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Health Technical Services Project

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**REVIEW OF USAID'S
MICRONUTRIENT PORTFOLIO:
A SUMMARY**

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Glossary of Terms and Abbreviations

EPI	Expanded Program On Immunization
GTZ	German Technical Cooperation Agency
HKI	Helen Keller International
HN	Office of Health and Nutrition
HTS	Health Technical Services Project
MCH	Maternal and Child Health
PHN	Population, Health and Nutrition
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development
VAD	Vitamin A Deficiency

Review of USAID's Micronutrient Portfolio: A Summary

At the request of the Office of Health and Nutrition of the Global Bureau for Programs, Field Support, and Research (G/PHN/HN) of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), a comprehensive review of the Agency's portfolio of contracts, cooperative agreements and other mechanisms for the furtherance of micronutrient research and field activities was undertaken by a six-person team, beginning in mid-October 1996. While looking at the portfolio in the context of all USAID support for micronutrient activities, **the review focused particularly on three funding mechanisms managed by G/PHN/HN:**

- **Opportunities for Micronutrient Interventions (OMNI): Authorization No. 936-5122**
- **Vitamin A for Health: Authorization No. 936-5116**
- **Food and Nutrition Monitoring and Support: Authorization No. 936-5110.**

The review was intended to assess the performance of these micronutrient initiatives, recommend changes to help the portfolio achieve its objectives more effectively, suggest medium- and long-term priorities, and surface ideas as to how to give micronutrients a stronger, more integrated profile within the totality of USAID programming.

As directed by the Scope of Work covering the review, the portfolio review team structured its examinations and conclusions around five subject areas: (1) the quality and availability of micronutrient services provided under USAID-funded programs; (2) the impact of services and research on policy development and resource allocation at international and country levels; (3) communication and behavior change strategies employed in furthering micronutrient awareness and related action; (4) the strengths, balance and applications of the micronutrient research agenda; and (5) the overall management of the micronutrient portfolio. An additional focus, touching on most of these areas, was on opportunities to stimulate greater involvement of the private sector in promotion of the

consumption of micronutrients, especially through food fortification. The team assessed both specific activity areas and the portfolio as a whole in the context of a “re-engineered” USAID, which is seeking to do its work with undiminished impact in an era of diminishing resources.

Most of all, the team sought to reach its own conclusions about the oft-repeated assertion that USAID has historically played an indispensable “leadership role” in international micronutrient research and program implementation, without which the field would be far less advanced. If anything, the team discovered this to be an understatement. Throughout the international health community, it found confirmation that USAID has indeed been the indispensable player in creating awareness of the negative, even fatal, consequences of micronutrient malnutrition in poor populations. **What understanding of, and commitment to, micronutrients does exist in the world, is due in large measure to the Agency’s pioneering efforts to have them understood as a key element of public health, and to put their universal acceptance and availability within reach.**

Evidence of this impact extends from USAID’s early support for ground breaking vitamin A research in Indonesia, to its sponsoring of countless expert meetings and support of the leading technical associations, to its involvement in bringing micronutrient interventions to scale in countries such as Nepal, the Philippines and Indonesia. **Under the funding mechanisms listed above, the importance of vitamin A supplementation to early child health has been proven categorically, and models developed to make possible national capsule coverage. Dietary diversification through the social marketing of vitamin A-rich foods has become a possibility worthy of further testing and evaluation.** The financial and technical viability of vitamin A, iron, and iodine fortification of food commodities has been proven, and important national fortification efforts launched in Asia and Latin America. **Efforts to make fortification an element of national policy have been shown to be particularly successful when the private sector has been involved as expert partner, and emphasis is placed on creating demand for fortified products. The review team urges a special effort to learn from, and create, private/public partnerships.** And dietary diversification is being studied for its potential as a long term solution to micronutrient deficiency, notably via a major evaluation of the Bangladesh home gardening project.

Going back as far as the 1970s, **the research component of USAID’s micronutrient portfolio has been especially vibrant**, effectively laying the technical and strategic groundwork for field implementation programs to follow. While its primary focus has been on applied research into vitamin A deficiency, important investments have also been made in research into iron deficiency

anemia and iodine deficiency disorders, and a start made at analyzing the importance of zinc to maternal and child health. Again, this research has been central to health policy making and resource allocation decisions in many countries. Current USAID-funded applied research on the impact of vitamin A, iron and zinc supplementation of pregnant women on maternal and infant outcomes, and of vitamin A on mother-to-child transmission of HIV, attest to the broad significance of the micronutrient research agenda to the entire field of international health. **The review team recommends a continued leadership role for USAID in VAD research, strengthened involvement in IDA and zinc research, and heightened attention to effective dissemination of research results, to ensure their application to field programs with no unnecessary delay.**

While fully convinced of the strength of USAID's commitment to micronutrients, and of the substance of its experience and current portfolio, the review team also noted problem areas which are hindering the micronutrient enterprise from reaching its full potential. **Within OMNI Field Support, currently the principle USAID-funded vehicle for implementation of projects in the field, the team felt the need for more intensive, integrated focus on a manageable number of countries.** OMNI FS currently has project activities of varying sizes and types in a long list of countries. OMNI Research also is funding a substantial list of operations research projects, often not in the same countries. The result is that impact is often fragmented and continuity in emphasis countries has suffered. This is not because of inattention to the problem. OMNI Research and OMNI FS in fact share project ideas and issues closely and regularly. Rather, it is a function in large part of OMNI's need to be responsive to requests from USAID and its Missions. The team urges a joint effort on the part of all concerned to help OMNI focus in an integrated manner on a reasonable number of "emphasis" countries, with regular on-the-ground management, and keep tangential countries to a minimum.

