FLAGSHIP 2 | Biofortification

Highlight 1: Major Awards Highlight Biofortification’s Role in Development Efforts

The World Health Organization estimates that malnutrition contributes to the deaths of 2.9 million children under age five every year—almost half the total deaths in the entire age group. A significant proportion of these are the direct result of “hidden hunger,” or a lack of micronutrients essential for physical and cognitive growth and development. Micronutrient deficiencies contribute to stunting, blindness, and compromised immune systems, among other health problems. The deficiencies are chronic in many impoverished communities, where quality of diets is low.

Working to fight hidden hunger, A4NH’s second research flagship focuses on biofortification. This work is led by HarvestPlus, in collaboration with international research institutes and national research partners. HarvestPlus works with partners to develop more nutritious varieties of staple crops, bred to have higher amounts of vitamin A, iron, and zinc—the three micronutrients most lacking in diets globally, according to the World Health Organization. HarvestPlus and partners catalyze dissemination of these nutritious varieties of staple crops, including zinc wheat, iron beans, and vitamin A maize, to farming families around the world.

With goals of reaching 20 million farm households with biofortified crops by 2020 and 1 billion people consuming biofortified foods by 2030, HarvestPlus is taking steps that include mainstreaming biofortified crops into conventional breeding programs; providing evidence for advocacy; developing tools for targeting biofortification interventions; creating an enabling policy environment; partnering for delivery of biofortified planting material; and generating demand for biofortified foods. These steps require increasing awareness of biofortification along the entire supply chain.

HarvestPlus received several high-profile awards in 2017, a testament to its tireless work to bring biofortified crops to millions of people worldwide. These awards not only recognized the innovative and groundbreaking work being done to fight hidden hunger, but also raised the profile of biofortification, helping to further establish it as a tool in the global fight to improve nutrition and health.

In February, HarvestPlus was named a LAUNCH Food Innovator for its pioneering work in making staple food crops more nutritious and available to rural communities around the world. HarvestPlus was one of 12 innovators selected from a pool of 280 applicants from 74 countries, and joined other innovators in March at the LAUNCH Forum in San Francisco to receive tailored feedback, creative support, and opportunities for funding. LAUNCH was founded in 2009 by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the US Department of State, and NIKE to build a community of innovators, thought leaders, and decision makers to scale solutions for positive change toward a more sustainable society.

“LAUNCH Food gave HarvestPlus the opportunity to work together with the DFAT InnovationXchange and the USAID Innovation Lab to bring this powerful idea to new areas of the globe,” commented HarvestPlus’s Benjamin Uchitelle-Pierce. “With the help of committed partners like these, we can bring biofortified seeds to many millions more in the future.”

USAID further highlighted biofortification’s potential at the 2017 Global Innovation Week in October. HarvestPlus was inducted into USAID’s Million Lives Club in recognition of the millions of households already benefiting from biofortified crops.

In December, HarvestPlus was awarded US$15 million as one of four finalists in the MacArthur Foundation’s 100&Change competition, selected over the course of the year from nearly 2,000 applicants addressing critical social problems of our time.

“HarvestPlus’s revolutionary process of using natural plant breeding to enrich staple crops, combined with its strong on-the-ground networks and partnerships, is a feasible and durable solution to remediate the lack of dietary diversity for millions of people. It also has the potential to improve their economic opportunity,” said Cecilia Conrad, MacArthur’s Managing Director who leads 100&Change.