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Emerging Trends in Biofortification for Microelement Enrichment in Crop Edibles: Implications for Health

Muhammad Zaib[1*], Hassan Zubair[2], Hussain Akbar[3], Maryam Zahra[4], Umar Ali[5], Abdul Hannan Afzal[5], Aiza Marium[2]

[1]Department of Soil and Environmental Sciences, University of Sargodha, Sargodha 40100, Pakistan

[2]Department of Agronomy, University of Sargodha, Sargodha 40100, Pakistan

[3]Department of Electrical Engineering, Southwest Jiaotong University, Chengdu 610031, China

[4]Department of Botany, University of Education (Multan campus), Lahore 54770, Pakistan

[5]Department of Plant Breeding and Genetics, University of Sargodha, Sargodha 40100, Pakistan

*Corresponding Author E-mail: zaibch767@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This review explores the dynamic landscape of biofortification with a focus on emerging trends in enhancing microelement content in crop edibles through fertilization. Recent research demonstrates the potential of biofortification to address widespread micronutrient deficiencies globally. Fertilization, a key aspect of biofortification, influences the nutritional value of crops by enhancing essential microelement uptake. The review emphasizes the importance of understanding and harnessing biofortifications dynamic landscape in the context of improving human health and well-being. Additionally, it delves into the selection of crops for biofortification programs, genetic engineering, and the health implications of consuming biofortified crops. The examination of fertilization techniques, including traditional, chemical, and innovative methods, reveals their impact on increasing microelement content. The review concludes by discussing the challenges faced by biofortification, such as socio-economic, cultural, and environmental factors, and proposes a multifaceted approach for overcoming these challenges. Future research directions focus on refining biofortification techniques, integrating them into broader agricultural strategies, and conducting interdisciplinary studies to address complex challenges associated with global adoption.

Keywords: *Biofortification, Microelement Enrichment, Crop Edibles, Health Implications, Emerging Trends, Sustainable Agriculture, Genetic Interventions, Public Health.*

INTRODUCTION

Biofortification, the process of enhancing the nutritional content of crops through agronomic practices, is a pivotal strategy in addressing global concerns related to nutrition and food security. This review explores the dynamic landscape of biofortification with a specific focus on emerging trends that aim to increase microelement content in crop edibles through fertilization.

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Recent research has shown that biofortification has the potential to significantly improve the nutritional quality of staple crops, thereby addressing widespread micronutrient deficiencies in populations around the world (Bouis & Saltzman, 2017). Fertilization, as a key component of biofortification, plays a crucial role in enhancing the uptake of essential microelements by crops, ultimately influencing the nutritional value of the harvested produce (White & Broadley, 2009). The implications of these emerging trends in biofortification are far-reaching, especially in the context of escalating global concerns about nutrition and food security. As populations continue to grow, ensuring access to nutrient-rich foods becomes paramount for maintaining human health and well-being. Biofortified crops have the potential to contribute significantly to meeting these nutritional needs (Bouis et al., 2011).

This review highlights the importance of understanding and harnessing the dynamic landscape of biofortification, particularly in the context of enhancing microelement content in crop edibles through fertilization. As further research unfolds, it is crucial to monitor and evaluate the impact of these trends on human health and to implement strategies that can effectively address the challenges posed by malnutrition and food insecurity on a global scale.

Overview of Biofortification

The concept of biofortification traces its origins to the mid-20th century Green Revolution, which primarily aimed at boosting crop yields without sufficient consideration for nutritional quality. However, the late 20th and early 21st centuries witnessed a paradigm shift in focus due to increased awareness of malnutrition and its global health implications. This shift led to the emergence of biofortification, a strategy aimed at addressing hidden hunger by enhancing the nutritional content of crops. One noteworthy initiative in this domain is the Harvest Plus program, launched in 2003 by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) and the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT). Harvest Plus focuses on developing and disseminating nutrient-rich crops, specifically targeting deficiencies in vitamin A, iron, and zinc. The program's overarching goal is to combat deficiencies of essential micronutrients prevalent in diets based on staple crops, offering a sustainable and cost-effective solution to malnutrition. Biofortified crops are designed to be accessible and affordable to smallholder farmers and vulnerable populations, ensuring widespread impact and sustainable improvements in nutrition without heavy reliance on external interventions.

