

Impact Story 27:

Pathways to Healthier Diets in Malawi's Tea Communities

THE OPPORTUNITY

Global tea production is valued at over **USD 17 billion annually, with 10% of this being cultivated in Malawi**. In 2022, Malawi exported nearly **50,000 tonnes of tea**, and unsurprisingly the tea sector is one of the country's largest employers. In fact, through the production and processing of tea, the sector provides direct employment to approximately **50,000 permanent and seasonal workers** across the country. Furthermore, the sector sources tea from around **17,000 farmers, of which approximately 65% are women**.

Studies have shown that tea workers and farmers frequently face high rates of malnutrition due to diets lacking essential nutrients, and Malawi is no exception. In 2020, **82% of Malawi's population was experiencing moderate or severe food insecurity, 31% of women were found to be anaemic, and 35% of children under five were stunted**. Moreover, the prevalence of adult obesity is on the rise.



THE SOLUTION

While the workplace is recognised as a key avenue for addressing malnutrition, it continues to be underutilised and underexplored. The evidence on the effectiveness of workforce nutrition programmes for low wage workers in low- and middle-income countries remains particularly limited. Drawing on GAIN's evidence-based four pillar framework for effective workforce nutrition programmes and prior experience in India's tea sector, a workforce nutrition programme was proposed, designed and implemented for tea estate workers and their families on **12 tea estates throughout the country**. The programme was implemented between February 2021 and March 2023 in collaboration with the Ethical Tea Partnership.

The goal of the programme was to improve the consumption of healthy diets by promoting the demand and access to nutritious and healthier foods. This was done at the estates where the workers were employed and in close collaboration with the estate managers (the employers). The interventions focussed on:

- Increasing the knowledge and awareness of the estate workers on the benefits of consuming fortified foods and healthy diets by distributing posters and brochures on the estate with the support of the managers
 - Increasing the workers' access to fortified maize lunches by supporting the estate management with the installation of dosifiers (a device needed to add precise amounts of micronutrients to flour) and the training of maize millers to produce and regularly assess the quality of the fortified flour that was used to prepare the lunches.
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THE IMPACT

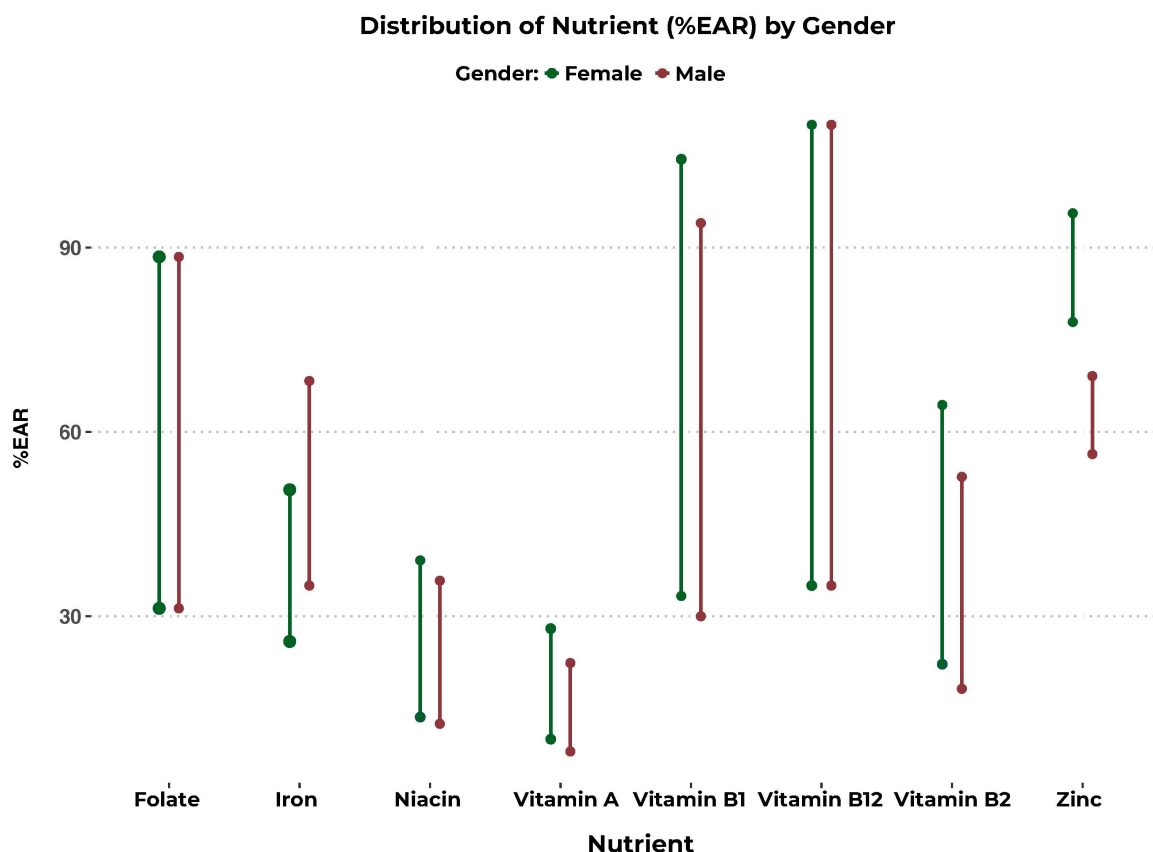
By the end of the project **23,000 estate workers were consuming fortified lunches approximately 5 days a week, across 12 different tea estates.** The fortified lunches included eight essential micronutrients (folate, iron, vitamin B12, B1, and B2, niacin, zinc and vitamin A) which are not (or only in very small amounts) present in regular maize flour. Consequently, the programme successfully supported workers in moving closer to meeting their daily nutrient requirements. The contribution of fortified maize flour to the estimated average requirements (EAR) for various nutrients is presented in the table below.

Additionally, **the percentage of female estate workers eating at least 5 of the 10 key food groups** - meeting the minimum dietary diversity – **increased significantly from 20.3% to 59.6%** over the course of the programme. This means that these women eating more micronutrient-rich diets.

This programme showed that workplaces are an effective entry point to improve diet quality, particularly when lunch is being provided to workers. Tea estates providing fortified maize flour for lunches is a cost-efficient intervention, ensuring that estate workers receive critical micronutrients on a daily basis. Because of the close collaboration with the estate managers and the government, the fortification of lunches will go on and continue to improve the workers' nutrition and wellbeing beyond the programme's conclusion. This model can be replicated in any setting where large numbers of workers are provided with meals that can be easily fortified. Identifying a reliable source of premix containing essential vitamins and minerals to add to the flour is key to the longevity, safety, and success of the work.

To the best of our knowledge there is limited evidence available on the impact and programmatic challenges of fortifying worker meals. The insights gathered during the process of this intervention can be valuable for government, policy makers, donors, and employers who are working on approaches to promote healthier diets in Malawi and similar contexts.

Graph 1: The contribution of 1 portion of fortified maize flour to the daily nutrient requirements (expressed as %EAR) of females & males



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