Raising awareness of iodized salt in Benin

On Saturday, October 27, Benin marked the 21st “National day of mobilization for the fight against iodine deficiency disorders” (Journée nationale de mobilisation pour la lutte contre les troubles dus à la carence en iode). Hosted at the General Education College in Agbangnizoun (Zou department) in south-western Benin, the celebrations were launched by Dr. Françoise Assogba Komlan, General Secretary of the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Fisheries, and M. Venance Gandaho, Deputy General Secretary of the Ministry of Health.

The theme of the day’s events: “Adequately iodized salt guarantees child development,” was chosen to remind the community of the importance of iodized salt for the whole family, especially children, in the prevention of IDD. It was an opportunity for the authorities to educate the public on the role iodine plays in the proper functioning of the body. In pregnancy, iodine deficiency can be responsible for spontaneous abortion, premature delivery, fetal death or impaired development of the fetal brain. “Iodine deficiency disorders are often irreversible and the prevention is the only way to fight them,” warned Mr. Gandaho.

Dr. Assogba Komlan reminded those present that the elimination of IDD was adopted as a global goal at the World Summit for Children in 1990, including by Benin, which has since made tremendous progress thanks to collaborative efforts of many sections of the government. However, despite the efforts to promote iodized salt, pockets of low coverage still exist, particularly in the south. The reasons include the reluctance of local salt harvesters to iodize locally produced salt, poor involvement of local elected representatives in the promotion of iodized salt, and the reluctance of salt sellers to adhere to regulations and good practice, and irregular monitoring of iodization levels. This situation could be remedied as part of the Government’s “Implementation of the food strategy to reduce malnutrition” plan, in alignment with the National Plan for Agricultural Investment and Food and Nutrition Security (Pniasan 2017–2021).

The strategy foresees implementing an effective food and nutrition communication plan, increasing the capacity of technical officers to implement food and nutrition advice, and promoting behaviour change in the population.
Dr. Françoise Assogba Komlan, General Secretary of the Ministry of Agriculture, handing out iodized salt.

The mayor of Agbangnizoun, Gaspard Gboli-Honon, thanked the government for launching the celebrations in his locality and committed to join in the efforts to eliminate IDD. The Secretary General of the prefecture of Zou, Julien Ouankpo, pointed out that the indicators of iodized salt consumption in his department, specifically in Agbangnizoun, are not good. "It is imperative to change behaviour," he said.

The slogan "Adequately iodized salt guarantees child development" was printed on posters to raise the awareness of IDD.

History of iodine deficiency elimination in Benin

Iodine deficiency disorders were historically endemic in Benin. A baseline survey of IDD in 1994 found that close to a fifth of the population had goiter, and the median UIC was only 40 µg/L. In the same year, salt iodization became mandatory, at 60–100 parts per million (ppm) of iodine at production, 50–60 ppm at importation, and 30–50 ppm at the retail level. By 2000, 76.8% of households had iodized salt, and 56% of households had salt that was iodized adequately (at least 15 ppm). At the same time, the goiter prevalence had dropped significantly and the UIC increased to 424 µg/L, indicating that iodine intakes were now excessive. In February 2009, the national legislation was amended to lower the required iodine concentration in salt to 30–40 ppm at production/retail and 15–40 ppm at the household level. A national survey in 2011 reported a median UIC in almost 800 children (6–12 yrs) to be 318 µg/L, and household coverage with adequately iodized salt of 86%. Salt harvested by small-scale producers popular in the southern part of the country, which tends to be not iodized, has been identified as a key limiting factor in achieving universal coverage in Benin.

The event was well-attended.