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Govt. of Canada Supports COVID-19 Response by HarvestPlus To Reach Vulnerable Rural Households with Biofortified Crops

The COVID-19 pandemic underscores the urgency of ensuring that vulnerable households in low- and middle-income countries have reliable, affordable access to nutritious foods—even during crises. A new project in Africa and Asia, supported by the Government of Canada and implemented by [HarvestPlus](#), will help address this humanitarian challenge.

[The project](#)—**An Integrated Food Systems Approach to Build Nutrition Security**—will focus on the pandemic’s immediate threats to the food, nutrition, and livelihood security of smallholder farming families in six low-income countries: Bangladesh, Democratic Republic of Congo, Malawi, Pakistan, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

The families will be equipped to grow nutrient-rich “biofortified” varieties of familiar staple crops that are scientifically shown to improve nutrition and health when eaten regularly—particularly for women, adolescents, and young children. These conventionally bred (non-GM) biofortified crops also cost farming families no more to grow than their non-biofortified local varieties, and their nutritional value is retained harvest after harvest.

The project will also strengthen these farming families’ access to post-harvest markets, enabling them to sell any surplus crop to support their livelihoods—while also extending the nutrition and health benefits of biofortification to off-farm consumers.

Focus on benefiting women

Through the project, Harvestplus aims to reach and benefit a total of 7.8 million people across the six African and Asian countries over an 18-month period. A top priority is engagement and empowerment of women—who are disproportionately susceptible to the adverse effects of micronutrient deficiency—to ensure gender-equitable improvements in health and livelihoods. Project activities will include: improving women’s access to farm inputs, trainings, and technologies; targeting women-led enterprises in seed and food value chains; and increasing awareness among women of the nutrition and health benefits of biofortified foods in family meals.

Karina Gould, Canada’s Minister of International Development, said, “HarvestPlus’ priority to provide women with their life-saving nutrition interventions is of critical importance. Women and girls will only be able to earn, learn, grow, and lead when they have access to good, nutritious food to fuel their bodies and minds.”

The project is part of the Government of Canada’s commitment of CAD 520 million (about USD 412 million) in nutrition-specific investments over five years to “address acute malnutrition and the underlying determinants of malnutrition.” This commitment was one of several by countries, multilateral lenders, and NGOs, totaling more than USD 3 billion, that were announced at the [December 2020 launch event](#) for the Nutrition for Growth Year of Action. The Year of Action culminates in the Tokyo Nutrition for Growth Summit in December 2021.

“HarvestPlus is honored to be working with the Government of Canada to address malnutrition among rural women and their families, particularly in this time of crisis,” said Arun Baral, CEO of HarvestPlus. “Growing and consuming biofortified crops will help improve their health, resilience, and livelihoods.”

A food systems approach

The project takes a food-systems approach to ensure that farming families have sustained access to biofortified crop seeds and related inputs, as well as to vibrant post-harvest crop and food markets. To help strengthen these markets, HarvestPlus and local partners will also support the development of small- and medium-sized (SME) value chain businesses by providing them with technical know-how to produce and sell biofortified seed, grains, and food products, as well as linkages to sources of financing.

The biofortified staples promoted in the project are rich in iron, zinc, or vitamin A—micronutrients that help act as a first line of defense against viruses and diseases, and are essential for maintaining good health and reaching one’s physical and intellectual potential. Biofortified varieties of maize, wheat, beans and several other staples promoted by HarvestPlus are currently grown and consumed by 9.7 million smallholder farming households in 40 countries, benefiting more than 48 million people.

Micronutrient deficiency, known as “hidden hunger,” afflicts 2.5 billion people worldwide, mostly in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. It leads to widespread stunting, anemia, blindness, and impaired mental and physical development. Women and young children are most vulnerable to the effects of hidden hunger. Biofortified crops deliver micronutrients to families who cannot afford nutritionally diverse diets, and are not often reached by industrial food fortification or supplementation programs.

HarvestPlus is part of the [CGIAR](#) agricultural research partnership and leads a global movement to rapidly scale up development, production, and consumption of biofortified crops and foods, with the aim of benefiting 1 billion people by 2030. HarvestPlus works with hundreds of public, private, multilateral, and civil society partners to embed biofortification in food systems and make them more nutritious and inclusive.

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