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World Food Day: A case for improving quality of school meals

BRENDA BANURA > FOOD FORTIFICATION

households in Uganda. The 2015 Fortification Assessment Coverage Tool, a survey conducted by the Ministry of Health and Makerere University with support from the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition, found that 92 per cent of households in Uganda consume maize flour.

For school-going students, especially those in boarding school, maize meal is more or less a staple food. Majority of people who went to boarding school can attest to this. For most, maize flour made up all the three main meals of the day, six days a week with hardly any vegetables or fruits.

This is because maize flour is cheap, produced in most parts of the country and available throughout the year. But does maize contain enough nutrients to keep one healthy? Maize is a source of carbohydrates, B vitamins and proteins. However, maize has low levels of vitamin C, iron, zinc, calcium, sodium and potassium that

are required for healthy growth. To make matters worse, the preferred flour is grade one which is milled so much that its nutrient value reduces even though its taste is more appealing.

The missing nutrients can be obtained from other foods. But unfortunately, price, availability caused by seasonality and climate change as well as the perishability of food stuffs like vegetables and fruits limit diet diversification. With diets being made up of only a handful of food groups, many school going children end up consuming food with very low nutrient value.

The most cost effective solution and means to improve the quality of the meals of school going children is through food fortification. Simply defined, food fortification is “strengthening” food by adding vitamins such as vitamin A and folic acid and minerals such as iron, zinc to food products to improve their nutritional value.

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Currently in Uganda, all wheat flour and edible oil and fat is fortified and therefore has the above mentioned nutrients in them. But few people can afford eating products of wheat flour and cooking oil, in amounts that are adequate enough to provide them with the nutrients needed.

When it comes to maize flour which is a staple food, industries that produce at least 20MT a day have an

obligation to fortify all maize flour they produce. But according to findings by USAID/SPRING published in a report titled Uganda: Mapping of Maize Millers, majority of the millers who supply schools, households and retail shops in suburbs produce less than 20MT a day. These do not fortify the maize flour they produce because they are under no obligation to.

Eating fortified maize flour products by school going children will help reduce micronutrient deficiencies that cause health problems like anaemia, mental retardation, poor growth and development.

A fortified product can be identified by a logo of a blue circle with a big F at the centre. Consuming fortified food is the direction to take for cost effective improvement of diet quality. But it is not an end in itself; the best option is to diversify the students’ diet to include fruits and vegetables. The limitations of diet diversification make fortification the better alternative.

So as we celebrate World Food Day urging for investment in food security and rural development, we also ought to advocate for consumption of foods with high nutrient value by choosing fortified products.

The writer is the communications officer at the USAID-SPRING/Uganda. bbanura@gmail.com

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