Reinvigorating the IDD control program in Mauritania

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Introduction

UNICEF estimates that only 2% of households in Mauritania have access to iodized salt. In May of 2007, Dr. Théophile Ntambwe Kibambe of ICIDD visited Nouakchott, in conjunction with the national follow-up program on the control of IDD in Mauritania. The aim of this mission was to update information on IDD in Mauritania and to evaluate the commitment of the decision makers in order to accelerate development of the universal salt iodization strategy in the country. Dr. Ntambwe Kibambe was accompanied by the UNICEF Nutrition Officer, Youssouf Koita, who was the focal point of this mission.

Historical background

The first national survey in Mauritania was done in 1995 and reported a goiter prevalence of 31% in 6–12 y-old children, indicating severe IDD. In addition, 69.8% of children had a urinary iodine concentration (UI) <100 μg/L. Since 1995, no other epidemiological survey has been conducted to evaluate progress.

In 1998, UNICEF provided iodization machines to salt producers in Nouakchott, to demonstrate the feasibility and technique of salt iodization. After installation of the salt iodization lines, a multimedia communication campaign was organized. Over 6 months, 570 health personnel and more than 200 teachers were trained in communication messages on iodized salt in 5 regions, in order to create demand and promote iodized salt consumption. Also, a marketing network, built around stations of the General Secretariat to Women in 4 regions with 400 cooperatives, as well as in demonstration shops in Nouakchott, was installed to make available iodized salt on the Mauritanian market.

With the signature of decree no. 2004-034 of April 29, 2004, declaring the iodization of salt for human and animal consumption mandatory and with the publication in the official Journal on August 17, 2005, Mauritania has adopted the universal salt iodization strategy and at the same time asserted its commitment for the elimination of IDD as public health problem.

In 2005, a study mission to Algeria was organized, and analysis of the commercial circuit of salt in Mauritania was done, with support and input of the salt producers on necessary equipment for salt iodization. In 2006, a training course on salt iodization techniques, control of iodization and the maintenance of equipment was provided for 160 employees of the 3 major salt producers. In January 2007, the association of salt producers of Mauritania signed a formal commitment letter for the iodization of all salt produced in the country.

The current situation

Strengths

■ Existence of a legal framework regulating production, control and commercialization of iodized salt in Mauritania
■ Willingness of the different public sectors to collaborate (Health, Industry, Trade, Agriculture, Women Condition, Communication) in an multi-sectoral follow-up committee
■ Existence of a Direction to protect consumers and repress fraud within the framework of the Ministry of Trade
■ Favorable socioeconomic environment with new political authorities at different levels
■ Adherence of the private sector to the salt iodization strategy
■ Reinforcement of the capacities of the service employees in charge of the control of salt iodization
Existence of large potential for salt production, with the potential to cover the national market and to expand to other African countries
- Presence of a number of available partners to support the efforts of the Mauritanian Government regarding salt iodization (UNICEF, ONUDI, World Bank)
- Availability of support from ONUDI for upgrading the salt iodization infrastructure

Weaknesses
- Absence of application orders of the decree regulating salt iodization
- Absence of prescribed controls and of punishment of fraud
- Salt iodization occurs away from the major sites of salt production
- Authority for import of noniodized salt for use in industrial applications
- Use of potassium iodide for salt iodization
- Poor quality of locally produced salt: impurities, broad range of particle size
- Existence of unhealthy salt production sites, situated in Nouakchott
- Consumer adherence to rock salt (see photo), generally used in the form of pellets, and circulation of unfounded rumors regarding sea salt which is usually meant for livestock consumption
- Control of the salt sector by a single economic interest group
- Absence of centralization of the salt producers association
- Irregular meetings of the national committee
- Absence of an epidemiological surveillance system
- Absence of a permanent sponsor for the coordination of the program

During discussions with the key players in Nouakchott, Dr. Ntambwe Kibambe emphasized the negative impact of IDD on key sectors of development (Health, Education, and Economy) and the severity of IDD in Mauritania originally found in the 1995 study. Also, he highlighted the commitments of the international community and Mauritania for the elimination of IDD, with IDD being a contributing factor to the exacerbation of poverty and a slowdown of the achievement of the Millenium Development Goals. He expressed concern over the slowdown in efforts to control IDD in Mauritania.

To adopt the application regulation of the governmental decree in order to implement the national legislation regarding salt iodization
- To prohibit all circulation of noniodized salt outside of the production sites
- To install regular controls at the production sites and markets
- To apply disciplinary action in case of fraud

Recommendations
In Nouakchott on June 29, 2007, a multi-sectored meeting was organized to discuss these issues and reactivate the national program to control IDD. The meeting was chaired by the Secretary General for Trade, Mines and Industry. Participating delegates from UNICEF, WHO, and the Salt Producers Association, as well as government representatives from Health, Trade, Industry, Custom, Information, Education, Agriculture, and Women’s Condition attended. Recommendations for the development of a salt iodization strategy in Mauritania based on the discussions were:
- To start a national communication campaign
- To organize regular meetings of the national committee for follow-up
- To create a true national coalition for the development of the salt iodization strategy by reinforcing a partnership with the economic group which manages the salt industry
- To support the salt producers with production equipment
- To close the unhealthy salt production sites situated in the interior of the city of Nouakchott

The concerned parties adopted the presented recommendations and have committed to unite to eliminate IDD in Mauritania.