

READING COPY

**Development Cooperation Seminar
Iodine Deficiency Disorders:
A Development Challenge for Thailand
*Thursday, 29 July 2010, 08.30 – 13.00 hrs.
Lotus Suites 5-7, 22nd Floor
Centara Grand Hotel (Central World)***

**OPENING STATEMENT
by
Ms. Gwi-Yeop Son
UN Resident Coordinator in Thailand**

Excellencies,
Colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the United Nations Country Team in Thailand, it is my great pleasure to welcome you to the Development Cooperation Seminar. We're all here to discuss an issue that concerns everyone in Thailand, starting from before birth through childhood to adulthood.

And that is about salt. More specifically it's about iodine, which most people get from iodized salt. A lack of

iodine poses a serious threat to the intellectual development of children and, ultimately, to the future of Thailand. No region of the country is immune to the problem.

A lack of sufficient iodine in the daily diet causes IDD or Iodine Deficiency Disorders. These disorders are causing preventable but serious health and development problems for our children. They are world's leading cause of preventable mental retardation and physical underdevelopment. Iodine deficiency also lowers children's IQ and makes adults tired and weak more easily.

According to a 2006 National Statistical Office survey, only 58 percent of households in Thailand consume salt that contains some iodine. The rate is particularly low in the Northeast region, at only 35 percent. There are also some disturbing numbers from a large-scale sample survey, showing a decline in the IQ level of sample Thai children from an average of 91 in 1997 to 88 in 2002. While iodine deficiency is not the only factor, it has been proven globally to have

substantial negative impact on children's mental development. IDD can affect the very basis of a child's learning capacity and development.

These numbers are indeed alarming. At the same time there are simple and effective solutions to this problem. Consumption of iodized salt is the safest, most cost-effective, easiest and sustainable strategy to ensure an adequate intake of iodine. The cost of iodization is very, very small--just over one Baht per person, per year. According to the World Bank, each dollar dedicated to IDD prevention would yield a productivity gain of around \$30. That's an investment in human development that has far reaching benefits and immediate results. Investing in this issue will enable children to develop to their fullest potential, who will in turn, contribute to a more creative and robust country.

In order to enable children in Thailand to grow to their fullest potential, actions should be taken. That is to effectively develop and enforce legislation to legally iodize all salt sold for human and animal consumption as a mandatory requirement. This is known as "Universal

Salt Iodization,” or USI. The legislation should ensure equitable distribution of iodine and cover the salt used in the production of all processed food including fish sauce, which is a main source of salt intake in the Thai diet.

There have been debates regarding the impact of this legislation on salt and fish sauce producers as well as on consumers, particularly on the pricing of the processed food. With the right strategy, I believe the focus should be the overall benefits and positive contributions from getting the right amount of iodine in our salt, that is improving intelligence of children, productivity of adults and contributing to overall human development.

Legislation should create a “level playing field” for concerned salt and processed food producers to compete under the same conditions and ensure fairness for all. A new law should also place quality assurance systems to monitor and evaluate the availability of iodine within the food supply.

Today’s seminar brings together representatives from the government, regulators, the private sector,

academic and international organizations. It also provides an opportunity to reach out to potential new players that haven't yet had a chance to get involved. We are glad all of you are here because the issue of IDD affects the whole country and will need all sectors of society to work together. We need to develop a clear common understanding and achieve consensus on the importance of iodine as a crucial step to maximizing human development. I believe today's event itself demonstrates a commitment to eradicate IDD and translation of that commitment into full actions.

The elimination of IDD is a goal that has been pursued globally for decades. At the World Summit for Children in 1990 and at the 43rd World Health Assembly, delegates agreed that the Universal Salt Iodization should be achieved in all countries by 2000. It was subsequently agreed at the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Children in 2002 that the Universal Salt Iodization goal should be completed by 2005. This goal has been achieved in a number of countries. In this regard, it may be useful to exchange

information, experiences and lessons learnt with other countries on this issue.

As we all know, Thailand has made great progress over the last several decades in public health and nutrition areas. The country is often hailed as a leading “model” in many of the concerned fields internationally. At the same time, there are still challenges to be addressed in the area of IDD elimination. We should be concerned about inadequate and declining access to iodized salt at the household level and a decline in urinary iodine concentrations in pregnant women. This indicates insufficient iodine intake and poses very serious risks to physical and mental development of one million children born in Thailand every year.

Knowledge entails responsibility. Now that we know existence of these issues, we as a society owe it to our children to take effective action to address them. Ladies and Gentlemen, I wish you a fruitful and productive seminar. I look forward to the key policy recommendations towards a systematic and sustainable elimination of IDD in Thailand.

Let me end by expressing my gratitude to the Ministry of Public Health in co-organizing this event in partnership with the UNCT. As the newspaper *Nation* recently acknowledged, His Excellency the Minister of Public Health has been taking a very active initiative to highlight this issue and accelerate actions to address it.

I am also honored to have the presence of so many distinguished speakers and panelists to share their perspectives with us in their varied capacities. I want to convey that the UN Country Team will continue to work closely with the Royal Thai Government and all concerned stakeholders and provide its full support to help remove this preventable hurdle to Thailand's future productivity, creativity and wellbeing.

I thank you for your attention and I wish you all a very productive day together.

* * * * *