

Mandatory Salt Iodization and the Demographic Issue in Russia

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I was recently asked, what was my biggest frustration after having worked in the Russian Federation for three and a half years. I replied without hesitating that it was my failure to convince the authorities to pass legislation on universal salt iodization (USI). I consider this a personal failure because my peers in over 70 countries world wide including China, Thailand, Indonesia, India, Nepal, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Georgia have succeeded. Mandatory salt iodization also exists in Austria, Denmark, Poland, Czech and Slovak Republics, Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia, Montenegro and many other developed nations. In 30 additional countries such laws are pending.

Why does that frustrate you so visibly? I was asked. Because a country whose population is declining at a rate of some 700,000 people per year, and is deeply concerned about fertility rates should also be concerned about the *quality* of its population. The fact is that insufficient intake of iodine, especially during the early months of the pregnancy period has an irreversible effect on the intelligence quotient (IQ) potential a child can achieve. Currently some 70 per cent of households in the Russian Federation are not consuming iodized salt. This means some 140,000 children are being born annually without the basic physical pre-requisites required to achieve their full intellectual potential, in practice this translates into a 10 per cent reduction of IQ potential. Additionally some 20 million children are being deprived of protection against iodine deficiency disorders (IDD). Can Russia afford this intellectual loss today? In Soviet times it definitely could not as the authorities then had a full control over the situation with a strategy of targeted allocation of iodized salt. So what is the problem then? It is clearly not lack of understanding neither lack of know how.

Despite the facts that most stakeholders in Russia, including consumers, scientists and governors from most regions, support mandatory salt iodization and that the producers have shown the ability and willingness to iodize salt, over the last four years three draft laws submitted by the State Duma have been rejected by the Government. The latest arguments against the draft law are: consumer rights as stipulated in article 34 of the constitution would not be respected with mandatory salt iodization; unspecified additional financial commitments for iodine rich medicines (iodine capsules); legislation is too narrow and should consider broader food safety issues; a technical regulation (decree) would suffice, no need for legislation.

Based on UNICEF's 60 years experience and presence in 156 countries my perceptions regarding these four arguments are respectively:

a) Mandatory salt iodization is a public health as well as a strategic issue, besides this, in accordance with part 3 of the article 55 of Constitution of the Russian Federation, rights and freedoms of a person and a citizen can be limited by federal law only to such extent, when it is essential in terms of safeguarding the fundamentals of the constitution, morality, health and legitimate interests of other parties, ensuring country's defense and security of the state.

Consumers for example receive piped chlorinated water at home and are obliged to have their children vaccinated against infectious diseases for both public health and strategic reasons. Consumer choice does not apply in such cases. In a few very specific cases when the rights of people who cannot consume iodine could be violated innovative solutions can be found. In Italy for example consumers can request managers of retail shops to provide them with non-iodized salt that is stored at the back of the shop and not displayed on shelves. In Spain non-iodized salt can be found in pharmacies to respond to specific health related concerns of a minority.

b) I happen to fully agree with the concern for “unspecified additional financial commitments for iodine rich medicines”, for three reasons: iodine capsules are totally unnecessary to address IDD as history in this country has already proven; it would be a logistical burden to distribute iodine capsules to all those persons, especially pregnant women and children, who require adequate iodine intake, and; it would be improper use of tax payers’ money.

c) Regarding the argument that legislation should be broadened to include other micro-nutrients and food safety concerns, in principle this is not a bad idea but given the urgency of protecting children against IDD this could be done through future amendments or new legislation.

d) As to the argument that a technical regulation is sufficient, in fact the Government passed Resolution № 1119 on the 5th of October 1999 “On measures for IDD prevention”. While it was an important step in IDD prevention as it helped increase the production of iodized salt; develop and adopt regional programs for IDD prevention and; increase knowledge of the population in IDD prevention, today eight years later, however, only 30 per cent of households in the country consume iodized salt. While the resolution was necessary it was clearly insufficient.

Over the past four years over half a million children were born in Russia with their basic right to a healthy start in life being grossly violated. How many more children will have to wait for policy makers and legislators to act in the best interest of Russia’s children?