

## **A conversation with Dr. Michael Zimmermann, April 28, 2015**

### **Participants**

- Dr. Michael Zimmermann – Chairman, Iodine Global Network
- Ben Rachbach – Research Analyst, GiveWell
- Tim Telleen-Lawton – Research Analyst, GiveWell

**Note:** These notes were compiled by the GiveWell and give an overview of the major points made by Dr. Michael Zimmermann.

### **Summary**

GiveWell spoke with Dr. Zimmermann of the Iodine Global Network (IGN) as part of its investigation into IGN as a potential top charity. Conversation topics included new IGN staff, IGN's budget, and the countries that IGN plans to focus on in each of its regions.

### **New staff**

#### **Executive Director**

In April, Jonathan Gorstein, who had been a Senior Advisor at IGN, became IGN's Executive Director. Dr. Gorstein works for IGN at a 35% level of effort in this role. Dr. Gorstein has taken over day-to-day management of IGN and supervision of regional coordinators and staff.

#### *Dr. Zimmermann's role*

Dr. Zimmerman was formerly IGN's Executive Director. Following Dr. Gorstein's appointment as Executive Director, Dr. Zimmermann's become Chair and shifted his focus to high-level strategy, fundraising, program-oriented research, and collaboration with UNICEF, the Micronutrient Initiative (MI), and Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) to better integrate the organizations' programs. Dr. Zimmermann now devotes about 1 day a week to IGN.

#### **Communications officer**

IGN has hired a communications officer at 60%-time.

The communications officer's first project will be to revise IGN's website. A survey of IGN's national coordinators found that they use the website as their primary resource for technical information. The revised website will include:

- A technical resource package of documents available for download
- A forum for the national coordinators to communicate and share knowledge
- Mobile responsive design

The communications officer will also:

- Manage communication between regional coordinators and between IGN's regional and global levels. IGN received funding from UNICEF specifically to improve communication between its regions.
- Manage IGN's Twitter
- Manage IGN's newsletter
- Serve as a main contact for fundraising

### **Treasurer**

A new treasurer has joined IGN *pro bono*.

### **Hiring staff from the GAIN-UNICEF Universal Salt Iodization Partnership Project**

IGN hopes to hire some personnel that were trained by the Partnership Project (which is ending this year), possibly into similar roles that they played in the Partnership Project. These could include personnel in the Philippines and in Niger.

IGN has not made final decisions about whom to hire from the Partnership Project. Recommendations for hires will come likely from Dr. Gorstein, Dr. Roland Kupka of UNICEF, and Mr. Greg Garrett of GAIN as Partnership Project programs end. Hiring decisions will also depend on discussions with IGN's regional coordinators about fitting potential hires into regional budgets.

### **Revising global iodization guidelines**

The World Health Organization has asked IGN to help revise its guidelines for salt iodization later this year (the last update was done in 2007).

### **Regional target countries**

IGN has identified one or two target countries in each of its regions where it believes it can make substantial progress in the next year or two.

IGN plans to serve primarily as a technical advisor in these countries, helping to define the problem by, e.g.:

- Designing and helping to conduct cost-effective surveys of target groups
- Paying to test household coverage and urinary iodine levels via IGN's network of regional laboratories

IGN does not plan to act as an implementing agency in these countries (i.e. building infrastructure, buying salt iodization lines), and hopes that this role will be filled by organizations like MI, UNICEF, and GAIN.

### **The Americas**

#### *Haiti*

IGN recently completed a national survey of preschool children to get a baseline measurement for iodine coverage. MI has been investing in improving salt iodization infrastructure in Haiti. In June, Dr. Zimmermann had planned to visit Haiti

along with representatives from UNICEF and USAID to try to push salt iodization further (the trip has been proposed until early 2016 because of elections).

## **The Middle East and North Africa**

### *Lebanon*

Lebanon's Ministry of Health (MOH) called for a national iodine survey in 2014 (in part due to advocacy by IGN's national coordinator in Lebanon, Dr. Omar Obeid). IGN helped design the survey, provided technical support, and paid for analysis of urine samples. The survey showed moderate iodine deficiency. IGN's next step in Lebanon will be an advocacy visit to the MOH to explain the importance of iodine deficiency in terms of its effects on education and national development.

Lebanon currently faces many difficult health problems related to hosting Syrian refugees, so the MOH is excited about the possibility of quickly making progress on salt iodization. One of the salt producers in Lebanon also supplies most of the salt for northern Syria.

It is planned that Lorenzo Locatelli-Rossi, previously employed by GAIN as part of the Partnership Project, who is an expert in salt iodization, may consult for IGN and work with salt producers in Lebanon on sourcing potassium iodate and technical issues related to iodization.

Dr. Zimmermann believes that most progress being made on salt iodization in Lebanon is attributable to IGN's efforts.

### *Sudan*

Sudan is a complicated country that has seen many past efforts at iodization. IGN and UNICEF are developing a financial plan for an iodization facility on the Red Sea. The government supports the facility, but salt producers have to agree to the plan. Several private companies are ready to step in and build large-scale salt iodization infrastructure. IGN will serve as a convener, facilitating meetings between investors, businesses that build iodization infrastructure, and salt producers to reach an agreement on the facility.

### *Yemen*

IGN completed its national survey just before conflict broke out in March. The analysis of the data gathered in the survey will soon be complete.

### *Oman*

IGN's Management Council meeting was held in Oman in the first week of April. The data from a national iodine survey was released during the meeting, giving IGN a good opportunity to advocate on a national level.

## **Eastern Europe/Central Asia**

### *Russia*

In Russia, IGN's primary focus will be advocacy for passing fortification legislation.

## **Southern Africa**

### *Madagascar*

IGN conducted a national survey in the second half of 2014. There might be measurable impacts of IGN's work in Madagascar by the end of this year.

### *Burundi*

Dr. Zimmermann believes that rapid gains are possible in Burundi.

Burundi imports most of its salt from Tanzania and Kenya. IGN's regional coordinator visited several salt producers, including a major producer in southern Tanzania that provides much of Burundi's salt, and encouraged them to iodize the salt that they export. He also met with Burundi's MOH about ensuring that border checkpoints use rapid test kits to ensure that salt entering the country is iodized.

IGN believes that over the past year, due to stricter border enforcement, a higher proportion of salt entering Burundi has been iodized. IGN plans to run a study of household coverage and urinary iodine levels in October, and to have an evaluation of impact by November. Previously, data on household coverage was about 10 years old.

## **West Africa**

IGN plans to focus on Niger, which currently does not have other iodization organizations running programs.

## **South East Asia**

IGN plans to focus on Papua New Guinea.

## **Regional Workshops**

IGN coordinates three-day regional workshops for representatives from its countries to share experiences and develop plans for national programs that IGN can then follow up on. These workshops are funded by restricted funding coming to IGN from USAID through UNICEF. Each workshop costs around \$80,000. This year, IGN plans to host workshops in:

- Morocco, for Northern and Western African countries
- Dubai, for Gulf and Eastern Mediterranean countries
- Tanzania, for Eastern and Southern African countries
- Southeast Asia
- Central Asia (two workshops)

All GiveWell conversations are available at <http://www.givewell.org/conversations>