Uneven technical assistance and weaknesses in training and planning have rendered OMNI's communications capability less than fully effective. The team urges a full review of all communications priorities and activities, and an emphasis on accessibility and readability of information, featuring such things as short bulletins which summarize key "take home messages" emerging from research findings. It also suggests that clearer separation of the project communications and information dissemination functions of OMNI communications would enable each service to fulfill its mission more effectively, especially the difficult and, so far, poorly understood process of influencing behavior change. The establishment of a Communications Working Group among OMNI partners would also enhance the program's linkages with both the research agenda and the policy development process.

Also problematic is the continued low level of enthusiasm for micronutrient initiatives within other areas of USAID, in particular in USAID Missions. In developing their Strategic Objectives, Missions have tended to emphasize familiar activity areas, such as family planning and HIV/AIDS prevention, and have not, with a few exceptions, “bought in” to the micronutrient agenda. African Missions in particular have been perceived as not being oriented to supporting nutrition- or micronutrient-oriented interventions. After an uncertain beginning, OMNI has begun to develop a better rapport with Missions, but many have felt that the micronutrient message was oversold, and not persuasively linked to local realities, nor Mission priorities. Focusing on a manageable number of emphasis countries (see above) will help this. So will working with regional groupings, such as those covered by the Southern Africa Initiative. **What is likely to be most persuasive, however, is access to lessons learned from successful interventions in other countries and regions; an awareness of local political and cultural realities** (in countries where “campaigns” are popular, vitamin A supplementation might be linked with EPI); **and a willingness to integrate micronutrients with other national and Mission priorities.** For example, the team urges serious consideration of a vigorous initiative to integrate micronutrient counseling and services into family planning/MCH service projects.

Management weaknesses were perhaps the most acute area of concern for the review team, particularly as regards OMNI. The management history of the OMNI Field Support contract has been a rocky one, as detailed in our report, starting with the selection of prime contractor and sub-contractors and their surprising miscalculations as to their respective roles in implementing such a complex project. Sub-contractors’ dissatisfaction with their roles in OMNI led to bad feelings and poor communications, which were exacerbated by the contractor’s own management problems. These included senior staff weaknesses and a poor level of communication between OMNI Field Support and OMNI Research, which is responsible for a small grants program to encourage operations research in connection with OMNI field activities. Fallout from these difficulties led to a high level of distrust about OMNI within USAID and in the wider micronutrient community.

Much of this distrust is undeserved. The review team found the OMNI staff to be motivated, hard working and technically competent. Thanks to the focus and even-handedness of current OMNI senior management, relations with and among sub-contractors have steadily improved. While there is still dissatisfaction on the part of some with their activity levels, a climate has been established within which they are better able to deal with these issues. The OMNI team in general sees the two years remaining in their current contract (or CA in the case of OMNI Research) as an opportunity rather than a limitation, and is committed to learning from hard lessons and, in particular, strengthening country programs. To give

OMNI every chance to accomplish its objectives, **the review team urges an approach to oversight on the part of G/PHN/HN that allows for flexibility and innovation, but also one that features regular, scheduled discussions among the key players (in addition to the sub-contractors' meetings) to trouble shoot, assess progress, and exchange ideas.** On a separate, but related, management issue, **the team urges a complete review of the process by which funds allocated to the Micronutrient Reserve are themselves allocated to the various activities within the micronutrient portfolio.** A clear, rational process (no small task in a funding climate that is often irrational) will benefit all concerned.

The portfolio review team felt respect and admiration as it considered all that has been accomplished in the micronutrient field with USAID support, and focused its recommendations on ways it felt would maintain and increase the momentum. **While urging USAID to continue its leadership role in vitamin A research, it recommends as well an expanded research effort on iron deficiency anemia, strong consideration for supporting zinc research, and a hard look at multi-vitamin/mineral supplementation. It recommends an approach to operations research that is better coordinated with in-country implementation activities,** and thus has an improved chance of impacting behavior change. It urges energetic enlisting of the help of the private sector, in creating demand and drawing on established expertise, as the most effective long-term way of overcoming technical problems of fortification programs at minimal cost.