Traditional breeding methods play a crucial role in biofortification, involving the selection and crossbreeding of plants with naturally high nutrient levels. This approach has successfully yielded crops with enhanced nutritional profiles, such as high-iron beans and vitamin A-rich sweet potatoes. Additionally, genetic modification techniques, such as genetic engineering and biotechnology, are employed to introduce specific genes responsible for increased nutrient content.

A notable example of this is Golden Rice, engineered to produce beta-carotene, a precursor of vitamin A. Beyond genetics; biofortification considers agronomic practices, including optimizing soil nutrient levels and irrigation, to further enhance the nutrient content of crops. By incorporating these diverse approaches, biofortification seeks to address malnutrition comprehensively, offering a multifaceted strategy to improve global nutrition (Harvest Plus, 2003).

Microelement Importance

Microelements, also known as trace elements or micronutrients, play a crucial role in maintaining human health, as they are essential for various physiological functions. Iron, for example, is a key component of hemoglobin, the protein responsible for transporting oxygen in the blood. Zinc is involved in immune function, wound healing, and DNA synthesis, while selenium acts as an antioxidant, protecting cells from oxidative damage. These micronutrients are vital for the proper functioning of enzymes, hormones, and other biochemical processes in the human body.

Deficiencies in microelements can have severe consequences for health. Iron deficiency, for instance, leads to anemia, causing fatigue, weakness, and impaired cognitive function. Zinc deficiency is associated with immune system dysfunction and growth retardation, particularly in children. Selenium deficiency may result in increased susceptibility to infections and certain chronic diseases. According to the estimation of WHO (2019) over two billion people worldwide suffer from micronutrient deficiencies. In micronutrient deficiency they referred as hidden hunger, with pregnant women and young children being particularly vulnerable.

Biofortification, the process of increasing the nutrient content of crops through conventional breeding or biotechnology, has emerged as a promising strategy to combat malnutrition. By enhancing the levels of essential microelements in staple crops, biofortification aims to address deficiencies and improve the nutritional quality of the food supply. For instance, biofortified crops with elevated levels of iron, zinc, and other micronutrients have been developed to target regions where malnutrition is prevalent. This approach offers a sustainable and cost-effective solution to improving public health, as it integrates nutrition into food production and consumption.

Several studies highlight the potential of biofortification in alleviating micronutrient deficiencies and their associated health impacts. For example, a meta-analysis published in the Journal of Nutrition and Food Science (Bouis & Saltzman, 2017) demonstrated the effectiveness of biofortified crops in improving iron and zinc status in vulnerable populations. Additionally, research by Joy et al. (2015) in the journal Food and Nutrition Bulletin found that biofortified crops could contribute significantly to reducing the global burden of malnutrition. These findings underscore the importance of addressing micronutrient deficiencies through innovative strategies like biofortification to enhance overall human health and well-being.

Fertilization Techniques

Biofortification is a crucial strategy aimed at enhancing the nutritional quality of crops, particularly by increasing their microelement content. Various fertilization methods, both traditional and innovative, play a pivotal role in achieving this objective. This examination delves into these methods, exploring their mechanisms and assessing their effectiveness in augmenting the microelement content in crops.

Table 1 Microelement importance, deficiencies, and biofortification; role, consequences, and research insights

