Strengthening laboratory monitoring to sustain USI in India

Ongoing monitoring of iodine content in salt at production level is one of the most critical components of universal salt iodization (USI) as a strategy for ensuring sustainable elimination of IDD. An effective monitoring system must have access to a coordinated network of laboratories, using standardized methods, and producing accurate results.

A laboratory quality-assurance/quality-control (QA/QC) system would help strengthen the function of the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), which is responsible for monitoring the quality of salt (including adherence to iodization standards) at the consumer level, while it could also be expanded to monitor production quality in salt producing regions. Quality assurance is not a fault-finding mission but a method to ensure the consistency and quality of results from each laboratory.

On 24-27 June 2018, a four-day training workshop was conducted jointly by IGN South Asia, Nutrition International (NI), and the All India Institute of Medical Science (AIIMS) in New Delhi. The purpose of the training program was to “Strengthen laboratory monitoring of salt iodization to achieve Universal Salt Iodization (USI),” and it had the following objectives:

1. Update participants on the status of IDD and salt iodine fortification.
2. Introduce the technical guidelines, including the reporting framework, issued by the National IDD Control Program (NIDDCP).
3. Familiarize the participants with the NIDDCP’s implementation framework at state and national level.
4. Demonstrate and practice laboratory procedures for salt and urine iodine estimation with a focus on the quality assurance protocol and record keeping.

The four-day training was attended by state nodal officers, state technical officers and laboratory technicians of the NIDDCP from Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Chhattisgarh, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan states. Additional participants included project managers and senior chemists from NI. The workshop content was designed to improve the participants’ academic knowledge, and develop and practice skills, and it was an opportunity to involve them in the policymaking process through interaction with representatives from the government, research agencies, and civil society. Dr. Chandrakant Pandav formally inaugurated the workshop. He thanked all supporters for their participation.

Workshop proceedings
On day 1 of the workshop, presentations focused on IDD and current status of USI, expounded the role of the private sector and the salt commissioner’s office in achieving USI, and discussed the challenges encountered in the distribution of iodized salt through the public distribution system (PDS). On day 2, the focus shifted to NIDDCP: its guidelines, monitoring and reporting framework, monitoring capacity, and the role of effective communication with the media. Representatives from the 7 states presented a report on NIDDCP activity in their region, with a focus on achievements and remaining challenges, which was followed by group work and formulation of action points to sustain a multisectoral partnership.

On days 3 and 4, the focus of presentations shifted to laboratory methods for urine and salt iodine estimation and principles of quality assurance, which was followed by practical demonstrations and hands-on training.

Dr. Anamika Wadhera thanked everyone for their participation and engagement during the workshop. Special thanks were given to Dr. Pradeep Saxena, Dr. Madan Godbole, Dr. Satish Babu, Mr. RK Mishra, Mr. MA Ansari, Nutrition International, and IGN South Asia staff for making the event a success.