

A conversation with Arnold Timmer on May 1st, 2014

Participants

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Note: This set of notes was compiled by GiveWell and gives an overview of the major points made by Mr. Timmer.

Summary

GiveWell spoke with Mr. Timmer about the roles of UNICEF and the International Council for the Control of Iodine Deficiency Disorders (ICCIDD) Global Network in global programs to eliminate iodine deficiency.

Major tasks in eliminating iodine deficiency

Sustaining iodization programs

Significant progress has been made in preventing and treating iodine deficiency disorders. Many countries have large-scale salt iodization programs, which are very cost-effective. Salt iodization has the potential to be a sustainable intervention, but this will require efforts to maintain iodization programs in regions that currently have sufficient iodine coverage.

At the national level, organizations need to ensure that governments maintain iodization policies. At the global level, organizations need to make the prevention of iodine deficiency a priority and ensure that it is included in international programs such as Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN). ICCIDD helps organizations support effective iodine programs and helps foster a clear consensus among the private sector, the public sector, and academia on iodine deficiency.

Addressing challenging issues in iodine deficiency

Though 75% of the global population has sufficient iodine nutrition, there are novel ways needed to scale up salt iodization to prevent iodine-deficiency in the remaining populations. The elimination of iodine deficiency in these populations will require innovative approaches tailored to the needs of countries. ICCIDD helps organizations collaborate and share information so that they can learn through trial and error. The

learning process is made easier by the fact that there are multiple organizations working on iodine issues.

Roles of the International Council for the Control of Iodine Deficiency Disorders (ICCIDD) Global Network

It would be difficult for UNICEF to solely organize collaborations among implementing agencies, academia, researchers, and donors to reduce iodine deficiency. Instead, the International Council for the Control of Iodine Deficiency Disorders (ICCIDD) Global Network is best suited to perform this function. ICCIDD is comprised of a variety of actors representing each of these groups as well as salt producers, so they are also able to connect different actors within and outside their network to places where their assistance is needed.

ICCIDD's task forces identify challenges in reducing iodine deficiency. Organizations often have different strategies for iodine programs, so ICCIDD uses scientific evidence to help organizations find the most effective methods. For example, organizations disagreed over the most effective strategy to promote iodization among small salt producers. One strategy is to provide subsidies and extensive support to the producers to help them iodize their salt. The other strategy is to let the free market find a solution to iodization regulations, so that salt producers who did not find a way to iodize would shut down. ICCIDD initiated a discussion of this issue and examined the evidence. ICCIDD is more suited to facilitating this type of discussion than other organizations or individual agencies.

ICCIDD also facilitates the sharing of information among organizations that administer salt iodization programs. If organizations have problems implementing iodine programs, they first discuss the issues with one another and then ask ICCIDD for assistance.

ICCIDD has recently been organizing workshops on iodine deficiency with a focus on sustainability, but it has sometimes been challenging to have national participation, like in Latin America where the ICCIDD does not have the clout in all the countries.

ICCIDD coordinators

The precursor to the ICCIDD Global Network, the Network for Sustainable Elimination of Iodine Deficiency, focused on issues at the global level and did not have a means to link those discussions to specific programs. The newly formed ICCIDD Global Network now has national coordinators and regional coordinators who play this role by doing advocacy on issues at the national level and regional level, but the coordinator network has not been working well, because it is new and coordinators need training and coaching. The structure needs to be further developed.

ICCIDD could be particularly important in locations where other organizations do not implement iodine programs, such as in some Latin America countries and some industrialized countries. It will be important for ICCIDD to sustain its network of coordinators in the future.

National coordinators

The effectiveness of ICCIDD's national coordinators varies between countries. Many, if not all, national coordinators have other jobs, such as in academia or health ministries, which makes it difficult to sustain advocacy for iodization. The national coordinators are volunteers and can play this role because of their status and recognition. The idea of sustainability is to work through nationals who will remain engaged in advancing the iodine agenda and remind policy makers of the need to act. However, there is a significant amount of turnover in the position of national coordinator.

Though the national coordinators have good intentions, they sometimes do not have a clear understanding of iodine issues and their role in iodine programs. Some also lack effective communication skills. Many see their task as implementation of iodine programs, but it is also important for them to promote trust between the private sector and the public sector and to strengthen mechanisms for the coordination of iodine programs.

Another issue is that national coordinators often represent groups that are just one of several stakeholders in iodine programs, so some people may perceive the coordinators as biased. It is important to ensure that national coordinators maintain a neutral position.

One possibility to make national coordinators more effective is to motivate them with the promise of funding or recognition for their work. However, this is challenging because of the large number of national coordinators and because of the principle of sustainability which requires a solution that can sustain itself without external funding support.

Examples of the varying roles of national coordinators:

- Not all national coordinators are active in West Africa.
- Some national coordinators have struggled to influence Latin American governments.
- National coordinators in Eastern Europe have been fairly effective.

Regional coordinators

Regional coordinators are generally experienced in technical implementation of programs, but it is also important for them to coordinate with other organizations, identify key issues, influence the global agenda, and share information on best practices. Training and experience can help them better understand their role. This is a shift in tasks from the previous organization where they were operationally oriented; therefore, this poses challenges.

Though regional coordinators are perceived as neutral in global-level discussions, at the local level they are sometimes perceived as having an independent agenda because they are often members of the medical community or organizations other than ICCIDD.

Iodization programs within UNICEF

UNICEF has been at the forefront of iodine issues since the 1980s. It works closely with national governments and the private sector to implement iodine programs.

Examples of ICCIDD's role and collaborations with other organizations:

Mozambique

In 2012, UNICEF was the only organization working on iodine issues in Mozambique. It struggled to motivate medium-sized salt producers to iodize their salt. UNICEF discussed the issue with ICCIDD, and ICCIDD made the link with GAIN to offer assistance on the issue. GAIN now collaborates with UNICEF on salt iodization programs in Mozambique especially to align salt iodization with other food fortification efforts that GAIN is supporting. GAIN has a program in Mozambique to fortify flour and oil with micronutrients, which has provided models for quality assurance and inspection systems for UNICEF's iodization programs.

China

China has recently had problems related to excess iodine consumption. UNICEF and ICCIDD's national coordinator in China made ICCIDD aware of the problem, and ICCIDD provided experts to study the issue.

UNICEF and ICCIDD have different roles in China. UNICEF has a close relationship with the health ministry, while ICCIDD's national coordinator has connections in the medical community and the provincial governments.

Haiti

UNICEF has a national office in Haiti that also support salt iodization. Since the portfolio of UNICEF is extensive there is a risk that salt iodization becomes a smaller part of the agenda. ICCIDD could in such cases strengthen the support for iodine nutrition.

In more developed countries like in Latin America, UNICEF's role is more advocacy focused. And nutrition may no longer be a high priority for that office; therefore, ICCIDD's role to advocate and support salt iodization becomes crucial. ICCIDD's national coordinators or regional coordinators could continue to monitor the iodine status to ensure that the country is not neglected, though they would be limited in their ability to provide technical support.

In Haiti UNICEF supports salt iodization actively. Much of the salt production infrastructure was destroyed in the recent earthquake and hurricane in Haiti, however. Because of these issues, UNICEF has considered other possibilities for iodization in Haiti, such as iodizing wheat flour. Thus far these have not been implemented.

There will continue to be a role for ICCIDD in Haiti to bring in the expertise to work on alternative solutions if salt iodization is not a short term viable solution. Instead, ICCIDD

could access external technical expertise, such as from the U.S. salt industry. UNICEF sometimes lacks such connections to the salt industry or other areas of expertise.

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