

Rethinking communication for salt iodization

The final mile to achieving USI in Africa will cross a different landscape than initial efforts that established USI. Communications strategies in iodine programs will need to adapt to a challenging new environment.

Jack Bagriansky, Ruth Situma UNICEF, New York, USA

Reaching the remaining African households that do not yet have access to iodized salt will require new communications strategies that fit the changing USI program environment. To date, successful USI programs were mainly driven by national regulation which motivated larger producers, who usually produced refined packaged salt sold disproportionately in urban markets. These companies typically respond to national regulations and their consumers are relatively easy to reach via traditional marketing channels. But the work ahead lies mainly among smaller informal, un-registered and often seasonal enterprises, typically beyond the reach of government food control. In this very different supply chain, past messages focusing on industry compliance with regulations, corporate social responsibility, value addition or expanding market share may not be appropriate.

In countries adopting decentralization, local government, especially in salt producing and trading areas, emerges as a key channel for enforcement of national regulations, capacity building and raising consumer awareness. The work ahead involves securing their commitment and developing local options for their participation. In markets with limited penetration of iodized



Communicating the benefits of USI on child health remains a key program message ©UNICEFNYHQ2010

salt, consumers will be lower income, more rural, less literate and more difficult to reach. In most cases, they purchase non-iodized or poorly iodized salt not because they are unaware but simply because distribution systems do not provide affordable high-quality iodized salt.

Sustaining the remarkable USI achievements in Africa will be a challenge. Past communications to establish USI targeted government to secure policy commitments, industry to change production and business practices and consumers for “product

launch” to ensure acceptance. Future communications to sustain USI will require a more targeted and strategic, albeit less intensive communications approach. Clear recognition of the contributions of key government and industry stakeholders can sustain their commitments as well as ensure new players are aware of USI. And as the market and consumer habits change to include increasing consumption of processed foods, opening new channels to the food industry will be required to ensure their products use only iodized salt.