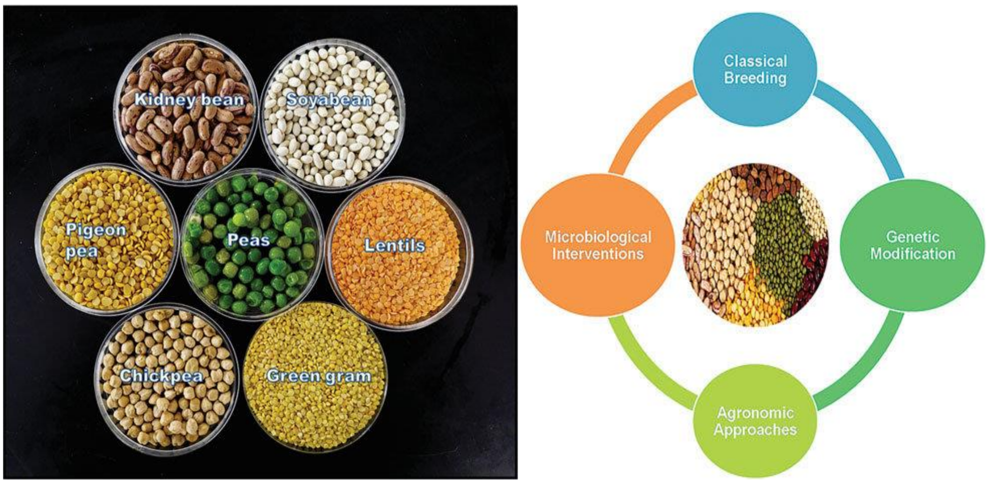
Microelement	Role in Human Health	Consequences of Deficiency
Iron	Component of hemoglobin, transporting oxygen in the blood	Anemia, causing fatigue, weakness, and impaired cognitive function
Zinc	Involved in immune function, wound healing, and DNA synthesis	Immune system dysfunction, growth retardation, particularly in children
Selenium	As an antioxidant, protecting cells from oxidative damage	Increased susceptibility to infections and certain chronic diseases
Deficiencies	Can lead to severe health consequences	Over two billion people worldwide suffer from micronutrient deficiencies (WHO, 2019)
Biofortification	A promising strategy to combat malnutrition by increasing the nutrient content of staple crops	Offers a sustainable and cost-effective solution to improving public health
Biofortified Crops	Developed to target regions with prevalent malnutrition, enriched with iron, zinc, and other micronutrients	Aims to improve the nutritional quality of the food supply, contributing to overall health

Traditional fertilization methods have long been employed in agriculture to enhance soil fertility and, consequently, crop nutrient content. Among these, the application of organic manures such as compost and farmyard manure is notable. These organic amendments contribute essential microelements to the soil, promoting their uptake by crops. Research has indicated that organic fertilization positively influences the micronutrient content in crops, including zinc, iron, and selenium (Branca et al., 2019). This traditional approach aligns with sustainable agricultural practices by improving soil health and minimizing environmental impacts.

Conversely, chemical fertilizers have been widely utilized in conventional farming to boost crop yields. While they primarily address macronutrient requirements, certain formulations also include micronutrients. However, the overreliance on chemical fertilizers has raised concerns about their environmental consequences and limited impact on enhancing microelement content in crops. Studies suggest that the efficiency of chemical fertilizers in delivering micronutrients to plants may vary, with factors such as soil pH and microbial activity influencing nutrient availability (White & Broadley, 2011).

Innovative fertilization methods offer promising avenues for biofortification by overcoming some limitations of traditional approaches. One such innovation involves the development of micronutrient-enriched fertilizers tailored to specific crop needs. These fertilizers are designed to deliver precise amounts of microelements essential for optimal plant growth and nutritional content. For instance, zinc-enriched fertilizers have shown effectiveness in increasing zinc concentrations in crops, addressing deficiencies that prevail in many regions (Cakmak, 2008).

Additionally, foliar application of micronutrients has gained attention as a rapid and efficient method to enhance microelement content in crops. This approach involves spraying micronutrient solutions directly onto plant leaves, allowing for quick absorption. Studies have reported increased iron and zinc concentrations in crops following foliar applications (Kumar et al., 2017). However, the effectiveness of this method can be influenced by factors such as plant species, growth stage, and environmental conditions.



Shapes and data adopted from the publication of Kaur et al., (2020)

Moreover, the utilization of nanotechnology in fertilization represents a cutting-edge approach in biofortification. Nano-fertilizers, characterized by their nano-scale dimensions, offer advantages such as improved nutrient solubility, enhanced nutrient uptake, and targeted delivery. These features contribute to increased efficiency in supplying microelements to crops. Research on zinc oxide and iron oxide nanoparticles as fertilizers has shown promising results in elevating micronutrient concentrations in crops (Raliya & Saharan, 2016).

