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Food Fortification: Scaling Up Nutrition, Downsizing Choice

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Abstract:

This paper sets out to uncover the trend/increase in the privatization of food fortification within the present day food and nutrition market and the narrowing of ‘choice’ in the food available to consumers. It was apparent from my early research that there has been a shift over the last few decades as to the reasoning behind fortification. Whereas in the past, at the beginning of the early 20th-century, fortification was done in efforts to restore a product to what it was before processing, present day fortification techniques are implemented with the notion of profit not far behind. There has been a fusion of the private and public sector, and humanitarian organizations, such as the World Health Organization, are now becoming involved and intertwined with private corporations, skewing objectivity, and making it hard to ignore the presence of profit-driven health interest.

Although Western/biomedical science and science and technology studies are not the be-all and end-all of what is ‘correct’ in the creation and distribution of products to help alleviate deficiency and disease, it seems the alternative to this is not necessarily Traditional Medicine either. With World Bank and Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) backed programs — such as the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) movement— an opt-in worldwide program set out to ‘tackle’ nutrition problems in both developed and developing countries, the role of money in decision-making and planning is more and more obvious.

Food anthropology and nutritional anthropology have become fields that stand on their own. In the last three-quarters of a century, these fields of Anthropology have produced an increasing number of ethnographic and case studies that illustrate the effect, place, and roll of food, food components, and food ‘thought’ in cultures around the world. My intention with this paper is to discuss food fortification as a process, trace the trend in fortification from inception to present-day, and to discuss what I have found to be the case that human “choice” and “rights” come second not first in food efforts. This is due to none other than the movement towards privatization of the food market within nutrition programs.

For the purpose of my research objective and to better support this paper, I spent four weeks doing a case study in Sri Lanka, where I conducted many interviews and engaged in multiple conversations to try to glean a better understanding of how the SUN program is viewed and implemented. More so, I wanted to lay the foundation for a longer-term investigation, which I would return to over the course of several trips. My intention is to conduct subsequent visits to follow the trends in food fortification and to see how the SUN program takes form. My interest also is to continue to discover and uncover the continual change in food supply, food quality, and health effects and response in the community. This would be understood and analyzed on both a physiological and psychological/perceived level.