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Mains Practice Questions

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Q. Food fortification is the new panacea for nutritional deficiency in the Indian population. Critically discuss. (250 Words)

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Approach

- Start with explaining about the food fortification.
- Discuss the potential advantages of food fortification in India.
- Discuss the adverse impacts of using food fortification.
- Conclude with the way forward.

Introduction

Food fortification is the process of adding micronutrients (essential trace elements and vitamins) to food. It can be carried out by food manufacturers, or by governments as a public health policy which aims to reduce the number of people with dietary deficiencies within a population.

Body

Advantages of Food Fortification

- **Increase in Nutritional Value:** The biofortified crops have 1.5 to 3 times higher levels of protein, vitamins, minerals and amino acids compared to the traditional varieties.
- **Safer Method of Fortification:** It is worth noting that these varieties are not genetically modified — they have been developed through conventional crop breeding techniques by the scientists. Moreover, the addition of micronutrients to food does not pose a health risk to people.
- **Nutritional Security at Large:** Since the nutrients are added to staple foods that are widely consumed, this is an excellent method to improve the health of a large section of the population, all at once.
- **Does Not Require Behaviour Change:** It does not require any changes in food habits and patterns of people. It is a socio-culturally acceptable way to deliver nutrients to people.
- **Quick Results:** It can be implemented quickly as well as show results in improvement of health in a relatively short period of time.
- **Cost Effective:** This method is cost-effective especially if advantage is taken of the existing technology and delivery platforms.

The Copenhagen Consensus estimates that every 1 Rupee spent on fortification results in 9 Rupees in benefits to the economy.

Adverse Impacts of Food Fortification

- **Not a Substitute of Good Nutrition:** While fortified foods contain increased amounts of selected micronutrients, they are not a substitute for a good quality diet that supplies adequate amounts of energy, protein, essential fats and other food constituents required for optimal health.

- **Fails to Cater to the Poorest Segment of the Population:** Poorest segments of the general population have restricted access to fortified foods in the open markets due to low purchasing power and an underdeveloped distribution channel.
- **Inconclusive Evidence:** Evidence supporting fortification is inconclusive and certainly not adequate before major national policies are rolled out.
- **Can Have Detrimental Effects:** Adding one or two synthetic chemical vitamins and minerals will not solve the larger problem, and in undernourished populations can lead to many detrimental effects like toxicity.
- **Decrease Value of Natural Food:** Once iron-fortified rice is sold as the remedy to anaemia, the value and the choice of naturally iron-rich foods like millets, varieties of green leafy vegetables, flesh foods, liver, to name a few, will have been suppressed by a policy of silence.

Way Forward

- **Increasing Women's Nutritional Literacy:** There is a direct correlation between mothers' education and the wellbeing of children.
Hence, programmes for improving the educational status of girls and reducing the school dropout rates, particularly at the secondary and higher educational levels, need to be promoted.
- **Need For Multi-pronged Approach:** It must be recognised that in the long run, India needs a multi-pronged approach [access to basic infrastructure (electricity, drinking water and sanitation)] to eliminate the root cause of this complex problem.