

A conversation with Laura Rowe, February 19, 2015

Participants

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Note: These notes were compiled by GiveWell and give an overview of the major points made by Laura Rowe.

Summary

As part of its work aiming to explore potential GiveWell top charity recommendations, GiveWell spoke with Ms. Rowe of Project Healthy Children (PHC). Conversation topics included a description of PHC's current projects and work processes, its organizational structure and hiring processes, its vision for future work, its need for additional funding, and what it would do with additional funds.

Project Healthy Children

Project Healthy Children (PHC) provides technical assistance to small countries as they design and implement food fortification programs. This work is done in-service of national governments who have agreed to prioritize fortification. Food fortification has been deemed one of the most cost-effective ways to reduce micronutrient deficiencies in people.

PHC's technical assistance

PHC's technical assistance focuses on four elements:

1. Policy and legislation
2. Country-specific standards creation and regional harmonization
3. Industry implementation
4. Government monitoring and social advocacy

Policy and legislation

PHC works with country governments to integrate food fortification programs into existing micronutrient strategies or broader nutritional programs. PHC also works with country governments to write and pass legislation that makes the food fortification programs mandatory.

Mandatory food fortification programs have two advantages over voluntary programs:

1. Mandatory programs level the playing field in terms of cost for producers and importers adopting fortification.
2. Mandatory programs allow countries to correctly calculate the amounts of micronutrients that should be added to foods to reduce deficiencies in their

populations. These calculations can only be truly effective if countries can assume that all sources of a particular food will contain the designated amount of micronutrients. Mandatory programs are an effective way to ensure nutritional impact.

Standards creation

PHC works with country governments to draft food fortification standards. These standards are based on deficiency levels and food consumption patterns. These standards also have to be close to existing regional standards to minimize any barriers to trade with other countries in the region.

Industry implementation

PHC helps food producers revamp their production lines to accommodate the fortification process, source the required vitamins and minerals to add to the food, and design and implement internal testing and quality control procedures.

Government monitoring and social advocacy

PHC assesses countries' existing food monitoring systems and helps countries integrate fortification monitoring into these systems.

To assess a country's monitoring system, PHC asks the following questions:

- How many food inspectors exist?
- How many food inspectors are visiting production and importation facilities?
- How many borders does the country have?
- Do inspectors have the time, resources, and ability available to add food fortification sampling to their workloads?
- What is the flow of samples from inspectors to lab?
- What capacity (human and financial) does the national lab have to test fortified products?
- How will data be reported back and by whom to stakeholders and producers?

After collecting this information, PHC collaborates with regional consultants specializing in how to sample and test fortified foods to train countries' food inspectors. PHC also ensures that countries have equipment in the field and in the lab that allows their inspectors to test foods for micronutrient fortification levels.

PHC also ensures that countries have data compilation tools available to collect and aggregate the data generated by their food inspectors. Countries typically do not have their own compilation tools, so PHC creates a unique monitoring workbook for each country that it works with. These workbooks automatically generate graphics based on data entered by inspectors and clearly display where compliance with the country's food fortification standards does and does not exist.

PHC's current projects

PHC is currently working with programs in Rwanda, Burundi, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Tanzania, all of which now have some quantity of producers and importers fortifying their products.

Country selection

PHC works with small countries (typically populations of less than 15 million) that either do not have food fortification programs in place but are interested in developing them, or that have programs in place that are faltering in some way. For example, PHC was invited by the Government of Malawi to assist in strengthening their already-existing program. PHC focuses on small countries generally overlooked by larger agencies.

PHC only works in countries in which they are invited. Governments have to be ready to independently run and prioritize food fortification programs for the programs to be successfully implemented over the long term.

Countries typically hear about PHC through word of mouth or from another organization. Burundi heard about PHC from Rwanda, and Sierra Leone heard about PHC from Liberia.

PHC's country evaluation process

Once a country approaches PHC for assistance with its food fortification program, PHC conducts a high-level assessment, and if warranted, a more in-depth situation assessment, to determine whether to work with the country.

