

# Alliance of large consumers to be formalised soon

## Our correspondent

Islamabad

Recognising the role of large consumers in making iodised salt available, accessible and affordable for the people of Pakistan, the foundation of an Alliance of Large Consumers was laid here on Thursday at a consultative meeting, which also saw representatives of large consumers making verbal commitments to promote the use of iodized salt in food items in a bid to control the rising incidence of Iodine Deficiency Disorders (IDDs).

Organized by TheNetwork for Consumer Protection, the meeting was based on the theme 'Iodised Salt: An Easy Solution to Iodine Deficiency,' and was attended by a representative cross-section of large consumers including the Naanbais Association, Edhi Foundation, Pakistan Railways, Ministry of Tourism, PTDC, Youth Hostels Association, hoteliers, hospitals, civil society, chamber of commerce, private food companies and the Utility Stores Corporation.

Assistant Director Pakistan Railways Yunas Rehman pledged that iodised salt would henceforth be used in all food items served to their passengers. Similarly, the chief executive officer of A R Foods Limited announced to print a newsletter to promote awareness about the value of iodised salt. The manager of a youth hostel also announced use of iodized salt in all food preparations. The Naanbais Association requested for communication material to raise public awareness and urged the government to develop a policy for price control, quality control and packing of iodised salt. Media representatives also joined hands in the cause.

"Large consumers have an important role to play in combating iodine deficiency. By formalising an alliance, it is hoped that they will be in a stronger position to influence policy-makers for enforcement of Universal Salt Iodization (USI) legislation," the executive coordinator of TheNetwork Dr. Arif Azad stated during an informal chat.

Large consumers can display iodized salt at prominent shelves of their stores; they can sell iodised salt at affordable rates and store it in proper conditions; they can improve the demand and supply of iodised salt; and they can join hands with key stakeholders for enforcement of USI legislation.

Addressing the meeting, Dr. Azad advised consumers to

only use iodised salt in food items. "We should all join hands for promulgation and enforcement of USI legislation. We should make this a part of our regular mobilisation activities, and actively celebrate Global IDD's Day, which falls on October 23 each year," he recommended.

Dr. Azad also shared the findings of a survey in which a convenience sample of 100 retailers and consumers of each group was analyzed to investigate the barriers to use of iodized salt. According to the survey, the major barriers to use of iodised salt among consumers and retailers are high price differentiation between iodised and non-iodised salt; lack of awareness and education at the level of consumers as well as retailers; and poor marketing and monitoring by the government.

Dr. Shahid Awan from Unicef highlighted the public health implications of IDDs in children and pregnant women and the measures for their control. He also shared the common causes of iodine deficiency. He pointed out that an iodine deficient child has IQs at least 10-15 points below their potential IQ level, which leads to mental handicap. "Human life cannot exist without having iodine," he said. The main causes of iodine deficiency disorders are iodine deficient soil, low iodine content in vegetables and crops and low consumption of dairy foods.

Yaqoob Qureshi, Health Education Advisor, Nutrition Wing, Ministry of Health, briefed the audience about the implementation status of salt iodization Pakistan. According to the National Nutrition Survey, only 17% of the population in Pakistan is using iodized salt while 50% is at risk of developing IDDs.

Sheeba Afghani from UNICEF underlined the role of the civil society in awareness-raising and of the government in developing policies for USI in order to eliminate IDDs while Mehnaz Ajmal, Advocacy and Research Coordinator of TheNetwork, discussed the future plan of action. A follow-up meeting has been planned in March.

Iodine deficiency is the world's most prevalent cause of brain damage. Pakistan is rated 6th amongst countries where iodine deficiency is a serious public health problem. According to estimates, the proportion of household utilization level in Pakistan is as low as 17 percent as against 50 percent in India and 70 percent in Bangladesh.