**Review Article**

**Biofortification: A Sustainable Solution to Hidden Hunger**

**Abstract**

Biofortification is a process of improving the nutritional quality of food crops by increasing their essential vitamins and minerals content like iron, zinc and vitamin A. This strategy is important especially for the people in developing countries who rely heavily on staple foods and often suffer from hidden hunger *i*.*e*., malnutrition caused by lack of micronutrients. Biofortified crops can be developed through traditional breeding, better agronomic practices, or modern genetic engineering. Several nutrient-rich varieties of rice, wheat, maize, sweet potato and other crops have been released in countries like India, Nigeria, Bangladesh etc. These crops offer long-term and cost-effective way to improve people’s health. However, issues such as taste, awareness, bioavailability of nutrients and market acceptance still need to be addressed. Future efforts should focus on combining multiple nutrients, using advanced breeding tools like CRISPR and promoting biofortified crops through national programs and public education. Overall, biofortification has great potential to make diets healthier and farming more sustainable.

**Key words:**  Biofortification, hidden hunger, Micronutrient deficiency, nutrient-enriched crops, genetic engineering and food and nutrition security

**Introduction**

Micronutrient deficiencies, often called as "hidden hunger," continue to affect large segment of the global population, especially in low-income and rural regions (Zulfiqar *et al*., 2024). Deficiencies in such as iron, zinc and vitamin A contribute significantly to impaired physical and cognitive development, weakened immunity and increased vulnerability to various diseases. Despite efforts through supplementation and industrial fortification, the interventions often fail to reach the populations due to logistical, economic and infrastructural constraints (Ofori *et al*., 2022). Biofortification has emerged as an important and promising agricultural approach aimed at improving the nutritional quality of food crops by increasing their micronutrient content during growth (Dhiman *et al*., 2023). Unlike traditional food fortification that occurs during food processing, biofortification integrates nutrition directly into the crop through plant breeding or modern genetic engineering techniques. This strategy ensures nutrient-rich foods available to communities who primarily depend on crops such as rice, wheat, maize, millet and cassava for their daily dietary needs (Mishra *et al*., 2022).

In addition to enhancing nutritional value, many biofortified crops are bred for improved tolerance to biotic and abiotic stresses, making them more resilient under changing climatic conditions (Lewis, 2021). Dual benefit like this supports both food and nutrition security in sustainable manner (Kellogg *et al*., 2022). Over the past decade, biofortification efforts have gained the global traction, supported by various organizations like HarvestPlus, national research programs and various policy initiatives (Jaiswal *et al*., 2022). The present review aims to provide a detailed examination of the progress in biofortification, including the scientific approaches used, key crop varieties released and their impact on nutrition and agriculture. It also explores ongoing challenges and future directions to integrate biofortification more effectively into global food systems.

1. **What is Biofortification?**

Biofortification is the process of increasing the bioavailable micronutrient content in the edible portions of crops. It involves enhancing nutrient content of food crops through methods like breeding, offering a sustainable, affordable and long-lasting strategy to increase the micronutrient intake (Srivastav *et al*., 2022). This method not only reduces reliance on the therapeutic interventions for severe malnutrition, but also supports the continued improvement in nutritional health of the individual. This can be achieved through conventional plant breeding, agronomic practices or transgenic (genetic engineering) approaches.

1. **Methods of Biofortification**
	1. **Conventional plant breeding method**

Conventional breeding involves crossing of high-yielding crop varieties and those with naturally rich nutrients like iron, zinc, or provitamin A to develop nutritionally enhanced cultivars, like vitamin A-rich maize and iron-rich pearl millet (Lakshmi *et al*., 2022; Gangashetty *et al*., 2021). Agronomic biofortification enhances nutrient content by applying micronutrient-rich fertilizers (like zinc or selenium) to soil or foliage, helping the plants to absorb and store these nutrients in the edible parts; however, this requires seasonal application and is also soil-dependent (Marques *et al*., 2021). Transgenic approaches involving inserting specific genes into crops to enable them to produce or accumulate essential nutrients not naturally present in sufficient amount, as seen in the Golden Rice, which is engineered to produce beta-carotene (Medina-Lozano and Diaz, 2022). Each method has its advantages and limitations, but together offer complementary pathways to combat the micronutrient deficiencies through agriculture.