Nevertheless, the long-term environmental implications of nanofertilizers necessitate careful consideration. To evaluate the effectiveness of these fertilization methods in enhancing microelement content in crops, researchers employ various assessment tools and techniques. Nutrient analyses, including atomic absorption spectroscopy and inductively coupled plasma mass spectrometry, are commonly employed to quantify micronutrient concentrations in plant tissues (Kalinowski et al., 2017).

Crop Selection and genetic engineering

Biofortification is a strategy aimed at improving the nutritional quality of crops by increasing the concentration of essential microelements, such as vitamins and minerals. This approach plays a crucial role in addressing global malnutrition, particularly in regions where people rely heavily on staple crops for their dietary needs. The selection of crops for biofortification programs involves careful consideration of various criteria to ensure the effectiveness and success of the initiative. One primary criterion for selecting crops for biofortification is their importance in the diets of target populations. Staple crops like rice, wheat, maize, and cassava are often chosen because they are major sources of calories for a significant portion of the world's population (Riaz et al., 2022b). For instance, rice is a staple food for over half of the global population, especially in Asia (Riaz et al., 2022a). Therefore, biofortifying these crops can have a widespread impact on improving the nutritional status of a large number of people. The World Health Organization (WHO) emphasizes the importance of choosing crops that are widely consumed by the target population to maximize the public health impact of biofortification (WHO, 2019).

Another crucial criterion is the feasibility of genetic modification for enhanced micronutrient accumulation. Genetic engineering plays a pivotal role in biofortification programs by enabling the development of crops with improved nutrient content. One approach involves the identification and manipulation of genes responsible for nutrient uptake, transport, and storage in plants. For example, the insertion of genes encoding micronutrient transporters or enzymes involved in micronutrient biosynthesis can enhance the accumulation of essential elements in edible plant parts (Garg et al., 2018).

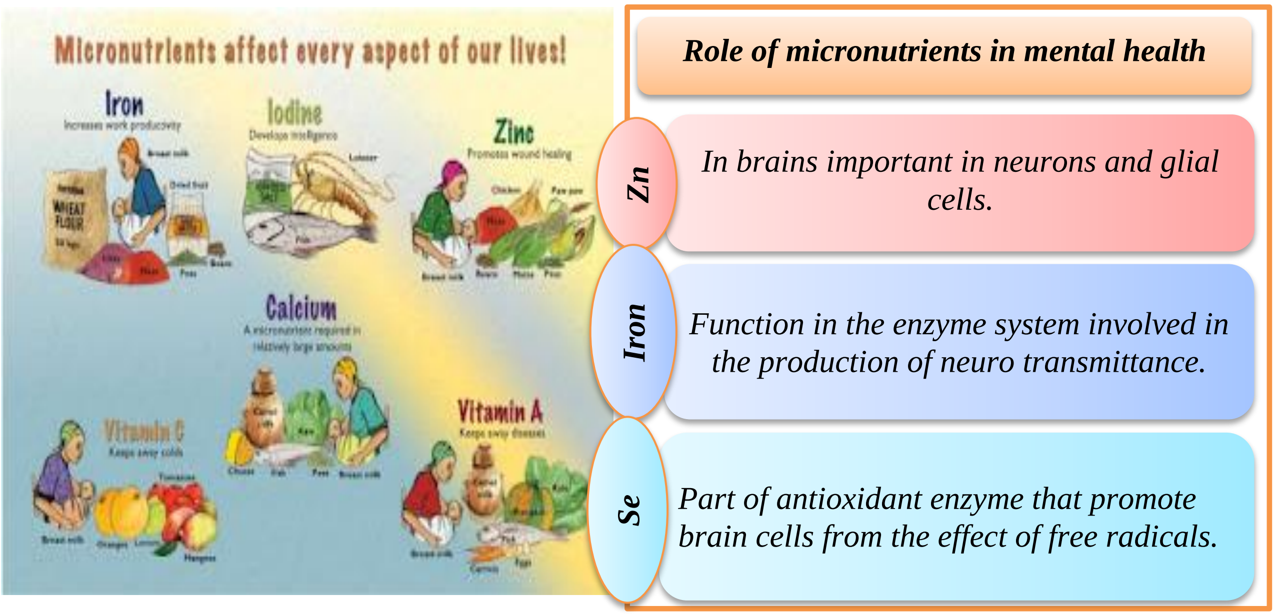
The feasibility of these genetic modifications depends on the availability of genomic information and genetic tools for a given crop. Advancements in genetic engineering have significantly contributed to the success of biofortification programs. The use of molecular breeding techniques, such as marker-assisted selection, allows breeders to identify and select plants with desirable traits more efficiently. CRISPR-Cas9 technology, a revolutionary gene-editing tool, has further accelerated the development of biofortified crops by enabling precise modifications in the plant genome (Doudna and Charpentier, 2014). For example, researchers have used CRISPR-Cas9 to enhance the iron and zinc content in rice, addressing micronutrient deficiencies prevalent in many rice-consuming populations (Ali et al., 2022d; & Trijatmiko et al., 2016). These genetic engineering advancements contribute to the development of crops with improved nutritional profiles, ensuring the success of biofortification initiatives.

