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UNICEF cautions against the abolishment of mandatory wheat flour fortification in Indonesia

JAKARTA, 8 February 2008- The health of Indonesian women and children could be put at risk by a recent move to abolish the mandatory fortification of wheat flour, says UNICEF Indonesia. UNICEF says that there is an increased risk of micronutrient deficiencies in children if wheat flour is not fortified with Iron, Zinc, Thiamine, Riboflavin, and Folic Acid.

In Indonesia, young children and reproductive-age women, have a high risk of developing micronutrient deficiencies. This makes them vulnerable to disease, reduced learning capacity and lost productivity. Research shows that among several proven approaches available for addressing the problem of micronutrient malnutrition, fortification is currently the most cost-effective and sustainable¹.

In January this year the Ministry of Industry lifted the 2001 Decree on mandatory fortification of all wheat flour traded in Indonesia with the aim of reducing the price of flour in the market by allowing the importation of unfortified wheat flour.

However, economic analysis suggests that fortification is a very-high priority investment² and protecting the Indonesian population from unfortified imports is a critical part of combating micronutrient malnutrition.

The cost of fortification is just pennies per metric ton and the benefits of investment in micronutrient fortification far outweigh the cost. It is unlikely that allowing unfortified flour imports will reduce the cost of flour in the market.

Wheat flour plays an increasingly important role in the Indonesian diet where wheat consumption is predicted to increase from 15 kg/capita to 30 kg/capita in 10 years. In Indonesia, wheat is imported and is milled only in a limited number of factories. This creates a significant opportunity for cost-effective universal flour fortification. In Indonesia all flour milling machines have been equipped with micro-dosing tools for mixing the micronutrients in the flour. This investment by the government and companies has facilitated the successful introduction of wheat flour fortification.

The flour fortification program in Indonesia started in the early 80's with a study on the feasibility of fortifying wheat flour. In 1998, the Ministry of Health issued the Decree on wheat flour fortification, directing the need and dosage of nutrients for fortifying wheat flour in Indonesia.

During the early stage of wheat flour fortification in Indonesia, UNICEF provided grants for premix and studies for fortification. Since then, UNICEF has continued to endorse the government policy on mandatory wheat flour fortification and recognizes Indonesia as a leader in this initiative within the region. This has paved the way for other countries to follow, such as China, Vietnam, United Arab

¹ Journal of Nutrition 2006;136:1053-1054

² Journal of Nutrition 2006;136:1068-1071

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Emirates, and Iran. Flour fortification is practiced in more than 50 countries worldwide and the number is growing annually.

UNICEF believes that by abolishing the mandatory of wheat flour fortification, Indonesia will miss an opportunity to protect high risk groups from micronutrient deficiencies which can lead to higher susceptibility for morbidity and mortality, impaired mental and physical development as well as higher prevalence of neural tube defects at birth.

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