Iodine deficiency was first recorded in North Korea in 1995, and the government started efforts to produce iodized salt soon after. Over the years, considerable efforts were made to produce a minimum amount of washed, crushed, and iodized salt (40,000 MT) to provide the population with 4.5 g of iodized salt per day, which, iodized to a level of 50 mg/kg, would deliver the recommended amount of 150 µg of iodine per day. Throughout the period, UNICEF supported these efforts with the provision of KIO3, iodization machines, packaging materials, and fuel. It also provided technical support, centrifuges for drying the washed salt, and salt moving equipment. United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and World Food Program (WFP) supported rehabilitation of salt pans in the late 1990s, and WHO and IGN (then ICCIDD) provided survey and laboratory support. Despite these inputs, however, production of iodized salt was only about 50% of the target between 2011 and 2014. A survey in 2010 found that less than a quarter of households were receiving adequately iodized salt, and all except 2 of the 8 provinces assessed were iodine deficient on the basis of median urinary iodine levels.

Renewed efforts to increase coverage of iodized salt began again in 2014 with the creation of a technical working group and the development of a strategic plan. On the invitation of UNICEF, the Iodine Global Network visited in January 2016 and identified that constraints in the production of iodized salt appeared to be due to a lack of raw salt and lack of electricity to run washing and drying equipment. It was, therefore, proposed to change the strategy to iodize raw salt directly, cutting out the washing and drying step. IGN, under a Programme Cooperative Agreement with UNICEF, visited again in November 2017, this time with Alister Shields, a salt production and iodization consultant. Review of two salt works close to Pyongyang and extensive discussions within the multi-sectoral working group led to a decision to accept the recommendation to iodize raw salt without washing and drying it. It was also agreed that, while the 40,000 MT would be retained for the first phase of the strategy, the long-term goal for the government would be to iodize all raw salt produced for human consumption, including that for industrial food processing, i.e. adopt the strategy of universal salt iodization, employed by most countries around the world.

Finally, a complementary, interim intervention to add iodine to soybean paste and sauce, produced in county factories throughout the country, was agreed. The objective of this intervention is to increase household iodine intake in the short term, while improvements to raw salt production are made and iodization of salt is scaled up. National stakeholders and development partners are optimistic that the revised strategy, which takes into consideration constraints but also unique opportunities in North Korea will finally improve the iodine status of the population and afford protection against IDD.