

Salt Iodization in Ethiopia

New partnerships give children a brighter future



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Iodine deficiency is the leading preventable cause of brain damage and it can significantly lower the IQ of whole populations. Lack of iodine can result in cretinism, deafness or speech defects. Severe iodine deficiency in Ethiopian women leads to 50,000 stillbirths annually and the country's goitre rate has increased from 26% in 1980 to almost 40% today.

Because salt is commonly consumed, even in impoverished areas, it is an ideal vehicle to carry iodine. Adding iodine to salt provides protection from brain damage due to iodine deficiency for whole populations, helping people and Ethiopia reach their full potential. But less than 5% of Ethiopian households are currently consuming iodized salt. Ensuring that all edible salt is iodized is an investment that makes sense. For just a few cents per year, a child can be saved from the permanently damaging effects of iodine deficiency.

Spearheading the Return of Iodized Salt

After almost achieving Universal Salt Iodization in the early 1990s, after Eritria seceded from Ethiopia, iodized salt consumption in Ethiopia dropped to as low as 5% and much of the country's salt was being imported. In response to this, government began to explore the indigenous sources for salt production, including the salt deposits at Lake Afdera in Afar Regional State. Today, the salt supply in the country has dramatically changed; Ethiopia has successfully developed new sites in this part of the country to meet the salt needs of the country.

However, during the transition period, iodization efforts were sidelined. Currently, less than one per cent of the salt produced in the country is iodized. With raw salt production now firmly established, the Federal Government and the Regional Government of Afar are working to re-establish USI in the country.

Centralizing Salt Iodization: Establishing a Central Iodization Facility

Over the past two years, Afdera landowners, salt harvesters, community leaders, regional government officials, federal government officials and experts in salt iodization have been working tirelessly to determine the most effective way to provide Ethiopians with their daily requirements of iodine, a micronutrient essential to cognitive brain development in children. Working with partners such as the Micronutrient Initiative and UNICEF, they launched an ambitious project – the establishment of a Central Iodization Facility (CIF).

The CIF, to be located in Afdera, will be a modern streamlined facility equipped with salt iodization machines and material handling facilities to receive and process raw salt; ensure iodization; and repack salt in bags for distribution across the country. The facility will be supported by a quality control laboratory and all material inputs including potassium iodate. It is expected to be fully operational by 2010 and process an estimated 300,000 tons of a salt per year.

An Efficient, Mechanized Process to Bring Adequately Iodized Salt to Market

Small salt producers and traders will now bring their harvested salt to the CIF, where they can process and package it more quickly and assure that it's adequately iodized. Using its experience in other countries, the Micronutrient Initiative will help establish the CIF as an independent cost centre that will operate the facility and process the salt for a specified fee payable by the salt producer/trader bringing the salt to the facility. The fee charged will cover operating expenses and ensure the maintenance of equipment and the long-term purchasing capacity for potassium iodate. As a second phase, the CIF will offer upgrading facilities to improve the quality of the raw salt before it is iodized, thereby increasing its value and marketability.

Micronutrient Education Key to Success of Project

Ensuring that all salt producers and traders iodize their salt is key to the success of achieving Universal Salt Iodization in Ethiopia. The federal and provincial governments, with support from international agencies, will undertake to educate salt producers and traders about the contributions they will make to the development of Ethiopia's children by iodizing their salt, as well undertaking education for all Ethiopians about the health benefits of iodized salt.

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