

UNICEF Thailand's Seven Asks for the General Elections

#VoteForEveryChild



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FOREWORD

As citizens of Thailand prepare to exercise their right to vote, it's time for us to come together and make a bold declaration for our future. It's time for us to stand up for a brighter, more equitable future for all, especially for the 13.7 million children of Thailand who are counting on us to pave the way for their success.¹

In this upcoming election, we have a unique chance to shape a vision of a better Thailand, where every child can reach their full potential, no matter who they are or where they come from. Because, when it comes to our nation's future, no one is more important than our children. They represent our future, and we must do everything in our power to ensure that they have the support and resources they need to thrive.

Our nation has a proud history of putting children first, and it's up to us to continue that legacy. Thirty-one years ago, Thailand's leaders stood in solidarity with the world by signing the Convention on the Rights of the Child, making a commitment to value and protect our children. Today, we must renew that commitment and ensure that it becomes a reality for every child in Thailand.

With an ageing society on the horizon, the time to invest in our children and young people is now. By 2045, Thailand's age dependency ratio is projected to surpass 50%, meaning we will need to equip our children and young people with the skills and resources they need to continue our progress and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

It's time for us to roll up our sleeves and do the work needed to give our children the future they deserve. We've already made great strides, but there is still more work to be done. By coming together and making a concerted effort to support our children, we can ensure that every child in Thailand has an equal chance to live, learn, grow and succeed in a rapidly changing world.

So, let's make this election count. Let's make a vote for a better future, a future where every child in Thailand has an equal chance to thrive.

Today, you can play your part. This is your duty.



Kyungsun Kim
UNICEF Representative for Thailand

Issue 1

Accessible and affordable quality childcare services for all children below three

Thailand has made great strides in early childhood education services,² with 86% of children between 3 and 4 years old attending some form of early childhood education.³ However, there remains a significant gap in the availability, affordability, and quality of childcare services for children under three. This gap is a problem not only for the children and families struggling to access quality and affordable care, but also for the country as a whole.

The demand for childcare services is growing as more women enter and stay in the workforce, but most families struggle to access quality and affordable care.⁴ One in five children aged 0 to 4 years old do not live with either their mother or father due to economic migration to urban areas, and often, ageing grandparents are responsible for their care. The COVID-19 pandemic has only worsened this situation, leaving many parents struggling to balance childcare and paid employment, with women bearing the disproportionate burden. In a recent survey, 17% of women without paid jobs reported that they could not work because they had to care for their children.⁵

Childcare services in Thailand are limited, unevenly distributed, and complex, spread across formal and informal care, public and private centres, and varying quality of services, including differing workforce capacities. These services are not always affordable, especially for the most disadvantaged children, women, and families.⁶

Early childhood is a critical time of rapid and far-reaching development that sets the foundation for future success. Expanding quality childcare can improve women's employment and productivity, family welfare, business productivity, and overall economic growth.⁷ In fact, every dollar spent on early childhood development programs results in \$6-17 in benefits, with higher benefits for disadvantaged children. To fully unlock these benefits, Thailand must address the under three childcare services gap and ensure that all children have access to high-quality, affordable care.

UNICEF's Call to Action:

- **Urge a surge in funding** to expand the reach and improve the design and delivery of Thailand's childcare programs, ensuring that vulnerable families have access to high-quality and affordable services.
- **Professionalize the care workforce** by recruiting and retaining a diverse, well-compensated, and highly-skilled workforce dedicated to providing top-notch under three childcare services.
- **Integrate policy provisions for providing additional family and parenting support to vulnerable families in different contexts and childcare relationships**, including families in which grandparents and other extended family caregivers provide childcare, to ease the financial burden of the family-based caregivers and equip them with information, awareness raising, targeted parenting programmes, and social support.

