IGN's National Coordinators – our eyes, ears and voices for iodine nutrition

IGN has a unique and committed network of Regional and National Coordinators, who have been crucial to success in improving iodine nutrition. Our National Coordinators, who are largely volunteers and often work for government agencies, development agencies, or nutrition institutions, are invaluable sources of country-specific knowledge, offering in-depth insights and serving as vital contacts and partners in the implementation of essential activities.

They identify issues and advocate for support to address them, providing technical assistance in designing, implementing, analyzing, and reporting on iodine-related interventions. Additionally, they play a pivotal role in supporting the implementation of legislation and regulations pertaining to salt iodization.

In this column, we will highlight the work of individual National Coordinators, asking specific questions to give a broader understanding of their importance to our organization.

Dr. Kapil Yadav, IGN's National Coordinator in India

Dr. Yadav joined the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) in 2003 and is currently a faculty member at the AIIMS' Centre for Community Medicine in New Delhi. His areas of interest include iodine and iron deficiency disorders. He is also the Nodal Officer for the National Centre and Advanced Research on Anemia Control at AAIMS.

As a National Coordinator, what motivates you to contribute your time and effort to this cause and the Iodine Global Network?

My motivation comes from the significant progress the India program has made in reducing the prevalence of iodine deficiency. I have been involved with this initiative since iodine deficiency was a serious public health problem. Seeing how public health interventions, like iodized salt, can solve the issue of iodine deficiency and prevent goiter motivates me to continue working for this cause.

The widespread availability of iodized salt, reaching almost every household, and the reduced prevalence of iodine deficiency stand as examples of the success of these interventions. This exemplary public health achievement demonstrates how concerted efforts can lead to substantial improvements in health outcomes. The journey has been filled with unique challenges and invaluable learning experiences.

How do you collaborate with local stakeholders and partners to improve the program?

I believe collaboration with local stakeholders is achieved through a multi-tiered approach. India's National Coalition for Sustained Optimal Iodine Intake (NSOI) serves as a platform that brings together government agencies, private sector entities, civil society, international organizations, academia, and media. This collaboration facilitates knowledge sharing, advocacy efforts, and joint implementation of key activities for the elimination of iodine deficiency disorders (IDD).

Several states have established coalitions mirroring the NSOI structure. This localization of the collaborative effort ensures better alignment with specific state needs. Frequent coalition meetings at both national and state levels ensure continuous communication, problem-solving, and progress tracking.

Using webinars allows for efficient knowledge sharing and capacity building across a wider geographical range empowers local stakeholders, especially in areas with weaker programs. By engaging stakeholders through these methods, we strengthen our collective efforts to improve iodine nutrition and address the challenges of IDD.

Can you share the biggest challenges you face in your role?

One of the most significant challenges is coordinating among the diverse stakeholders involved in the program's implementation – aligning government bodies, private sector entities, civil society organizations, and international partners requires ongoing communication and collaboration.

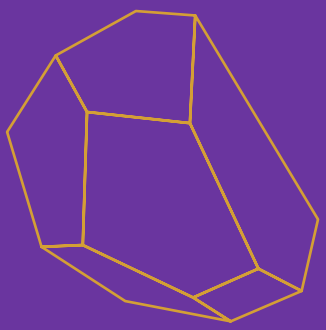
Enacting legislative changes, such as mandating iodized, prohibiting non-iodized salt and addressing prevailing myths and misconceptions surrounding iodized salt are other major challenges. Education campaigns and community engagement initiatives are crucial for dispelling misinformation and fostering acceptance among the public.

Another challenge is ensuring a consistent supply of iodized salt to every household. Close coordination with salt producers and distributors, along with capacity-building efforts, is essential for maintaining adequate iodization levels and quality control measures.

What are some successes or achievements you had in your role? What are you most of proud of?

The overall impact of the salt iodization program has been the biggest success. This achievement shows the importance of sustained advocacy, coordination, and innovative approaches in addressing complex public health challenges. Overcoming legislative barriers, industry resistance, and misconceptions surrounding iodized salt was a collective achievement for everyone involved in the program.

I am most proud of the positive impact it has had on the health and well-being of individuals and communities. It serves as a reminder of the transformative power of public health interventions.



How do you see the future of iodine nutrition in your region and what do you need to make it better?