**3.2 Agronomic practices**

Agronomic biofortification means improving the nutrient content of crops by adding special fertilizers to the soil or spraying them on plants. These fertilizers contain important minerals like zinc and selenium, which help plants to absorb and store more nutrients in the parts we consume, such as grains or tubers. For example, farmers use ZnSO4 in wheat and rice fields to boost zinc levels in grains, or selenium-rich fertilizers in countries like Finland to improve people's selenium intake through food (Lagoriya *et al*., 2023). This method is easy to apply and also gives quick results. It fits well with current farming practices and works well in the areas where, developing of new crop varieties is difficult. However, the nutrients need to be added every season and how well it works depends on the type of soil and how easily plants can absorb nutrients (Baum *et al*., 2024).

**3.3 Transgenic (Genetic Engineering) Approaches**

The transgenic approach in biofortification involves altering the plant’s genetic structure by introducing specific genes which enable the production or accumulation of essential micronutrients which the crop either deficit or produces in insufficient amounts. Scientists identify genes responsible for nutrient biosynthesis, such as those involved in the beta-carotene pathway and incorporate them into staple crops using advanced genetic engineering techniques (Nawaz *et al*., 2025). A well-known example is Golden Rice, engineered with genes from maize and bacteria to synthesize provitamin A, while recent innovations have led to iron and zinc enriched rice through gene editing. This method allows introduction of traits beyond the scope of traditional breeding, offering much greater precision and faster results. However, adoption of this faces significant challenges, including public skepticism toward GMOs, strict regulatory frameworks and high research and development costs (Meena *et al*., 2022)**.**

1. **Major Target Nutrients and Crops**

Biofortified crops are developed to address nutrient deficiencies by increasing the levels of essential vitamins and minerals. For example, iron-rich crops like pearl millet, rice and beans help prevent anaemia and support brain function (Shohael *et al*., 2025). Zinc-enriched wheat, rice and maize strengthen the immune system and promote healthy growth. Vitamin A is boosted in sweet potato, maize and rice, helping to prevent vision problems and improve immunity. Quality Protein Maize (QPM) provides better protein, which is crucial for growth and tissue repair, especially in children. These nutrient-rich crops offer a sustainable way to improve public health through daily diets (Table 1).

**Table 1. Major Target Nutrients and Crops**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Nutrient** | **Major Crops** | **Health Benefits** |
| Iron | Pearl millet, rice, beans | Prevents anemia, improves cognition |
| Zinc | Wheat, rice, maize | Supports immune function, growth |
| Vitamin A | Sweet potato, maize, rice | Prevents blindness, boosts immunity |
| Protein | Quality Protein Maize (QPM) | Growth and repair of body tissues |

1. **Global Adoption of Biofortified Crops for Better Nutrition**

Over the past two decades, various countries have introduced biofortified crops enriched with essential nutrients like iron, zinc and provitamin A to combat hidden hunger. These crops are bred not only for improved nutrition but also for resilience against pests, diseases and harsh climate conditions. For example, sweet potato enriched with provitamin A was first released in Uganda and Mozambique in 2007 with added drought resistance, while iron- and zinc-rich beans were introduced in Rwanda and DR Congo in 2012 with improved heat and virus tolerance. Countries like India and Bangladesh have released zinc and iron-fortified rice and wheat varieties with pest resistance and climate adaptability. Golden Rice, genetically modified to contain provitamin A, was officially released in the Philippines in 2021. These innovations represent a significant step toward improving public health through agriculture (Indian Council of Agricultural Research, 2017) (Table 3).

