Cross-sector collaboration in Thailand pushes for USI

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

IDD is the most common cause of preventable intellectual disability 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 decline in individual IQ. In Thailand, where only about half of 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 over 50 years. To address this and to protect children, there has been a push for regulations mandating the iodization of all salt for human consumption. Progress towards that goal, however, had been slow.

In July 2010, with extensive support from Sansiri, a major public campaign branded with an “Iodine Please” logo was launched to encourage support for mandatory salt iodization. Sansiri tapped into its extensive corporate resources to help develop and distribute numerous 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.

This campaign, combined with the ongoing, long-term efforts to promote salt iodization, resulted in a change — the Thai Ministry of Public Health adopted regulations on mandatory iodization in September 2010. These regulations took effect on 1st January 2011, with strict enforcement and heavy fines for non-compliance starting in June 2012.

Support also clearly shows the added value the corporate sector can bring, far beyond simply donating money.

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 beyond the reach of UNICEF or any other development organisation. In addition, Sansiri’s contacts provided critical opportunities to present to decision makers at the highest levels.

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...