

Nutrition Feature

August 2003

Shiwott: Iodizing Salt

Just three years ago Wolday Teklemicheal was a soldier. Now, he along with 26 of his old army buddies, have been demobilized, and formed a co-operative that is producing iodized salt. Shiwott, as they have called their co-operative, operates out of a recently constructed tin factory, in Mekelle, the regional capital of Tigray in Northern Ethiopia. "We chose a donkey piled with iodized salt for our logo," explains Wolday, "as the donkey is what carries the salt here from the distant salt mines and donkeys are what people use to carry the iodized salt back to the community."



UNICEF, working in partnership with the Regional Health Bureau, helped to set up the business by providing the salt crusher, the iodine mixer and supplies of iodine, as well as training. Unfortunately, previously, all salt iodization was done in Eritrea, and now along with the other legacies of the war, Ethiopia has very limited capacity to produce iodized salt. UNICEF's investment in Shiwott is part of a larger effort across the country to increase the availability and use of iodized salt.

While large segments of the population are at risk of iodine deficiencies, yet not aware of the advantages of iodized salt, the challenges to create more of a local market are considerable. Not far from the Shiwott factory and their whole sale store, is Mekele's main salt market. Haji Kahsay Ahmed, 75 years old, has been in the salt business for more than 20 years. Sitting with his business partner, behind a massive wall of salt bricks, they buy direct from the salt miners in the remote parts of Tigray and Afar and then resell to buyers in Addis. With little profit margin, it is a tough and competitive business. He understands the benefit but thinks a lot more will need to be done to get more salt iodized.

The members of Shiwott Cooperative agree. "The main problem is the community is not yet aware of all the advantages" explains Wolday. "They know the taste of salt but they do not know what it includes." Shiwott has the potential to produce more than 200 quintals of iodized salt a day but is producing under capacity because of the limited market.

To remedy the problem, they are working with UNICEF and the Regional Health Bureau to strengthen community awareness about the advantages of iodized salt. Already they have initiated activities in schools, churches and through the radio. "It is crucial the community see the value it can make to their life," says Wolday, who like most of his coop members had no idea before they starting their business that it was so important, "We are happy that we are helping to improve the health of our people."

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