**Table 2. Biofortified Crops: Nutrients, Traits and Global Release**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Crop** | **Nutrient(s)** | **Countries to Release First** | **Agronomic Traits** | **Release Year** |
| Sweet potato | Provitamin A | Uganda, Mozambique | Disease resistance, drought tolerance | 2007 |
| Bean | Iron, Zinc | Rwanda, DR Congo | Virus resistance, heat and drought tolerance | 2012 |
| Pearl Millet | Iron, Zinc | India | Mildew resistance, drought tolerance | 2013 |
| Cassava | Provitamin A | Nigeria, DR Congo | Disease resistance | 2011 |
| Maize | Provitamin A | Zambia, Nigeria | Disease resistance, drought tolerance | 2012 |
| Rice | Zinc, Iron | Bangladesh, India | Disease & pest resistance, cold & submergence tolerance | 2013 |
| Wheat | Zinc, Iron | India, Pakistan | Disease and lodging resistance | 2013 |
| Lentil | Iron, Zinc | Bangladesh | Heat and drought tolerance | 2014 |
| Banana | Provitamin A | Uganda (trials) | GM variety; nutrient-enriched | 2014 (R&D) |
| Sorghum | Iron, Zinc | Nigeria | Drought resistance | 2015 |
| Orange Maize | Provitamin A | Zimbabwe, Ghana | Drought and disease resistance | 2016 |
| Barley | Iron, Zinc | Ethiopia | Early maturity, stress tolerance | 2017 |
| Zinc Wheat | Zinc | India (BHU-25, WB-02) | High yield, lodging and disease resistance | 2017 |
| Zinc Rice | Zinc | India (DRR Dhan series) | Submergence tolerance, bacterial blight resistance | 2017 |
| Orange fleshed sweet potato | Provitamin A | Kenya, Rwanda, Malawi | Tolerance to weevil infestation, drought | 2020 |
| Golden Rice | Provitamin A | Philippines | Pest resistance, GM crop | 2021 |

1. **Important Nutrient-Enriched Crop Varieties Released in India**

India has made significant strides in promoting nutrition-sensitive agriculture through the release of biofortified crop varieties (Table 3). In the cereals category, rice varieties *viz*., CR Dhan 310, enriched with protein and DRR Dhan 45, fortified with zinc, were both released in 2016. In wheat, WB 02 and HPBW 01, both rich in zinc and iron, were introduced in 2017. Biofortified maize saw a major push with the release of hybrids like Pusa Vivek QPM9 Improved, which is rich in provitamin A, lysine and tryptophan, along with Pusa HM4, HM8 and HM9 Improved, each enriched with lysine and tryptophan. Bajra hybrids HHB 299 and AHB 1200, known for their high iron and zinc content, were also made available the same year. In pulses, Pusa Ageti Masoor, which is an iron-rich lentil variety, was released in 2017. Among oilseeds, Pusa Mustard 30, low in erucic acid, was released in 2013, followed by Pusa Double Zero Mustard 31 in 2016, which has both low erucic acid and low glucosinolate content. In horticulture, Pusa Beta Kesari 1, a β-carotene-rich cauliflower, was released in 2015. In root crops, 2017 saw the introduction of sweet potato varieties Bhu Sona (β-carotene rich) and Bhu Krishna (rich in anthocyanin) (Paul *et al*., 2024). Additionally, the pomegranate variety Solapur Lal, enriched with iron, zinc and vitamin C, was also released in 2017. These varieties highlight India's commitment to addressing micronutrient malnutrition through biofortified agriculture (Indian Council of Agricultural Research, 2022) (Table 3).

**Table 3. Few important crop-wise nutritional improvements in India\***

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Crop** | **Variety** | **Trait** |
| Rice | CR Dhan 310 | Protein rich |
|  | DRR Dhan 45 | Zinc rich |
| Wheat | WB 02 | Zinc & iron rich |
|  | HPBW 01 | Iron & zinc rich |
| Maize | Pusa Vivek QPM9 Improved | Provitamin-A, lysine & tryptophan rich hybrid |
|  | Pusa HM4 Improved | Lysine & tryptophan rich hybrid |
|  | Pusa HM8 Improved | Lysine & tryptophan rich hybrid |
|  | Pusa HM9 Improved | Lysine & tryptophan rich hybrid |
| Pearl Millet | HHB 299 | Iron & zinc rich hybrid |
|  | AHB 1200 | Iron rich hybrid |
| Lentil | Pusa Ageti Masoor | Iron rich |
| Mustard | Pusa Mustard 30 | Low erucic acid |
|  | Pusa Double Zero Mustard 31 | Low erucic acid & low glucosinolate |
| Cauliflower | Pusa Beta Kesari 1 | β-carotene rich |
| Sweet Potato | Bhu Sona | β-carotene rich |
|  | Bhu Krishna | Anthocyanin rich |
| Pomegranate | Solapur Lal | Iron, zinc & vitamin-C rich |

**\***[**https://icar.org.in/sites/default/files/Circulars/Biofortified-Varieties-English\_for\_0%20%281%29.pdf**](https://icar.org.in/sites/default/files/Circulars/Biofortified-Varieties-English_for_0%20%281%29.pdf)