In addition to genetic engineering, agronomic practices also play a role in biofortification. Soil nutrient management, including the application of fertilizers and soil amendments, can influence the uptake of micronutrients by crops. For instance, the addition of zinc-containing fertilizers has been shown to increase the zinc content in crops like wheat and maize (Ali et al., 2022c; & Cakmak, 2008). However, the effectiveness of agronomic approaches may vary depending on soil conditions and genetic engineering often offers a more targeted and sustainable solution. The success of biofortification programs also hinges on the acceptance and adoption of biofortified crops by the target populations. Social, cultural, and economic factors influence dietary habits and preferences, and understanding these factors is crucial for the effective implementation of biofortification initiatives (Riaz et al., 2022c; & Talsma et al., 2017).

Communication and educational campaigns are essential to raise awareness about the benefits of biofortified crops and to dispel any concerns related to their safety or perceived changes in taste and appearance. Moreover, the regulatory landscape surrounding genetically modified organisms (GMOs) can impact the deployment of biofortified crops. Stringent regulations may pose challenges to the commercialization and widespread adoption of genetically modified biofortified crops. Collaborative efforts between governments, researchers, and the private sector are necessary to navigate regulatory frameworks and ensure the timely release of biofortified crops to the market (Dubock, 2018).

Health implications

Biofortified crops, characterized by elevated levels of essential micronutrients, have become a focal point in the global discourse on nutrition and health. Research consistently affirms the potential of biofortified crops to alleviate micronutrient deficiencies, emphasizing their impact on key elements such as iron, zinc, vitamin A, and foliate (Zhang et al., 2012). Iron deficiency, linked to cognitive impairments, especially in children and pregnant women, underscores the importance of biofortified crops designed to enhance iron intake (Bouis et al., 2011). These crops play a vital role in mitigating cognitive deficits associated with iron deficiency, contributing to improved cognitive function.



Drawing and data and adopted from the publication of Tripathi et al. (2015)

Furthermore, biofortified crops address broader nutritional challenges by incorporating essential micronutrients like zinc. Zinc deficiency, a global health concern, affects immune function and wound healing. Research suggests that increased zinc consumption through biofortified crops positively influences immune response, reducing the susceptibility to infectious diseases (Bouis et al., 2011; & Ali et al., 2022b). Additionally, biofortification with vitamin A serves as a potent strategy against vitamin A deficiency, a leading cause of preventable blindness and compromised immune function. The adoption of biofortified crops emerges as a practical and cost-effective means to enhance diet quality, addressing the complex challenge of micronutrient malnutrition and contributing to better global health outcomes.

Empirical evidence from various studies supports the health benefits of biofortified crops. In Rwanda, a randomized controlled trial demonstrated the significant improvement in iron status among women consuming biofortified beans, addressing iron deficiency anemia (Bouis et al., 2011). In India, regular consumption of biofortified pearl millet improved zinc status in children, showcasing biofortification potential to alleviate zinc deficiencies. Beyond specific nutrient deficiencies, a comprehensive review in the Annual Review of Nutrition highlighted the positive correlation between biofortified crops and improved overall nutritional status (Bouis et al., 2011).