PHC conducts situation assessments by reviewing existing nutritional data and policies and by interviewing relevant individuals to learn about the work the country has already done in the nutrition and / or food fortification arena and to better understand how fortification might fit (or not fit) into the existing landscape.

PHC conducts its situation assessments by:

- Analyzing detailed micronutrient deficiency data to understand the types and severity of deficiencies in the population.
- Analyzing food consumption data, or data that describe the types and quantities of food that people typically eat, to understand which foods might be candidates for fortification.
- Assessing government functionality and profiling ministry officials involved in fortification and / or nutrition work to better understand how ministries work together.
- Assessing industry structure to identify the number of producers and importers of staple foods and from where staple foods are typically imported.
- Conducting a market analysis of how fortification would impact the cost of various foods.

PHC is typically able to rely on existing micronutrient deficiency data for its situational assessments. PHC does not have the human or financial capacity to conduct independent micronutrient deficiency surveys.

In terms of obtaining consumption data, PHC will conduct rapid on-the-ground surveys, obtain data from already-existing consumption data sources, or conduct implied consumption analyses from existing sources. In a few cases PHC has administered the Fortification Rapid Assessment Tool (FRAT), which is a questionnaire that collects consumption information specifically pertaining to effective fortified food staples. In other cases, PHC makes estimations about consumption based on other data, such as informal market assessments or general household expenditure surveys.

PHC has never declined to work with a country because its people did not have sufficient micronutrient deficiencies, but it has deferred work in several countries because it was unable to support additional projects beyond its current portfolio. Other larger agencies have recently started food fortification projects in some of these countries, so if PHC does eventually work with these countries, it may be in a more focused capacity. For example, some countries have shown interest in PHC providing specific fortification monitoring support.

PHC's process

PHC begins its work in a country by creating a National Fortification Alliance, which typically includes the country's ministries of health, commerce and / or trade, agriculture, and / or education; bureaus of standards, staple food producers and importers, consumer associations, and academia. PHC then guides this alliance through the process of creating a food fortification implementation plan for the country. During this process, PHC makes recommendations based on its knowledge and brings in outside consultants to do needed trainings and to perform industry assessments. Finally, PHC encourages the country to create a government position dedicated to the monitoring of its food fortification program. If monitoring tasks are not included in someone's job description, those tasks are often not completed.

Project timeframes

PHC typically spends between five and eight years working with a country to develop its food fortification program. Two factors—the country's political stability and the degree to which it takes ownership of its program—usually determine how long PHC remains involved. For example, PHC will likely only spend four years in Liberia because individuals in Liberia's government have provided strong leadership for its program. Conversely, PHC has been in Rwanda since 2007 because there has been a great deal of turnover in its government, which necessitates PHC's continued presence.

Project costs

PHC spends roughly \$70,000 per country per year. These costs cover:

- Consulting fees for industry assessments and inspector training.
- Travel costs for PHC staff.
- PHC salaries.
- Taxes paid to the countries.
- Gap funding for national fortification alliances and national standards labs.
- Advocacy and monitoring work.

Gap funding is used to ensure that national fortification alliance meetings are held during the early stages of countries' fortification programs. The funding covers small items like transportation, room rental, and refreshments, but without these things, the meetings would likely not happen. Country governments or other organizations eventually absorb the costs of these meetings.

PHC's per-year cost for a country decreases to approximately \$50,000 when it is transitioning out of the country.

Fortified foods

Countries typically add the following micronutrients to the following foods:

- Iron, zinc, folic acid, and vitamins A, B1, B2, B3, B6, and B12 are added to flour.
- Vitamin A is added to cooking oil and sugar.
- Iodine is added to salt.

Not every country adds vitamin A to flour because doing so is expensive. Adding it to cooking oil and sugar is more cost-effective. However, many countries push to add vitamin A to flour because regional standards require that it be added.

Countries are usually not able to measure deficiency levels for all of these micronutrients before deciding to include them in their food fortification programs. Performing the blood analyses necessary to determine micronutrient deficiencies is expensive. Rather, countries rely on dietary information or deficiency data from a few key micronutrients to make the implied assumption that there are deficiencies in other, harder to determine, micronutrients. Countries often have deficiency data on iron and vitamin A, and sometimes on iodine and zinc.

