

## “CHILDREN ARE EVERYONE’S BUSINESS”

Thailand: Salt Iodization

By Mark Thomas – Chief Communication Section, UNICEF Thailand

Bangkok – How an offer of funding to UNICEF from a private sector corporation grew into a partnership to successfully promote the adoption of sorely-needed regulations on salt iodization in Thailand. **This provides a good example of why progress for children must be everyone’s business.**

In May 2010, UNICEF was approached by Sansiri Plc., one of Thailand’s largest real estate developers, about making a donation to the organization. When Sansiri’s president, Srettha Thavisin, was told during the initial meeting with UNICEF that instead of funding we would rather have Sansiri’s support in promoting key policy changes for children, he was intrigued. And when Thavisin learned about the threat iodine deficiency disorders (IDD) posed to the well being of children in Thailand and the country’s future development, he committed himself and Sansiri to helping UNICEF do something about it.

Iodine deficiency disorders are the most common causes of preventable mental retardation and brain damage in the world. Even a mild iodine deficiency in the general population can result in significant loss of learning ability and a severe decline in individual intelligence quotients (IQ).

In Thailand, where only about half of the households use iodized salt and most other common food seasonings are not iodized, iodine deficiency had been a major threat to children’s development for more than 50 years. To protect children from IDD, UNICEF had been pushing hard for regulations mandating the iodization of all salt for human consumption. Progress towards that goal, however, had been painfully slow.

In July 2010, with extensive support from Sansiri, a major public campaign branded with only an “Iodine Please” logo was launched to mobilize support for mandatory salt iodization. Sansiri used its extensive corporate resources to help develop and disseminate numerous messages on the need to consume iodized salt, and through its business and political contacts helped UNICEF reach out to key decision makers at the highest levels of government.

The campaign, combined with UNICEF’s long-term efforts to promote salt iodization, resulted in the Ministry of Public Health adopting regulations on the mandatory iodization in September 2010. The regulations took effect on 1 January 2011, with strict enforcement and heavy fines for non-compliance starting in June 2012.

The successful campaign clearly showed the value of involving the corporate sector in addressing critical development issues for children. The level of creative resources provided by Sansiri for the campaign, as well as the number of messages designed and the speed with which they were disseminated, were well beyond the reach of UNICEF or any other development

organization. In addition, Sansiri's contacts gave UNICEF critical opportunities to present to decision makers at the highest levels evidence on the need for mandatory salt iodization.

Following the successful salt iodization campaign, UNICEF and Sansiri signed an agreement for further cooperation. We are now designing a campaign to promote the importance of early childhood education and on-time enrolment in primary school. Although this will be a long-term campaign, we believe that the combination of evidence from UNICEF with Sansiri's promotional expertise will result in another major victory for children in Thailand.