Biofortification extends its impact beyond immediate health concerns to long-term disease prevention (Ali et al., 2022a). The World Health Organization (WHO) recognizes the role of adequate nutrition in preventing non-communicable diseases (NCDs). Biofortified crops, by enhancing essential micronutrient intake, play a preventive role in mitigating risk factors associated with NCDs (WHO, n.d.). Increased consumption of biofortified vegetables rich in antioxidants aligns with global health agendas, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), emphasizing the promotion of well-being for all.

Challenges and Future Directions

Biofortification, encompassing both conventional breeding and genetic engineering, emerges as a promising strategy to combat global malnutrition and enhance public health (Bouis et al., 2011). However, this approach faces intricate challenges spanning socio-economic, cultural, and environmental dimensions.

(i) Socio-economic factors, including resource access and education, significantly impact the success of biofortification programs (Talsma et al., 2017). Financial constraints among smallholder farmers may hinder the widespread adoption of biofortified crops, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions like subsidies and education programs (Saltzman et al., 2021). Cultural preferences and traditional farming practices also pose barriers to acceptance, necessitating culturally sensitive awareness campaigns (Bouis et al., 2011).

(ii) Environmental considerations, particularly regarding genetically modified (GM) biofortified crops, raise concerns about ecological impacts (Bouis et al., 2011; & Safi et al., 2022). These concerns include gene spread to wild relatives, resistance development in pests and weeds, and effects on non-target organisms. Balancing biofortification goals with environmental sustainability requires robust risk assessments and ethical guidelines, necessitating collaboration among scientists, policymakers, and environmentalists (Gomez et al., 2019). To overcome these challenges, a multifaceted approach is essential. Policies and incentives supporting smallholder farmers, including subsidies and microfinance initiatives, can alleviate financial burdens (Saltzman et al., 2021).

(iii) Farmer education programs addressing biofortification benefits and sustainable practices empower communities (Talsma et al., 2017). Culturally sensitive awareness campaigns highlighting nutritional advantages and culinary adaptability are crucial for changing consumer perceptions (Bouis et al., 2011).

(iv) Environmental concerns demand stringent regulatory frameworks and ongoing research. Thorough risk assessments and monitoring mechanisms, especially for GM crops, are crucial for environmental safety (Gomez et al., 2019). Engaging environmental organizations facilitates holistic approaches, while investing in non-GM biofortified crops and precision breeding techniques mitigates risks (Ali et al., 2023; & Bouis et al., 2011).

(v) Future research should refine biofortification techniques without compromising crop traits (Gomez et al., 2019). Integrating biofortification into broader agricultural and food security strategies is essential for sustainable adoption. Interdisciplinary research combining agronomy, nutrition, economics, and environmental science is crucial for addressing challenges (Ali et al., 2021; & Saltzman et al., 2021).

(vi) Pilot programs in diverse contexts provide valuable insights, emphasizing ongoing research and implementation efforts for the potential of biofortification in global health and nutrition.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, biofortification stands out as a pivotal strategy in addressing global malnutrition and improving public health. The review underscores the dynamic landscape of biofortification, particularly in enhancing microelement content through fertilization. Research highlights the potential of biofortified crops in significantly improving the nutritional quality of staple foods, addressing widespread micronutrient deficiencies globally. The multifaceted nature of challenges, including socio-economic, cultural, and environmental factors, necessitates targeted interventions for successful adoption. The importance of understanding and harnessing the dynamic landscape of biofortification is crucial as the world grapples with escalating concerns related to nutrition and food security. The selection of crops, genetic engineering, fertilization techniques, and health implications are integral components requiring careful consideration in biofortification initiatives. Moving forward, a comprehensive and interdisciplinary approach, coupled with ongoing research, will be essential to fully unlock the potential of biofortification for global health and nutrition.

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Author Contribution

All authors have participated in critically revising of the entire manuscript and approval of the final manuscript.

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