UNICEF’s partnership with Sansiri for salt iodization in Thailand
UNICEF Thailand

The partnership

A strategic partnership between UNICEF and Sansiri PLC, one of Thailand’s largest real estate developers, to prevent iodine deficiency disorders in children, has led to mandatory salt iodization for the first time in Thailand.

The challenge

Iodine deficiency is the most common cause of preventable brain damage and intellectual disability among children worldwide. Even a mild iodine deficiency in the developing brain can result in a significant loss of learning ability and a severe decline in a child’s IQ.

Iodine is essential to the human body, as it helps boost production of the hormones that regulate the thyroid gland. A lack of this essential mineral affects adults and children, but iodine deficiency is especially detrimental to the developing brain and can lead to devastating physical and mental impairments, including cretinism. The use of iodized salt – at a cost of only US$.05 per child per year according to the World Bank – is the most cost-effective and efficient way to ensure adequate iodine intake in the daily diet.¹

In Thailand, where only about half of households use iodized salt, iodine deficiency has been recognized as a major threat to children’s development for more than 50 years. To address this problem, UNICEF had been advocating for the mandatory iodization of all salt for human consumption, but progress towards that goal had been painfully slow.

Background

To accelerate progress towards universal salt iodization in Thailand, UNICEF began in 2009 to employ a more evidence-based advocacy approach, building on lessons learned from other countries and engaging in partnerships to promote universal salt iodization legislation as the best way to combat iodine deficiency disorders.

In May 2010, when Sansiri approached UNICEF with the intent of making a donation, the company’s president, Srettha Thavisin, was told that rather than funding, UNICEF would prefer Sansiri’s support in promoting key policy changes for children. Thavisin was intrigued, and when he learned about the threat iodine deficiency disorders posed to the well-being of Thai children and the country’s future social and economic development, he committed himself and his company to helping UNICEF address this issue.

The result was the launching of a major public campaign in favor of mandatory salt iodization, branded with an ‘Iodine Please’ logo. In support of the campaign, Sansiri tapped into its extensive corporate resources to help develop and distribute messages highlighting the benefits of iodized salt, and through its business and political contacts helped UNICEF reach key decision makers at the highest levels of government.

Activities

UNICEF and Sansiri launched the multimedia ‘Iodine Please’ campaign in July 2010. To draw public attention to the need for universal salt iodization in Thailand, Sansiri spent approximately US$700,000 on media coverage and promotional activities, including advertisements in 16 leading newspapers and magazines and the creation of billboards and posters advocating the consumption of iodized salt.

The company organized eight large exhibitions to promote the campaign at shopping malls and office buildings, as well as at a hotel where a major governmental conference related to children and development issues was being held. Three of the exhibitions resulted in substantial television news coverage, with on-air interviews on the importance of salt iodization to prevent iodine deficiency disorders. Sansiri also organized a pop concert to promote the campaign, and manufactured and distributed T-shirts, tote bags and pamphlets with ‘Iodine Please’ messages.

In addition, Sansiri developed an ‘Iodine Please’ website (www.iodineplease.com) and used social media platforms to broadcast messages (www.facebook.com/IodinePlease; http://twitter.com/IodinePlease). The website featured 11 videos of local celebrities promoting iodized salt, as well as an animated video incorporating the campaign’s key messages concerning iodine deficiency disorders and universal salt iodization (www.youtube.com/watch?v=ls27sdGb7Q).
Results

The campaign, combined with UNICEF’s ongoing, long-term efforts to promote salt iodization, was an outstanding success: In September 2010, the Thai Ministry of Public Health adopted regulations on mandatory iodization. The regulations took effect in January 2011, with strict enforcement and heavy fines for non-compliance scheduled to begin in June 2012.

In December 2010, the Prime Minister of Thailand presented Sansiri and UNICEF with an award for their iodine deficiency control efforts, and in May 2011, Sansiri was Enterprise Asia’s Asia Responsible Entrepreneurship Awards program (AREA) winner for the South Asia sub-region. This award recognizes and honours Asian businesses for championing sustainable and responsible entrepreneurship.

Promoting universal salt iodization to combat iodine deficiency disorders is now considered a major development challenge. The UNICEF-Sansiri partnership resulted in greater awareness of issues related to iodine deficiency and gained political support for universal salt iodization at the highest level. Not only did the Thai Minister of Public Health actively promote legislation in favour of universal salt iodization, but even the Prime Minister of Thailand discussed iodine deficiency disorders and the need to use iodized salt during several weekly national television broadcasts.

The new salt iodization regulations are potentially the greatest public health victory for children in Thailand in many years. However, they need to be effectively enforced if they are to have a positive impact on children’s health, a challenge that the campaign is now addressing.

Lessons learned and way forward

In supporting the campaign, Sansiri clearly recognized the important role of the private sector in the development of Thailand and in addressing critical development issues for children. The impact of this campaign also demonstrated the added value that corporate support can bring to a cause, far beyond the simple donation of money.

In this case, the partnership benefited largely from Sansiri’s capacity to mobilize its creative resources and technical expertise to design a large number of communications materials for use in a variety of mass communications and social media channels. The level of the promotional resources Sansiri provided to the campaign, the number of messages designed and the speed with which they were disseminated would have been beyond
the reach of UNICEF or any other development organization acting alone. In addition, Sansiri’s contacts gave UNICEF critical opportunities to influence decision makers at the highest levels.

The partnership experience with Sansiri also presented some challenges for UNICEF, among them the necessity of speeding up internal processes so that the campaign could move forward quickly.

The successful collaboration between UNICEF and Sansiri led to the signing of a formal three-year Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in December 2010. Under the MOU, Sansiri will continue to support the ‘Iodine Please’ campaign to promote enforcement of the new regulations.

In addition, UNICEF and Sansiri will launch a new advocacy campaign in 2012 to promote another vital issue – the importance of early childhood development and on-time enrolment in primary school. Sansiri has also adopted and is carrying out child-friendly business practices and has agreed to serve as a “corporate champion for children” to encourage other companies to adopt similar child-friendly practices.

Further, as a demonstration of its willingness and capacity to set new standards for the private sector in Thailand, Sansiri also agreed to contribute a minimum of US$1 million annually for the three-year period of the MOU (2011–2013) to UNICEF’s worldwide emergency response. The first US$1 million contribution was made directly to UNICEF Headquarters in September 2011.

This support to UNICEF’s global emergency work indicates the Thai private sector’s openness to addressing critical development issues for children around the world. It also reflects the fact that Thailand is becoming more active on the global stage.

It is UNICEF’s aim to cultivate relationships with other Thai corporations to follow Sansiri’s example of dual-track support for children both at home and abroad, as well as to build on the progress Sansiri has already made in adopting child-friendly business practices.

UNICEF’s partnership with Sansiri worked well and achieved its objective quickly. The company’s support was relatively easy to gain once UNICEF presented a robust and evidence-based business case for the elimination of iodine deficiency disorders through universal salt iodization.

The issue of iodine deficiency is a fairly straightforward one to explain to corporate partners, however. Presenting a strong business case for corporate engagement in more complex issues, such as those related to statelessness, equity and social protection, appears to be much more challenging in Thailand.