



Iodine deficiency in Madagascar: time for action

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A recent national survey showed that iodine deficiency remains a serious public health problem in Madagascar, putting babies at risk of being born with mental impairment. The government now has an opportunity to revitalize the national salt iodization program thanks to the generosity of Japanese donors, and ongoing support from UNICEF, USAID and IGN.

Madagascar introduced mandatory salt iodization in 1995, which resulted in swift growth in iodized salt coverage, reaching almost three-quarters of households by 2009. However, the implementation of USI, and of other public health programs, fell victim to a period of political instability, and the progress was lost.

The Government renewed its commitment to salt iodization in 2013, but several key implementation challenges remained, including insufficient capacity to monitor the quality of salt production/iodization and, among small-to-medium size salt producers, insufficient technical capacity to iodize salt. Most salt in Madagascar comes from two large-scale and eight medium-scale salt producers, while only about 20-25% of salt is sourced from 100+ small or artisanal salt enterprises.

In 2016, the Ministry of Health with technical support from UNICEF and IGN conducted a national iodine survey. It revealed poor iodine status among reproductive-age and pregnant women in most regions of Madagascar, particularly in some northern, central and western regions of the country. In response, IGN facilitated the procurement of a large quantity of the fortificant potassium iodate (KIO₃) from a Japanese consortium of public and private sector donors: The Foundation for Growth Science, and Japan Iodine Industries Association (JIIA), Chiba Prefecture. After detailed planning and negotiation with the government and UNICEF, 850 kg of the generously donated iodate arrived safely in Madagascar in September 2018 and was followed by a donation ceremony on October 29 (See Box).

About the donors of KIO₃ to Madagascar

The Japanese Foundation for Growth Science has been involved in the elimination of iodine deficiency disorders since 1975. Japan is the second largest producer of iodine, making up about 30% of the global production. The Japan Iodine Industries Association (JIIA) in Chiba Prefecture, a collective of iodine producers, has been engaged in iodine aid projects and has a long history of supplying iodine to countries struggling with iodine deficiency, such as Mongolia, Cambodia, and Sri Lanka.

The donation ceremony was held on Monday, October 29, 2018 at the Chiba Prefectural Government Offices. The occasion was attended by **Ms. Mireille Rakotomalala** (Embassy of Madagascar in Japan), **Mr. Shinsuke Takigawa** (Vice Governor of Chiba Prefecture), **Mr. Takashi Fujino** (President and CEO, ISE Chemicals Corporation and Chairman of JIIA), **Mr. Yoshio Tachi** (President and Representative Director, Godo Shigen Co., LTD. and Vice Chairman of JIIA), **Mr. Takeshi Mori** (President, Kanto Natural Gas Development Co., LTD. and Chairman of Keiyo Natural gas council), and **Dr. Minoru Irie** (Honorary Advisor, the Foundation for Growth Science, and the Iodine Global Network).

In his opening speech, Mr. Takigawa thanked everyone for their contribution in efforts to improve the health of the people of Madagascar.

Mr. Fujino said it was an honor to aid such a valuable cause and the future of the women and children in Madagascar who could be affected by iodine deficiency disorders.

On ending the ceremony, Ms. Rakotomalala thanked all the contributors and stated, "I hope this donation will help strengthen the relations between the prefecture of Chiba and Madagascar."



Left to right: Mr. Y. Tachi, Mr. T. Fujino, Dr. M. Irie, Ms. M. Rakotomalala, Mr. S. Takigawa, and Mr. T. Mori at the donation ceremony in Chiba Prefecture.

Efforts to revitalize USI

The donation is part of joint efforts undertaken in recent years by UNICEF, USAID, IGN and other stakeholders to reinvigorate the salt iodization program in Madagascar. Universal salt iodization has been included as a key action under the 2017–2021 Multisectoral Nutrition Action Plan, and the Government is finalizing a new implementation decree on salt iodization, which will enhance the existing legislation and enable more effective enforcement. To help salt producers comply with the legislation, the iodate will be provided to medium-scale producers and used to help establish a revolving fund so that future needs of the fortificant could be met. As part of the package, the medium-scale producers will also receive iodization and quality control equipment to improve their iodization and internal monitoring capacity. In parallel, external quality control measures are being put in place to grow capacity for regulatory monitoring and enforcement. It is hoped that these measures will help provide adequately iodized salt to around 80% of the population in 2019, preventing brain damage in thousands of babies who are currently at risk.

To raise awareness of iodine nutrition in Madagascar, promote iodized salt consumption, and recognize the Japanese donors, a second donation ceremony was held on February 14 in Morondava, Menabe Region. The fortificant was officially handed to the Menabe Iodized Salt Counter (Comptoir du Sel Iode du Menabe) to launch the production of iodized salt. The lively event was attended by all key stakeholders: the national Government, the regional Government of Morondava, UNICEF, USAID, IGN, and salt producers, among others. The technical and financial partners urged the government to fully commit to USI, especially the enforcement of quality control. They also addressed all salt producers, wholesalers, packers and sellers to emphasize their social responsibility for the health and well-being of the population and urged them to comply with the legislation and standards. IGN Regional Coordinator for Eastern and Southern Africa, Dr. Festo Kavishe, thanked the Government, our partners, and the Japanese donors for their commitment to USI in Madagascar. “Together, we can eliminate IDD in Madagascar if we all play our part,” he said in his speech.



Festo Kavishe (IGN Regional Coordinator), and Daniele Nyirandutiye (USAID, Madagascar) are helping to make the first batch of iodized salt in Morondava.



The Leahaly band, at the ceremony in Morondava, singing about iodized salt.

Urgent need to translate political commitment into action

Prior to the event in Morondava, IGN regional representatives met with the Minister of Health, and separately with the Food Fortification Alliance Committee, and delegates from the Prime Minister’s office to discuss the need to revitalize USI in Madagascar and the existing challenges. Although political will has been established, it is now critical to translate it into effective multisectoral coordination and public-private partnership with the salt industry.

In the immediate term, IGN, UNICEF and other technical and financial partners will continue to focus on establishing and improving iodization capacity and quality monitoring among the large- and medium-scale salt producers, and changing

population behavior to improve the sales of iodized salt, improve coverage, and prevent the scourge of iodine deficiency among the most vulnerable populations.