SCAPE AND PURPOSE

The WHO evidence-informed global guidelines provide recommendations to Member States and their partners on the use of interventions with vitamins and minerals that can be considered for scaling-up in public health programmes in stable and emergency settings. While WHO fills the need for an authority to provide guidance to policy-makers, the ability to do so is dependent on the availability and the quality of evidence related to micronutrients at multiple levels. WHO's guideline development process requires applying research results at different levels of analysis: 1) monitoring the magnitude and distribution of the public health problem in countries and regions; 2) understanding its biological, behavioral, social and contextual determinants; 3) retrieving, summarizing and assessing efficacy and effectiveness; 4) synthesizing and integrating evidence related to specific programmatic solutions. This symposium aims to strengthen dialogue within the scientific community related to the utilization of research results to inform programme development, with a focus on vitamin and mineral interventions in developing countries. The presentations will lead the discussion through the dynamics of how existing research influences the guideline development process, and will highlight how the process of guideline development could be strengthened by more fluid communication between the programmatic and research communities.

Demands for evidence-informed guidelines on interventions with vitamins and minerals have been voiced in recent years by the scientific community as well as national and global programme implementers and policy makers. As part of the World Health Organization’s prime responsibility towards the Member States and authority to provide leadership on matters critical to international health it has taken pivotal role in developing these guidelines using the best available scientific evidence globally. A complex and meticulous system of gathering and synthesizing evidence through systematic reviews and use of Grading of Recommendations Assessment, Development and Evaluation (GRADE) method adds strength to the nine-step guideline development process. Supervised and guided by the WHO Steering Committee of Nutrition Guideline Development, a guidelines development group advises WHO on the critical questions, the scope of the recommendations, the quality of available evidence and its interpretation, as well as on their values and preferences, feasibility of implementation, considerations for costs, the balance between the potential harms and benefits and the timeframe when the recommendations should be revised and updated.

In some instances, the lack of adequacy and specificity of available evidence, however, poses limitations for the formulation of recommendations that have to be interpreted and applied in diverse contexts. The guideline development process itself identifies many
research gaps related to all types of evidence needs (epidemiology and determinants of the problem, efficacy and effectiveness of interventions and questions related to implementation). The scientific community could support this process by developing with other stakeholders, research agendas that prioritize filling these evidence gaps. This symposium will create a space for dialogue among those with contextual and programme knowledge in diverse settings and those with research knowhow and an in-depth understanding of the biology of nutrition and health.

The symposium is structured to provide a summary of the guideline development process, critical analyses of the adequacy of available evidence to support the process, discuss the implications of the gaps in evidence identified for priority setting and research agenda development, and identify mechanisms to better inform the policy and programme guidance and how policy and programme may guide the development and prioritization of research agendas. Five nutrition experts will briefly speak on the specific objectives of the symposium to initiate the discussion and leave ample time for the audience to interact. The first speaker will provide a brief introduction to the guideline development process followed by a more focused talk on why and how evidence is used to inform the process. The second presentation will then provide a critical review of how well the process is able to adequately take current evidence into consideration as well as on the adequacy of the current evidence to guideline development. The third presentation will provide the perspective of some organizations working to support policy and programme development, particularly in developing countries. This presentation will reflect on how well the guidelines respond to the needs of policy makers and programme developers in resource limited settings around the world, particularly highlighting how improved evidence may strengthen this process. The fourth speaker will reflect on how the evidence needs for guideline development might influence priorities for research related to micronutrients, from the perspective of the research community. The final presentation will reflect on mechanisms by which policy and programme guidance needs can be better informed by evidence and how research priorities may be better informed by policy and programme needs. The following specific objectives will form the basis for the presentations.

The objective of this symposium are to:

1. Understand the WHO evidence-informed guideline development process, highlighting where evidence from research of all types is needed to guide the process.

2. Understand the extent to which available evidence fulfills the needs of the guideline development process.

3. Reflect on mechanisms by which policy and programme guidance could be better informed by evidence and how priorities for research may be better informed by policy and programme needs.