweight** and **obesity**, especially among adults in urban areas.

Consumption of nutritious animal-source foods such as fish has remained static, consumption of vegetables and pulses has declined by **7%**, and consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages has increased by **39%**.



In Nigeria, **5** of the top **10** risk factors that drive disability and death are related to diets.



3 <https://www.gainhealth.org/resources/reports-and-publications/towards-adoption-rice-fortification-nigeria>

4 <https://www.gainhealth.org/impact/countries/nigeria>



INSIGHT 1

Addressing the Gaps in Workforce Nutrition Policy in Nigeria

Participants pointed out that Nigeria currently lacks a dedicated Workforce Nutrition (WFN) policy. Although several organizations and labor policies have policy statements that relate to aspects of WFN, efforts still need to be aimed at broadening WFN implementation across the country. It was acknowledged that the absence of a formal WFN policy in many workplaces, such as the lack of canteens or adequate arrangements to ensure access to safe, affordable, and nutritious food during working hours, remains a key factor behind employee absenteeism, lost time, and decreased productivity.

Concerns were also raised about food quality and gaps in food hygiene standards in organizations with canteens, where meals are not consistently monitored for quality and hygiene standards. Additionally, in most public sector work environments, breastfeeding spaces or kindergartens are not provided, leaving nursing mothers unable to breastfeed their babies exclusively for the first six months. This issue is further compounded by labor laws that

provide only 12 weeks of maternity leave - six weeks pre-delivery and six weeks post-delivery.

To address these challenges, participants agreed that a formal definition of healthy meals for WFN programs should be established through key multistakeholder collaboration of experts. WFN policies and programs should then be developed and integrated into labor laws and public services, with WFN indicators included for monitoring and enforcement by the Ministry of Labour. They also recommended implementing a WFN policy that requires health and hygiene checks for cafeteria staff before hiring to address food safety concerns. Additionally, participants proposed the creation of a WFN scorecard to assess and classify workplaces based on their compliance with WFN standards. This would help employees and potential employees identify organizations that meet key WFN criteria. Furthermore, participants emphasized the importance of exploring public-private partnerships to promote and implement effective WFN programs.



INSIGHT 2

Enhancing Worker Health Through Workforce Nutrition Programs

One of the key challenges Nigeria faces is poor or declining health in workers and people of working age, primarily caused by poor dietary habits and inadequate nutrition. The absence of Workforce Nutrition (WFN) programs only lets the problem get worse. Workers often lack access to safe, nutritious, and sufficient food during work hours. Additionally, participants emphasized the absence of nutrition education, which is crucial for meal planning and overall well-being. These needs are frequently neglected or inaccessible due to workplace pressures and the complexities of urban living.

To tackle this issue, participants proposed tailoring WFN programs to the specific context of companies, whether public or private, in urban or rural settings, while establishing a set of non-negotiable minimum standards. A critical solution identified was educating workers on nutrition to raise awareness using technology. Using technology could also facilitate nutrition and health monitoring, as well as promote accountability in implementing WFN initiatives.



The Need for a Mandatory Policy for Rice Fortification

Participants reflected on previous mandatory Large-Scale Food Fortification (LSFF) initiatives in Nigeria, noting that these programs had not achieved their intended goal of addressing micronutrient deficiencies. They identified key factors contributing to these shortcomings, including insufficient enforcement of regulations and a lack of consumer awareness regarding the benefits of fortified foods. Specifically, they highlighted that rice fortification in Nigeria is currently voluntary and in its piloting phase, resulting in low visibility to consumers and rice millers across the country. To overcome these challenges, participants proposed making rice fortification mandatory in Nigeria, supported by the following measures:

First Steps: Establishing Standards and Monitoring Compliance

- Develop clear standards for Fortified Rice Kernels (FRKs) and fortified milled rice.
- Improve the current national framework to monitor compliance among fortified food producers and to integrate rice fortification standards.

Second Steps: Building Capacity and Ensuring Accessibility

1. Strengthen the capacity of:
 - Small-scale rice millers to effectively implement mandatory rice fortification.
 - Regulators and laboratories to enhance regulatory enforcement and analytical capabilities.
 - Local artisans for the local fabrication and maintenance of blending equipment.
2. Ensure the availability of Fortified Rice Kernels (FRKs) by:
 - Providing an enabling environment for investors towards encouraging in-country production of FRKs to ensure sustainability.
 - Offering FRKs in smaller, affordable packages tailored to small-scale rice millers.

Participants emphasized the importance of increasing awareness among industry stakeholders, consumers, and policymakers about the significance and benefits of rice fortification. Political buy-in was identified as a critical factor in shaping and supporting policies for mandatory rice fortification, ultimately intended to improve public health.

This approach aims to ensure the success and sustainability of rice fortification in Nigeria to address multiple micronutrient deficiencies that persist in the population.

References

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2. Report on the Nutrition Dialogue – ‘Workforce Nutrition and Large-Scale Food Fortification: A Synergistic Approach to Combating Malnutrition in Nigeria. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1jj5ECleZQEWAqbT-K6WkD48Yf9lLeRwB/view>



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