Racked by strong political will, the unwavering commitment of the private sector, and a mobilized community, Sri Lanka has made huge strides towards ensuring the availability of iodized salt and eliminating iodine deficiency among its population. Today, close to 90 per cent of Sri Lankan households consume adequately iodized salt, ensuring that a new generation of children receives a smart start in life.

Sri Lanka embarked on its programme to eliminate iodine deficiencies just over a decade ago. A series of steps led to a doubling in the availability of iodized salt at community level – a 1995 law regulated the production and distribution of iodized salt for human consumption, the government strongly supported efforts to enhance public awareness about the problem of iodine deficiency and its solution, creating a demand for iodized salt, and an inter-sectoral committee was created to coordinate and strengthen linkages between the various partners.

The turning point came in 1996 when the Government-managed National Salt Corporation was privatized and split into two salt producing companies – Lanka Salt Limited and Puttalam Salt Limited. In order to gain the commitment of the private salt producers and to ensure long-term sustainability, a cost-sharing arrangement for machinery and equipment was instituted between UNICEF and the producers. Financial support from the Governments of Canada and Australia, and Kiwanis International, as well as technical support from UNICEF, supported the upgrade of these facilities and ensured their capability to meet all of Sri Lanka’s edible salt requirements. Since then, both producers have taken additional measures to further improve quality of iodized salt and to provide inter company technical support. In 1999, Lanka Salt Limited, the largest producer, was awarded the Sri Lanka Standard Institution certificate for the quality of its iodized salt.

Sri Lanka stands apart in South Asia as a country that has made tremendous progress in a short span of time towards providing a ‘smart start’ in life for the thousands of infants born each year. This initiative is very much in line with the Government’s recognition and focus on the importance of early child development and basic social services. It stands unquestioned that these children will go on to perform better in school and will be more able to perform as productive citizens in Sri Lankan society. The challenge now remains for Sri Lanka to rapidly ensure the same benefits to the small percentage of people who do not have access to iodized salt.

Global Progress on Eliminating Iodine Deficiency

The simple process of iodizing salt can eliminate iodine deficiency. Salt has been routinely iodized in parts of the industrialized world since the 1920s, but in the developing world, as recently as 1990, fewer than 20 per cent of people had access to iodized salt. Assessments at that time indicated that an estimated 750 million people were affected by goiter, 43 million had brain damage, and 100,000 children were being born each year with cretinism, conditions due to iodine deficiency.
Much progress has been made since the historic 1990 World Summit for Children where over 70 Heads of State and Government set a number of ambitious goals for children – including the goal of eliminating iodine deficiency disorders by the year 2000. Today, as a result of pursuing the strategy of Universal Salt Iodization (USI), it is likely that iodized salt consumption increases in most regions of the world.

The consumption of iodized salt is particularly important because it is the most cost-effective strategy to protect the populations of developing countries against IDD. Over 90 per cent of the populations in the developing world are using iodized salt. In some regions of the world, more than 90 per cent of the populations are protected every year from a significant loss in learning ability. Approximately 70 per cent of all households in the developing world are using iodized salt.

China's swift progress towards achieving the World Summit goal is a universal salt iodization has improved the lives of millions of children and has made a strong impact on the global campaign to eliminate IDD. The country's salt iodization coverage, which stood at 30 per cent in 1995, has reached more than 90 per cent today.

China began to tackle the problem of iodine deficiency in 1993, convening a high-level meeting of its State Council Participants at this historic meeting launched the Salt Iodization Project, which covers all aspects of salt production and distribution, including legislation, management, production technology, marketing, monitoring and social mobilization. State laws and a number of provincial regulations were enacted to address production and other issues. With the help of international partners, the country began to modernize a salt industry thousands of years old and gain a stake in salt iodization. A World Bank loan provided partial funding for a large-scale upgrade of production facilities and for monitoring IDD. UNICEF supported product monitoring and quality assurance. And recently, the Netherlands-based chemical company Akzo Nobel, with support from the Government of the Netherlands, agreed to provide technical assistance and management training to producers.

As a result of these efforts well over 1 billion people now enjoy the benefits of iodized salt in China. Yet the country must reach a small percentage of the population that still does not consume the fortified salt. Many of these people live in coastal or lakeside areas, where easy access to raw salt cuts down on the demand for iodized salt. In these areas, the Government, together with the National Salt Corporation, plans to step up its campaign to promote the health benefits of iodized salt and to improve distribution. If successful, the endeavor will help millions more of China's people avoid the terible consequences of iodine deficiency.

**China**

**Tackling the problem of iodine deficiency**

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