

# Iodizing salt: an investment for Vietnam's economic development

Abridged from a policy brief: **"Iodizing salt and fortifying flour: the best investment for Vietnam's national economic development"** drafted jointly by UNICEF, the Flour Fortification Initiative (FFI), ICCIDD, and Alive & Thrive (A&T).

Protecting the growth and development of today's children is the key to fuelling tomorrow's economic and social development. But recent reports indicate Vietnam's next generation of young people may not achieve their full intellectual and productive potential, simply because the food they eat does not contain enough essential vitamins and minerals, including iodine.

More than half of all births are to mothers suffering iodine deficiency, preventing full brain growth in the womb and mental development as infants (1). Cognitive test scores among children born to iodine deficient mothers are lower than among their peers (2). Delayed intellectual development and poorer school achievement associated with iodine deficiency in childhood is linked to lifetime earning deficits as adults. Salt iodization is feasible and affordable for Vietnam. By adding small amounts of iodine during salt processing, the drive for salt iodization can take advantage of the salt distribution and market system to deliver safe, effective doses to protect all consumers on a daily basis.

## Vietnam should rejoin the 100 countries with mandatory salt iodization

Countries with mandatory salt iodization have achieved about twice the coverage of households using adequately iodized salt compared to countries with voluntary regulations—and many have virtually eliminated iodine deficiency. Just a few years ago, Vietnam was one of those countries displaying remarkable progress.

In 1999, mandatory national regulations were issued and the salt industry responded positively. Quality iodized salt reached more than 90% of households by 2005. For consumers, iodized salt was accepted and affordable. And population surveys found the 'brain drain' of iodine deficiency had been eliminated.

However, progress was lost during the transition to the free-market.



The procurement of imported potassium iodate remained centralised within the Ministry of Health, with a budget now sufficient to cover only 16% of the nation's needs. More importantly, a revised decree in 2005 on the production of iodized salt failed to uphold the mandatory iodization requirement and salt producers felt no obligation to continue iodization. Today, less than half of households consume adequately iodized salt and population surveys found 77% of pregnant women with iodine deficiency (3).

With no regulations in place to protect iodization, the 'brain drain' has returned. It is time to stem the re-emergence of iodine deficiency in Vietnam. Just as iodine deficiency was eliminated by 2005, it can be eliminated again by 2014. All that is needed is the re-establishment of mandatory legislation and enforcement systems for salt iodization and transfer of responsibility for purchasing potassium iodate to the salt industry.

## Vietnam's new food law enables mandatory salt iodization

With the rapid expansion of modern food industries and consumer markets, Vietnam's Food Law of 2011 provides an up-to-date legal framework to capitalize on the poten-

tial of food fortification to provide nutrition protection. In harmony with international norms and conventions, Vietnam's Food Law of 2011 explicitly allows mandatory fortification foods to reduce the burden of micronutrient deficiencies that threaten public health.

- Article 20 of the WTO General Agreement on Tariffs

and Trade states that governments may pass mandates to protect human, animal or plant life or health, provided they are transparent and do not discriminate. Mandatory fortification is not a barrier to trade.

- WHO/FAO Guidelines on Food Fortification with Micronutrients states "mandatory fortification is more suited to cases of serious public health need or risk," and "voluntary fortification is less likely than mandatory fortification to deliver a guaranteed favourable outcome."

Mandatory fortification of salt is legally enabled by the 2011 Food Law, consistent with international trade obligations and represents one of the most attainable, high-impact investments Vietnam can make in the nation's social and economic development. It is a commitment to ensuring our children achieve their full potential as students, workers, parents and citizens.

## References

1. IDD Survey, Hospital of Endocrinology, Hanoi, Vietnam 2009.
2. Anderson et al., Global iodine status in 2011 and trends over the past decade. *Journal of Nutrition*, 2012; 142(4):744–750.
3. IDD survey sub-sample survey in Dong Thap. Hospital of Endocrinology, Hanoi, Vietnam. 2009.