Ensuring universal access to adequately iodized salt, aiming for 100% coverage, is crucial for achieving optimum iodine intake across all segments of society. Aligning iodine nutrition efforts with salt reduction strategies is essential to address the dual challenge of iodine deficiency and non-communicable diseases. Empowering state and districts to develop tailored strategies will address local needs and ensure sustained optimal iodine intake.

Continuous monitoring of iodine levels through public health laboratories is necessary to track progress and identify areas needing intervention. Mandating the use of adequately iodized salt in key food programs, such as school or work meals, Anganwadis (rural child care centers), and processed food items, will help reach vulnerable populations. Periodic assessments of dietary iodine intake are essential to inform targeted interventions and ensure adequacy. Lastly, strengthening the capacity of salt manufacturing industries, including the private sector, will sustain the production of iodized salt and meet demand effectively.

Dr. Gihan Fouad, IGN's National Coordinator in Egypt

Dr. Gihan Fouad is former Head of the National Institute of Nutrition at the Ministry of Health, Egypt, and is a Professor of Pediatrics and a Clinical Nutritionist with expertise in child nutrition. She has a passion for continuous learning across topics ranging from finance to research and training.

As a National Coordinator, what motivates you to contribute your time and effort to this cause and the Iodine Global Network?

I was nominated as IGN National Coordinator in 2021, coinciding with the start of my role as Head of the National Nutrition Institute (NNI) in Egypt. NNI had served as the hosting site for the IDD program from 2009-2019 and achieved significant success. Contributing to IGN allows me to collaborate with dedicated professionals and leverage collective expertise to address iodine deficiency and improve nutrition in our region.

How do you collaborate with local stakeholders and partners to improve the program?

In July 2021, I recommended a meeting which NNI organized, bringing together representatives from various partners in the USI program. We held a workshop to assess the current state of the program and discussed the necessity of conducting a national survey to understand iodine deficiency among vulnerable groups like pregnant women and newborns. I emphasized the importance of reactivating the role of the scientific secretariat for iodine deficiency to coordinate efforts and expand its role to support all micronutrients. One key initiative was to activate a website for salt factories allowing them to receive funding for potassium iodate.

The meeting also resulted in increasing government funding for the iodine program, which now covers the purchase of potassium iodate and supervision of its use. Raising societal awareness about the importance of using fortified salt while promoting moderate salt intake was another priority, as well as supporting small producers and distributors to ensure their participation in the salt iodization program.

Can you share the biggest challenges you face in your role?

The landscape analysis of the iodine nutrition situation in Egypt was a significant challenge due to its comprehensive nature and the need for extensive collaboration but was crucial for informing future programmatic actions and advancing universal salt iodization (USI) in Egypt.

I worked with IGN to conduct the analysis in partnership with the UNICEF Regional Office for MENA. The study aimed to assess the status of salt iodization in Egypt, map household use of iodized salt, and examine IDD indicators. This assessment covered national policies and strategies, legislation, standards, regulation and enforcement, the production, importation, and distribution of iodized salt, program management and coordination, monitoring and surveillance, utilization, and raising awareness.

The landscape analysis intended to inform programmatic actions by developing a national roadmap. We gathered data on iodine nutrition, universal salt iodization policies, and program actions by reviewing secondary documents and interviewing key informants. Relevant documents were collected from various sources, including national and regional development partners, and through web searches. Dr. Izzeldin Hussein, IGN's Regional Coordinator, visited Egypt in May 2022, facilitating discussions and a national workshop.

In January 2023, a two-day regional workshop was organized by UNICEF MENA and IGN, with participation from Iraq, Sudan, Egypt, and Lebanon. The draft landscape analysis results were presented and discussed, and inputs for the national action plan were formulated. These were to be taken forward with national stakeholders upon return to their respective countries. The landscape analysis was pivotal in shaping the direction of iodine nutrition efforts and addressing the program's challenges.

What are some successes or achievements you had in your role? What are you most of proud of?

With support from the Ministry of Health and an official decree backed by UNICEF, we successfully conducted a landscape analysis. Additionally, we held three workshops in Egypt from 2021-2023 to advance the process and reinforce our efforts.

How do you see the future of iodine nutrition in your region and what do you need to make it better?

During a workshop in Amman, Jordan, from January 24-25, 2023, our team, including myself, identified several program bottlenecks. We then outlined remedial actions, assessed the level of effort required, and evaluated the chances of success and the expected impact on program improvement. By addressing these issues and implementing the identified solutions, we aim to significantly enhance iodine nutrition in our region.