Finally, the review team urges consistent attention to two concepts which are highlighted on numerous occasions throughout its report. While not statistically quantifiable, we view them as essential in the qualitative sense to the overall strength and growth of the micronutrient portfolio:

One is continuity. The assurance of continuity is critical to developing and maintaining policy dialogue, program effectiveness and counterpart confidence in emphasis countries. Examples are cited where the presence or absence of continuity have been directly related to the success or ineffectiveness of interventions. Absence of continuity in training and message development has often prevented communications initiatives from fully realizing their central informational role. Continuity and consistency in articulating the micronutrient agenda, along with a willingness to adjust to local political and cultural realities, will enhance the ability of USAID/Washington, its contractors and cooperating agencies to enlist hitherto reluctant USAID Missions in the micronutrient cause.

The second indispensable concept is collaboration. Vigilant attention to collaboration, for example, within and between agencies, between public and

private sectors, between applied and operations research, will pay dividends in terms of more effective application of financial and technical resources. Failure to work together will have the opposite effect. **G/PHN/HN is urged to facilitate collaborative exchanges among USAID contractors concerned with micronutrients**, starting with joint meetings for the purpose of discussing the portfolio review report. **A vigorous effort to publish case studies of successful programs will provide the community with much needed new ideas. More frequent exchanges among international organizations**, such as the UN Sub-Committee on Nutrition and the Micronutrient Initiative, will lead to more effective partnerships, particularly in terms of timely sharing of opportunities and resources.

Future Directions for the Micronutrient Portfolio

While the portfolio review team crafted each of its individual recommendations to stand on its own, it also synthesized them all into a series of overarching recommendations as to directions it feels the micronutrient portfolio should take in both the short and long term. In doing so the team considered which activities or groups of activities would have the greatest pay-off in terms of broadening the stage for the micronutrient agenda, and increasing its potential for impact.

A. SHORT-TERM DIRECTIONS (1997-1998)

Two-year objectives are proposed in large part because the current OMNI Field Support contract and OMNI Research cooperative agreement have two years to run until their completion. This period is also seen as an opportunity to prepare the ground for the portfolio, in keeping with its potential, to take on more ambitious targets in the subsequent five-year period.

- Over the next two years USAID will maintain at least the current level of financial support for the micronutrient portfolio.
- USAID will ensure the flexibility necessary to respond effectively to micronutrient program opportunities by maintaining a mixed portfolio of contracts and cooperative agreements.
- USAID will launch a thoughtful and vigorous effort to ensure understanding of the micronutrient agenda on the part of USAID Missions, and to gain a significant level of Mission commitment to incorporating micronutrients in Strategic Plans.
- OMNI will lead an effort to prepare case studies highlighting lessons learned from notable micronutrient program experiences, especially those that have been successful in bringing supplementation and fortification initiatives to scale.
- Every effort will be made to maximize OMNI's performance during the two year period, by focusing on a manageable number of emphasis countries,

allowing OMNI management greater flexibility in decision-making, and strengthening project communications activities.

Effective realization of these objectives will ensure continued, flexible funding and implementation support for micronutrient programs, bring USAID Missions more consistently on board in terms of the micronutrient agenda, provide a solid experiential base drawn from work in the past, and establish a core of integrated country programs to serve as models for the future. It will set the stage for a more far-reaching set of objectives to guide work over the five years to follow.

B. LONG-TERM DIRECTIONS (1999-2005)

In proposing long-term directions for the micronutrient portfolio, the review team thought in terms of where the portfolio should be in the year 2005. Essentially, it felt that micronutrients will by then have fully emerged as a major partner in international health and nutrition programming, supporting and supported by other sectors, accepted as a uniquely productive and cost-effective component of a balanced approach to development assistance. If these objectives are ambitious, it is because the portfolio has earned no less.

- The portfolio will evolve to a point where it places equal global emphasis, in both research and field programs, on vitamin A and iron. Other micronutrients will command a substantially more modest portion of the whole. The attached supplement suggests funding targets for the period in question.
- In terms of the allocation of funds, portfolio balance will be shifted until it supports, in the aggregate, 1/3 research and 2/3 field programs.
- While retaining the flexibility to respond to compelling research opportunities wherever they occur, the major focus of operations research will be integrated within emphasis country programs.
- By the year 2005, USAID will be supporting major national micronutrient initiatives in at least ten Joint Programming countries. Criteria for selection will include population size, prevalence of VAD and IDA, adequacy of national immunization programs, and quality and extent of public/private sector commitment.
- A major priority of all country programs will be service to underserved populations through a locally appropriate mix of interventions.

- In the interests both of maximizing the impact of scarce resources and ensuring complementarity of interventions, the portfolio will underline the essential role of micronutrients in reproductive health by increasing and institutionalizing linkages with family planning and MCH programs.
- Development of working partnerships with the private sector, to take advantage of its technical, logistical and entrepreneurial expertise, will be a permanent strategic element of any initiative to promote national awareness of micronutrient issues and gain long-term acceptance of supplementation and fortification programs.

Supplement

**Five Year Funding Targets
1999-2004**

	Research		Program
Vitamin A	40%		50-60%
Iron	40%		30-40%
Zinc	10%	}	10%
Other	10%		

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