1. **Prime Minister Unveils 109 Climate-Resilient and Nutrient-Rich Crop Varieties**

During an event at the IARI, New Delhi, Prime Minister of India launched 109 newly developed crop varieties known for high yield, climate resilience and enhanced nutritional content. While interacting with farmers and scientists, he emphasized the need for value addition in agriculture to ensure better returns for farmers. Farmers expressed optimism that these varieties would lower the production costs and contribute positively to the environment. The Prime Minister also highlighted the rising demand for nutritious foods like millets and stressed the importance of natural and organic farming, which is gaining popularity among consumers (Birol and Bouis, 2023). Acknowledging the efforts of agricultural scientists, he noted their work in promoting underutilized crops. The 109 released varieties span 61 crops, including 34 field crops such as cereals, pulses, oilseeds and fibre crops and 27 horticultural crops like fruits, vegetables, spices and medicinal plants marking a significant step towards sustainable and nutrition focused farming (Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare 2024).

1. **Benefits of Biofortification**

Biofortification brings a range of benefits making it a sustainable and impactful strategy for improving public health (Labuschagne, 2023). One of its key advantages is sustainability once nutrient-rich seeds are developed and distributed, they continue to deliver health benefits year after year without any recurring costs (Rawal *et al*., 2024). This approach effectively reaches rural and underserved communities who depend heavily on staple crops for their daily caloric intake. Unlike supplementation/food fortification, which require ongoing investment and infrastructure, biofortification provides a cost-effective and long-term nutritional solution (Shohael *et al*., 2025; Glatzel *et al*., 2025). Moreover, it also supports broader goals of food system resilience and aligns well with the climate-smart agricultural practices (Bhardwaj *et al*., 2022), making it a promising tool in addressing both malnutrition and environmental challenges simultaneously.

1. **Challenges and Limitations**

Despite its potential, biofortification faces several challenges that limit its widespread adoption and impact. One major concern is acceptability, as biofortified crops may differ in taste, texture, or cooking quality, which can affect consumer preferences and cultural acceptance (Marques et al., 2021). Another limitation is the issue of bioavailability—although the crops are enriched with nutrients, the presence of anti-nutritional factors such as phytates can inhibit the body’s ability to absorb them effectively (Kumari *et al*., 2022). Additionally, there is a significant gap in awareness among farmers, consumers and even policymakers, which hampers large-scale implementation (Mishra *et al*., 2022). Furthermore, inadequate market linkages make it difficult to differentiate biofortified produce from conventional varieties, posing challenges in branding, marketing and ensuring fair returns to farmers. Addressing these issues is essential to fully realize the potential of biofortification in combating hidden hunger (Ginkel *et al*., 2023).

1. **Future Directions**

The future of biofortification lies in harnessing advanced technologies and integrating nutrition goals with broader agricultural strategies. Genomic tools such as CRISPR and marker-assisted breeding are opening new avenues for faster and more precise development of nutrient-rich crop varieties (Sheoran *et al*., 2022). There is a growing focus on developing multi-nutrient crops that combine essential micronutrients like iron, zinc and vitamin A within a single variety to maximize health benefits. In the context of climate change, breeding biofortified crops that are also resilient to drought, pests and diseases is becoming increasingly important (Panwar *et al*., 2024). A critical step forward is the mainstreaming of biofortified varieties into national agricultural programs, including their incorporation into public procurement systems and food safety net schemes. Additionally, improving consumer education through branding, certification and awareness campaigns can enhance acceptance and demand, helping to scale up adoption and impact.

1. **Conclusion**

Biofortification is a smart and sustainable way to make our everyday food—like rice, wheat and maize—healthier by increasing the amount of vitamins and minerals in them. This helps fight hidden hunger, which is when people eat enough food but don’t get enough nutrients. Scientists are using new farming methods, fertilizers and even gene technologies to develop these special crops. Many such varieties are already being grown in countries like India, helping especially poor and rural families who depend on staple foods. However, some challenges still exist—people may not know about these crops, or may prefer the taste of regular ones and farmers may not get good prices in the market. In the future, more awareness, better technology and support from governments can make biofortified crops a normal part of our food system. This way, we can build a healthier and stronger society, one meal at a time.

**COMPETING INTERESTS DISCLAIMER:**

Authors have declared that they have no known competing financial interests OR non-financial interests OR personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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