Mozambique renews its commitment to salt iodization

Mozambique is a country in south-eastern Africa on the Indian Ocean with an estimated population of 28 million. Mozambique adopted a mandatory law on salt iodization, and the country has had a national IDD control program for the past 16 years. UNICEF has been at the forefront in championing salt iodization across the region, and in recent years, the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) has joined forces with the Government and UNICEF to scale up existing interventions to improve the nutritional status of women and children in Mozambique.

In 2011–2012, a survey of almost 3000 women of reproductive age reported that iodine intakes in Mozambique are mildly deficient (based on a median urinary iodine concentration of 97 µg/L). At the same time, successive household and spot surveys have shown that iodized salt household coverage in Mozambique is decreasing, most likely as a result of a decreasing availability of potassium iodate. This downward trend is of concern as it could have an adverse effect on the population iodine status.

To improve the availability and quality of iodized salt on the market, GAIN is currently focusing on three complementary program areas to create an enabling environment:

- Strengthening the national food fortification policy to ensure that it includes salt iodization;
- Improving the sustainability and quality of the iodized salt supply;
- Integrating salt iodization and food fortification regulatory monitoring, and improving regulatory monitoring of salt production and salt imports.

To address these issues, GAIN and UNICEF supported the National Directorate of Industries (DNI) and the National Salt Program (PRONIS) to host a National Salt Iodization Workshop in Beira, the capital of the Sofá Province, on 18–20th April, 2017. This meeting was also an opportunity to strengthen program leadership and political commitment to USI by bringing all stakeholders together. Represented by Dr. Vincent Assey (Regional Coordinator for Eastern & Southern Africa), the Iodine Global Network was invited to share its experiences and contribute to the efforts to sustain USI in Mozambique. The meeting was inaugurated by the Governor of the Sofá Province, Hon. Mme Maria Helena Taipo on behalf of the Minister of Industry and Commerce. There were close to 200 delegates in attendance, including Directors from the Ministry of Industry and Commerce, the Ministry of Health, the Tax Revenue Authority, the Bureau of Standards, salt producers (small, medium and large-scale), food inspectors, provincial representatives of Industry and Commerce, public health experts, and the media. For the IGN, the workshop was an opportunity to partner with UNICEF and GAIN—the two organizations with established operations in the country. The meeting’s discussion points and outcomes are summarized below.

USI situation analysis in Mozambique

Despite ongoing efforts for the past 16 years to achieve USI, the goal has remained out of reach. Furthermore, the decline in the availability of iodized salt is alarming. The 2011 DHS showed that iodized salt is least available in the most populous provinces of Nampula and Zambezia, where about 40% of the Mozambican population lives. Since 2015, KIO3 procurement is no longer the responsibility of development partners; it now rests on the salt producers. But a survey conducted by Third Way Africa (TWA) earlier this year in salt-producing areas in three provinces—Cabo Delgado, Zambezia, and Nampula—indicates that most of the small-scale salt producers no longer have access to the fortificant, and they have
as the premix used to fortify other staple foods, and which have been put in place to ensure quality. To meet the current critical demand, it was suggested that a request be sent to UNICEF and other partners to help with immediate procurement of the fortificant to improve access to iodized salt in Mozambique.

Consolidating the salt industry and improving coordination among stakeholders
The salt industry is fragmented, and there is insufficient cooperation among the stakeholders to achieve universal coverage with adequately iodized salt. Based on insights from other countries in the region (especially Tanzania) and elsewhere (e.g., Haiti, Bangladesh) shared by the partner agencies, industry consolidation is a suitable if not the only approach that can provide adequate support to small-scale producers. Initiatives are already afoot to encourage investment from the few large-scale salt producers in Mozambique into purchasing, processing, iodizing, packaging, and marketing the salt produced by the small-scale majority. The SUN Business Network Mozambique is among the partners who could support this initiative. At the same time, there are currently no mechanisms in place to allow salt producers to come together and speak in one voice on issues that affect them, including how to achieve USI. There are only a few provinces with registered Provincial Salt Associations, and the salt producers lack knowledge about the potassium iodate suppliers accessible to them. To rectify this situation, a National Association of Salt Producers should be formed as a lobby group to act in the interest of salt producers and to spearhead industry development. In parallel, a National Salt Commission should be appointed to tackle immediately the critical issues emerging from the meeting. The Commission should engage with all USI stakeholders to work towards establishing a sustainable KIO₃ supply system.

Temporary return to knapsack spray iodization technology
In the short term, a return to hand spray-pump (knapsack) technology to iodize salt was advocated as a stop-gap measure to help resolve the crisis, to be adopted by producers whose current technology is an additional barrier to iodization. This measure was previously adopted with success in the neighboring Tanzania and Ethiopia as well as in other regions. But because of the lower accuracy of spray-pump technology, close supervision will be required for small-scale producers to ensure they can achieve the iodization levels prescribed in the national standards.

Building capacity for regulatory and internal monitoring
Inadequate enforcement of the iodization law in Mozambique, like in many countries, is an underlying problem which contributes to the continuing presence of non-iodized salt on the market. By including salt iodization regulations into the new national food fortification law, the capacity for regulatory monitoring could be improved. Monitoring of the iodization process at all stages, from producers through distributors and retailers to consumers, is lagging behind, and there is a need to strengthen the QA/QC steps at production level as well as the surveillance system for salt at distribution and consumer levels. Rapid test kits are commonly available for assessing the presence or absence of iodine in iodized salt. Quantitative methods for accurate iodine content determination are currently only available at the National Public Health Laboratory; there is a need to equip sentinel labs across the country for use by the producers to ensure they’re meeting the standards.
Conclusions and next steps

The workshop concluded with the following urgent and long-term recommendations:

• The Government and development partners should identify a means of securing a KIO3 supply to curb the shortage within the next three months, before the start of the salt production season.

• Partner agencies are invited to support the urgent procurement of KIO3. GAIN’s credit facility for KIO3 offers payment terms of 40 to 60 days, which may be challenging given that there are no funds pledged at the moment.

• The Government should review its vetting process to make sure there is sufficient flexibility to allow capable local investors to procure KIO3 as long as they can adhere to the required quality standards.

• Small-scale salt producers are encouraged to adopt knapsack spraying technology but only as a temporary measure to help curb the shortage of iodized salt. In the long term, all salt producers are urged to improve the quality of their salt products to be competitive on the global salt market.

• A National Association of Salt Producers should be appointed to mobilize salt producers and enable the development of the salt industry, including management of a cost-recovery system for KIO3.

• The monitoring capacity of regulatory bodies should be strengthened to improve legislation enforcement.

• The population iodine status should be monitored regularly, especially in light of the dwindling coverage of iodized salt.