PHC's metrics

PHC collects quantitative and qualitative metrics to help guide its work and measure its progress.

Quantitative metrics

PHC calculates the cost to itself, to each country's government, and to each country's food industry to reach every individual in the country with each micronutrient included in its food fortification program. PHC uses a methodology adapted from The World Bank's cost analysis of nutrition programs to make these calculations. These calculations are crude, but they allow PHC to compare the costs of operating food fortification programs across countries.

Qualitative metrics

PHC has developed four indicators that it deems essential for the successful implementation of food fortification programs:

1. Are all identified industries and importers producing and importing the fortified foods at the required standards?
2. Are samples and / or results from all identified border points and all identified staple food producers being obtained on a regular basis?
3. Are noncompliance measurements being followed up on?
4. Are surveillance mechanisms put in place to ensure that 80% of the population is consuming fortified foods?

PHC has developed a set of benchmark questions that measure progress towards each indicator. Examples of benchmark questions related to the first standard include:

- Does the country have a sampling plan in place for the food products to be fortified?
- Does the country routinely collect fortification data from food inspectors?
- Has the country's food industry appropriately scaled up to accommodate new food fortification procedures?
- Are importers aware of the country's new food fortification standards?

PHC reviews these benchmark questions for each of its countries on a quarterly basis to determine how to help each country move its fortification program forward.

Effectiveness metrics

While PHC does not currently measure the effectiveness of its food fortification projects via micronutrient surveys, as that is a longer-term initiative not within PHC's mandate, it provides desk-side support to governments and assists in ensuring collaboration with other partners in order to ensure such effectiveness studies are conducted. This has not taken place in any PHC country of operation to date since programs are not yet at this stage of implementation. Currently, PHC's effectiveness is measured against progress on qualitative metrics, which determine whether fortification policy has been put in place and whether effectively fortified foods are reaching the intended population.

PHC excel-based monitoring tool is one means by which PHC assists countries in measuring the effectiveness of their programs.

Micronutrient deficiency surveys

Micronutrient deficiency surveys, which measure the prevalence and extent of micronutrient deficiencies, are generally administered 10-12 months after the fortified foods are available on the market. This lag time gives countries sufficient opportunity to work out any issues in their supply chains. These surveys also should not be administered until countries have ensured that at least 80% of its population is consuming the fortified foods.

PHC will provide desk-side support to countries as they administer their micronutrient deficiency surveys. Ideally, countries would include these indicators in existing demographic and health surveys. For countries that are not able to administer their own surveys, PHC assists in establishing partnerships with other agencies that find fund such studies.

Malawi has scheduled a micronutrient deficiency survey to be conducted in 2015 / 2016. PHC is encouraged by the progress in Malawi and believes this survey will provide important data to capture the fortification program's impact.

Excel monitoring workbooks

PHC will also use its monitoring tool to track a country's fortification program progress. Countries will submit the captured monitoring data quarterly to both PHC and to their national fortification alliances so that interim program changes can be made before long-term impact studies are conducted.

PHC's organizational structure

Country coordinators

PHC's Country Coordinator model is structured in a way so as to ensure upmost program sustainability. Country Coordinators function as technical consultants to governments throughout the design and implement phases of food fortification programs. Country coordinators are often physically co-located with countries' ministries of health so that they are perceived as part of the government. One country coordinator operates in each of the following countries or country clusters: Tanzania, Liberia, Rwanda/ Burundi, and Malawi/ Zimbabwe.

A central challenge to any fortification program is effectively guiding multiple players on a consistent basis. Due to competing demands, there is often not a lead agency within a country that can dedicate full attention to fortification. It is, therefore, advantageous to have an external entity or individual promoting and supporting the identification of priorities, providing intense laser-eye focus on fortification, and pushing work streams forward in a timely manner. It is out of this understanding that PHC's 'Country Coordinator' model was born.

