



Embargoed until 00:01 GMT on Tuesday 17 September 2019

Unilever failing to deliver on key nutrition promises – report

Changing Markets report finds:

- **Unilever not fortifying Maizena Natural cornflour product in Mexico, despite claiming it fortifies its cornflour products in Latin America**
- **Levels of zinc, iron and vitamins in flavoured Maizena products found to be lower than claimed in Mexico**

Unilever, one of the world's largest food production companies, is failing to keep its own global commitments on nutrition, according to a new report from the Changing Markets Foundation, Proyecto Alimento and ContraPESO.

Unilever is currently ranked second in the 2018 Access to Nutrition Index, the most recent assessment of industry commitments to nutrition, and the company claims to fortify popular, affordable products in countries where malnutrition is prevalent.

However, new research from the Changing Markets Foundation, Proyecto Alimento and ContraPESO finds a glaring lack of consistency between Unilever's commitments and its business practice when it comes to fortification.

Micronutrient deficiencies are a serious health concern in Mexico, where one in four children under five suffer from anaemia (an iron deficiency) and nine out of ten women do not get enough iron in their diet¹. So the report used the case study of Maizena, a well-known brand of cornflour that's present in 90% of households in Mexico², to investigate nutrition levels in Unilver products.

It found that the company is not fortifying its Maizena Natural product in Mexico, despite claims that all its cornflour products in Latin America are fortified.

¹ Gutierrez, J., Rivera, J., Shama, T., Villalpando, S., Franco, A. and Hernandez, M. (2013) *Encuesta Nacional de Salud y Nutrición 2012: Resultados nacionales*. Cuernavaca: Instituto Nacional de Salud Public MX.

Rivera, J.A., Pedraza, L.S., Aburto, T.C., Batis, C., Sanchez-Pimienta, T.G., Gonzalez de Cosio, T., Lopez-Olmedo, N. and Pedroza-Tobias, A. (2016) Overview of the dietary intakes of the Mexican population: Results from the National Health and Nutrition Survey 2012. *The Journal of Nutrition*, 146(9): 1851–1855. [ONLINE] Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/27511939>.

² <https://www.maizena.com.mx/>

Micronutrients are only added to its flavoured – more processed and less healthy – *atole* hot drink mixes. However, some of the actual nutrient levels in the flavoured Maizena products were found to be significantly less than the level given on the package. For example in the cookie flavour, zinc was nearly 30% lower and iron was 20% lower, with analysis of the chocolate flavour revealing that thiamine (B1) was 73% lower than advertised. None of the samples appeared to contain the stated levels of iron and the majority of samples contained lower than the stated levels of zinc.

Maizena Flavours <i>atole</i> mix	Samples tested	% of RDA claimed on label vs levels present in test samples				
		Iron	Zinc	Folic acid (B9)	Thiamine (B1)	Niacin (B3)
Walnut	10	Amber	Amber	Green	Green	Green
Vanilla	10	Amber	Amber	Green	Green	Green
Strawberry	10	Amber	Amber	Green	Green	Green
Caramel	7	Amber	Amber	Green	Green	Green
Chocolate	10	Amber	Amber	Green	Red	Green
Coconut	3	Amber	Amber	Green	Green	Green
Guava	7	Amber	Amber	Green	Green	Green
Cookie	6	Red	Red	Green	Green	Green
Rice pudding	7	Amber	Red	Green	Amber	Green

Table: How do micronutrient levels stack up against Maizena’s claims when tested?

Sources: Laboratory tests; product labels

Colour key:

Red: nutrient clearly below the level stated on the package

Amber: questionable whether nutrient clearly meets the level on the package*

Green: nutrient clearly meets the level stated on the package*

* taking into account the range of uncertainty with the analytical test

Alice Delemare Tangpuori from the Changing Markets Foundation said: “Unilever claims to be committed to addressing micronutrient malnutrition around the world, however this report shows that the company is failing to translate these commitments into practice.

“Unilever must explain why its natural cornflour product is unfortified, seemingly in direct contrast to its global communications on fortification, and why the levels of iron and zinc in its *atole* products do not appear to match the levels stated on the packaging.

“The company has ambitions to provide more than 200 billion product servings with at least one of the five key micronutrients by 2022³, but if Unilever is serious about addressing micronutrient deficiencies and increasing its customers’ consumption of essential vitamins and minerals, it must take action to resolve the glaring inconsistencies in implementing its public commitments.”

³ <https://www.unilever.com/sustainable-living/improving-health-and-well-being/improving-nutrition/responsibly-delicious/providing-essential-micro-nutrients/#244-416712>

Floriana Cimmarusti, Secretary General of Safe Food Advocacy Europe (SAFE), said: “This study exposes the stark gap between companies’ official commitments and communication, and their actual practices on the ground.

“It’s simply unacceptable that large multinational companies still market products for which labelling information does not reflect the real content. Whether it is in Europe or in Latin America this kind of deceptive communication misleads consumers and clearly violates their right to transparent information about the products they buy”

According to Euromonitor International, health and wellness research, edition 2018, Unilever Group’s global sales of its fortified and functional food and beverage portfolio was just over 190 million USD in 2018, with forecast sales of the global fortified and functional food and beverage market set to grow to by 24% in the next 5 years.

In Mexico, the government has recognised micronutrient deficiencies as a major public health problem that needs addressing. In 2002, a law came into force requiring all wheat and maize flours available for sale in Mexico to be fortified. The current standards say wheat and nixtamalized maize flour should be fortified with iron, zinc, folic acid and vitamins B1, B2 and B3.⁴

Although not obvious, it appears that Maizena cornflour products do not fall within the scope of these standards, as the product is not a nixtamalized maize flour. Nevertheless, on Maizena’s Mexico website, Unilever states that, in the 1990s, its cornflour products were voluntarily ‘enriched with vitamins and minerals’.

The report also raised concerns about the lack of information from Unilever on the iron source used in its products. Different iron sources have different levels of bioavailability, which means they are more or less easily absorbed by the human body, and therefore able to provide more or less nutritional value.

The study analysed the information available on the Maizena Mexico website and Maizena product labels, and tested 84 samples of Maizena products readily available in Mexico. The full report can be downloaded [here](#).

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⁴ Allen, L., Benoist, B., Dary, O. and Hurrell, R. (2006) *Guidelines on food fortification with micronutrients*. Geneva: WHO/FAO. [ONLINE]. Available at: https://www.who.int/nutrition/publications/guide_food_fortification_micronutrients.pdf.

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The Changing Markets Foundation partners with NGOs on market-focused campaigns. Our mission is to expose irresponsible corporate practices and drive change towards a more sustainable economy. www.changingmarkets.org / @ChangingMarkets

ContraPESO is a coalition of more than 12 civil society organisations working on prevention for the overweight and obesity epidemic in Mexico. <http://coalicioncontrapeso.org> / @ContrapesoMX

Project AliMente is a Mexican non-profit organization dedicated to promoting sustainable, fair and healthy food systems. @Proy_Alimente