

MEDIA RELEASE

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SOUTH-EAST ASIA THE NEXT TARGET FOR FIGHTING ‘HIDDEN HUNGER’

While there has been significant progress in scaling up of biofortified crops to improve mineral and vitamin nutrition, and so help to improve cognitive abilities, and to reduce sickness, child stunting and blindness in Africa and South Asia, we now have to get started in Southeast Asia. High zinc rice in Indonesia and the Philippines are initial target countries, with Australia helping to kick things along.

This is the key message during a visit to Australia by Dr Howarth (Howdy) Bouis, the Founder of [HarvestPlus](http://HarvestPlus.org), and Laureate of the [World Food Prize](http://WorldFoodPrize.org) – the “Nobel Prize for Agriculture .”

“Today, more than 2 billion people—one in four of us—don’t get enough essential vitamins and minerals. Micro-nutrient deficiencies, or “hidden hunger,” are leading causes of easily-preventable deaths. Undernutrition contributes to almost half of deaths in children under five, with more than one in three children under five stunted in most parts of Africa and South Asia,” he said.

Over a 25-year period, Dr Bouis pioneered the implementation of biofortification as a global plant breeding strategy so that crops such as iron and zinc fortified beans, rice, wheat and pearl millet, along with Vitamin A-enriched cassava, maize and orange sweet potato have been released in over 30 countries and within 5 years will in 60 countries.

“For low-income farming families in developing countries, fruits and vegetables, high-quality proteins, are most often sadly not affordable. Vitamin and mineral supplement and food fortification programs do not reach everyone.”

“We have made very good progress in Bangladesh with zinc rice, and are making inroads with zinc wheat in India and Pakistan. Support is much appreciated from Australia’s Department of Foreign Affairs to now help us make inroads in Indonesia and the Philippines.”

Dr Bouis explained the tremendous impact and scaling out of biofortified crops in Africa, showing real potential for South East Asia.

“In Rwanda high iron beans account for 20% of total production now and in Nigeria one million farm households are growing provitamin A cassava.”

He explained that biofortified crops add an additional benefit in the face of climate change.

“Studies show that mineral and vitamin densities in seeds are expected to decline as CO2 levels in the atmosphere rise. This is coupled with increasing prices of non-staple foods as rising temperatures and prolonged flooding and drought hinder food production. Biofortification helps to ameliorate both these trends at no extra expense to poor consumers. Biofortified staple foods sell for the same price as non-biofortified, but provide extra minerals and vitamins in diets.”

The need for biofortified crops is now more critical because other strategies are less cost-effective and sustainable.

“Reports indicate that vitamin A capsule coverage has shown some marginal declines recently. This is after 10 billion vitamin A capsules have been distributed over the last 20 years, saving millions of lives but at a cost of \$10 billion. It makes sense to get the plants to do the work, rather than repeated expenditures year in year out on supplementation and commercial fortification.”

“We would like to see the private sector on board more so that all new varieties being released—with the best agronomic properties and highest yields—are biofortified. This would ensure that, eventually, most staple food production in developing countries would be biofortified. The 38 million now consuming biofortified crops is just a small start toward attaining our vision,” he concluded.