In each country of operation, PHC places or co-places one, single Country Coordinator whose role it is to act as a catalyst and provide guidance to government and industry in support of a national program. More importantly, the Coordinator model allows for extreme sustainability to be built into the program from the start. The goal is to ensure the program is owned by the government with PHC staff there simply to support and guide based on organizational experience and given the specific context, challenges, and needs. Coordinators have the flexibility to provide niche assistance when and where necessary. As the program matures and as government and industry take on greater responsibilities, work streams can be slowly and seamlessly handed over to government and PHC assistance withdrawn without a void being felt.

One country coordinator will split his or her time between two countries as PHC transitions out of one and into another. For example, the country coordinator for Rwanda is helping the Rwandan government manage its program on its own while physically located in Burundi and starting a program there. This model works well because countries continue to need PHC's support at they take full control of their food fortification programs, but providing this support is not a full-time job. Providing limited support to countries while transitioning out also allows PHC to identify and address weaknesses in each country's ability to manage its program.

Country coordinators work independently but receive support from one another and from Ms. Rowe. Coordinators schedule support calls for themselves, and twice a year all PHC staff meet in one of its countries to focus on team building. Ms. Rowe calls each country coordinator at least once a week, and visits them frequently to help them move their projects forward and address any challenges they may be facing.

Hiring country coordinators

PHC uses a structured process to hire country coordinators, and it prioritizes independence over a background in nutrition. PHC has an internal nutrition training program so it is not necessary that country coordinators be hired with a certain level of technical knowledge.

PHC's limitations

To expand PHC's operations to several other country programs, the organization would be limited by the size of its budget.

PHC's future

PHC sees an opportunity to transition from helping countries design food fortification programs to helping countries improve their ability to monitor their programs. Few countries remain that need PHC's assistance developing food fortification programs, but many countries need PHC's assistance to improve their existing programs' monitoring systems. These systems are often overlooked when developing fortification programs, or they are planned but not given sufficient resources to operate. Additionally, monitoring systems are often difficult to manage because they typically involve both industry and government inspectors. However, without effective monitoring, mandatory food fortification programs typically do not meaningfully reduce micronutrient deficiencies and can lead countries to think that food fortification does not work.

In this regard, PHC would work with countries that both independently developed their food fortification programs and that worked with other organizations to develop their programs. PHC may approach countries to do this work because some countries may not know that their monitoring programs are ineffective. PHC may also work with both small and large countries because it would be the only organization doing specifically monitoring work. PHC may use maps put out by the

Food Fortification Initiative to identify countries that have many elements of food fortification programs but may be struggling to monitor those programs.

If PHC transitions to monitoring work, it will likely be doing only this type of work by the beginning of 2018. PHC may have its country coordinators continue to act as consultants if it makes this transition or it may identify a more effective model for this specific purpose. The first countries PHC would likely target for its monitoring work include Uganda, Kenya, South Africa, and Zambia. There may be a need for PHC to expand its monitoring work into as many as 10 countries, including countries outside of Africa, like India and Pakistan.

Other organizations' involvement in monitoring

Other organizations, including GAIN and UNICEF, are aware of the challenges that countries face when monitoring their food fortification programs and are returning to countries they worked in previously to help improve their monitoring abilities. No other organizations are currently using PHC's monitoring workbook, which is the leading tool available to track countries' progress towards fully implementing their food fortification programs.

PHC's need for new funding

If PHC were to change its mission and become specifically focused on fortification monitoring, additional sources of funding would need to be identified. When PHC began full-scale operations in 2010, they asked their donors for a commitment to ensure PHC operated for seven years, reached seventy million people, in seven countries. Given that PHC will have reached this goal at the end of 2016, donors will have fulfilled their stated commitment.

The type of work that PHC will be able to do in 2017 and beyond will depend on the amount of funding it is able to secure and the actual per-country cost of PHC's monitoring work, which Ms. Rowe thinks might be less than the per-country cost of PHC's current projects. If it is able to raise half of its current operating budget, it will likely be able to start its monitoring work in three countries, but likely not at full capacity. If it is able to raise all of its current operating budget, it will likely be able to start monitoring work in five or six countries. If it is able to raise one million dollars or more, it will be able to expand its monitoring work into even more countries.

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