The salt iodization program in Egypt began in 1996, and over the years has received support of a coalition of international and national stakeholders including WHO, UNICEF, IGN, and GAIN together with the IDD Scientific Secretariat of Egypt/ National Nutrition Institute (IDDSSE/NNI) in collaboration with governmental bodies including Ministry of Health and Population (MOHP), MOI, and salt producers. National surveys show that Egypt has sustained adequate iodine nutrition in school-age children for over a decade, but as we are celebrating this achievement, there is a need for more political and technical support from all USI partners and stakeholders to overcome the inevitable challenges. Although momentum for nutrition is still strong among development partners and within the government, USI must remain center stage to ensure that the current coverage of adequately iodized salt is sustained and further improved.

USI sustainability workshop, 20–21 December 2017
To reinvigorate the USI program in Egypt, the Iodine Global Network held a two-day workshop on 20–21 December 2017 in Cairo, which brought together all key stakeholders (government, UN agencies, salt industry) with a goal to reaffirm their commitment, and develop a workplan that will strengthen and reposition IDD elimination as a top public health priority in Egypt. More than 100 attendees were invited to participate, including representatives from MOHP, NNI, IDDSSE, Food Standards Organization/MOI, Ministry of Supply, as well as salt producers, and development partners (UNICEF, WHO, IGN).

The main challenges facing the USI program in Egypt, identified in workshop discussions, were as follows:

• QA/QC procedures are not implemented by small- and intermediate-size salt producers, which leads to inadequate iodine levels in salt. As a result, nationally about a quarter of household salt is inadequately iodized (i.e., at >5 but <30 ppm), as reported in a recent national survey of iodine nutrition 2014–15 and EDHS 2014.

• As new salt production areas continue to emerge in Egypt, new producers require strict regulation and monitoring by MOHP and MOI to ensure they are licensed and become a part of the national USI program. In addition to education and social marketing efforts, the government should conduct periodic inspections of the market to confiscate illegal salt.

• According to a recent national survey (2014–2015) less than 30% of the population was aware of the existence of the USI program and the importance of adequate iodine nutrition. This lack of awareness, especially in rural areas, is very dangerous to the sustainability of the program. Strong social marketing and education campaigns are needed to increase the population knowledge about how to use iodized salt, preferably combined with the new campaign to reduce salt in foods, as recommended by WHO.

• Education campaigns should also focus on primary health care units to make sure adequate information (and if needed, supplementation) is offered to pregnant women.

• More than 7.5% of households in Egypt (or around 10 million Egyptians, according to the 2017 population census) are using salt that is not iodized at all. Strong efforts are needed from all partners to
identify new channels to reach the entire Egyptian population with iodized salt, especially the rural areas and the poorest strata.

- Salt producing companies currently face strict legal consequences if they fail to meet the salt iodization standard of 30–70 ppm, including a prison sentence and a financial penalty of 10,000 £E. The representatives of the salt industry would welcome a modification of this regulation, so that falling just below the standard (>20 to 30 ppm) would be punishable by fine only.

Concluding the discussion, the participants agreed that to achieve the USI goals, there is an urgent need for a plan of action that will offer concrete solutions and steps to tackle these challenges.

All partners, including the IGN, agreed to continue their support of the USI program in Egypt and endorse the Plan of Action for 2018–19, which will be developed by IDDSSE, in collaboration with different stakeholders. The workshop identified the following key goals of the plan:

- Ensure the implementation of QA/QC procedures by all salt producers and repackagers.
- Maintain mandatory USI legislation and enforce the salt iodization standards.
- Continue the provision of free potassium iodate to salt producers.
- Conduct research to identify all areas with low household coverage of iodized salt and adequately iodized salt.
- Develop a training program to build capacity of the food inspectors and laboratory technicians.
- Implement a strong social awareness campaign targeting young people and families to improve their understanding of the benefits of using iodized salt whilst trying to reduce overall salt intake.

Follow-up
Using the considerable momentum generated by the workshop, Dr. Izzeldin Hussein, IGN Regional Coordinator for MENA and Dr. Ibrahim Ismail, IGN National Coordinator for Egypt, will work closely with all USI stakeholders, including MOHP and NNI leaders, salt producers, WHO, and UNICEF, in coordination with IDDSSE, to discuss the next steps, and the role of the IGN as we continue to support Egypt’s efforts toward optimal iodine nutrition and USI.