Issue 2

Transform education to equip children with relevant competencies and skills to thrive in the 21st century

In Thailand, children generally have access to basic education through public funding. However, the actual education and skills acquired falls short of the expected 12.7 years of schooling by their 18th birthday, and when we factor what children learn and achieve, the expected years of school is only 8.7 years highlighting the learning deficit.⁷ In fact, six out of ten primary school students struggle to read by grade 2 or 3.⁹ Reading performance in Thailand is declining and scores in math and science at the lower secondary level are stagnant.¹⁰

Young people in Thailand believe they need more education or skills training to succeed in the workforce. The shortage of skilled talent and an ineffective education and training system pose a significant challenge to Thailand's future economic growth and competitiveness.¹¹

The country's aim to develop a knowledge-based economy is admirable,¹² but significant education reforms are necessary to achieve this goal.¹³ Equipping children and young people with strong foundational skills, such as problem-solving, creativity, critical thinking, and digital literacy, is crucial for developing a sustainable human capital. Globally, employment rates are higher among individuals with more education.

Thailand needs to shift gears and use it as an opportunity to improve its education system. The focus should be on making the curriculum relevant and accessible, breaking down financial and implementation barriers, and transforming education through technology to enable all students to learn effectively and transition to the workforce and higher education.

What Adolescents and Young people say...⁸

- Almost half (**47%**) of young people believe that finding a job after completing studies is not easy.
- Less than **40%** of young people feel that the current education system prepares them for the job market.
- Only **36%** of young people have a positive experience with online learning sessions provided by their schools were found to be ineffective.

UNICEF's Call to Action:

- **Accelerate competency-based curriculum reforms**, and ensure policy coherence and alignment between curriculum, assessment, and teacher training for improved classroom practices at scale to build 21st century skills.
- **Provide adequate financial and human resources** for classroom interactive technology, individual devices for students, and digital media tools to close the digital divide.

Issue 3

Universalization of the Child Support Grant

Ensuring that all children have equal opportunities and are protected from poverty is crucial for their well-being and future success. A recent study suggests that implementing a universal child benefit program, funded by 1% of the GDP, could significantly reduce child poverty levels by 20% or more.¹⁴

In Thailand, the Child Support Grant is a non-contributory benefit aimed at children under the age of 6. The program was launched in 2015 and has since expanded, but still falls short of reaching all eligible children.¹⁵ It provides THB 600 per month to families with an average income of less than THB 100,000 per year. However, this amount has not been adjusted since 2016 and is no longer sufficient to cover the expenses of raising a child.¹⁶

Due to the lack of financial support, 40% of mothers in the Child Support Grant scheme reported not working during their pregnancy, leading to a loss of income and negative impacts on the well-being of their children.¹⁷ In fact, the Ministry of Public Health reported that 9.5% of Thai children are born with a weight lower than the standard 2.5kg.¹⁸

To address this issue, the National Child and Youth Committee proposed universalizing the Child Support Grant in 2021, but the proposal is still awaiting approval by the Cabinet. As Thailand becomes a rapidly aging country, it is essential to ensure that all children have the resources they need to succeed and contribute to the country's prosperity.

UNICEF's Call to Action:

- **Remove the income threshold criteria for the Child Support Grant and extend the coverage to all children.**
- **The transfer value should be determined based on the actual cost of raising a child for the middle-income quintile of the population.** The amount can be set as a percentage of the cost of raising a child, for instance, 80% of the cost of raising a child for 3rd income quintile.
- **Expand the child benefits to pregnant women regardless of their employment status,** the cost of which to be financed by tax revenues.

Issue 4

Addressing the needs of young people Not in Employment, Education, or Training (NEET)

As Thailand faces a rapidly aging population and declining birth rates, it is crucial to address the challenges faced by young people not participating in employment, education, or training (NEET), to sustain the country's economic development.

The situation is stark. Over 1.4 million young people aged 15-24 in Thailand are NEETs – that is around 15% of the youth population.¹⁹ The majority of these NEETs are women (70%) who often drop out of school due to pregnancy or caring responsibilities.²⁰ The NEET group is diverse, but the majority (68%) lack motivation to develop their skills or work due to the perceived lack of opportunities.²¹ This is important because unmotivated youth lack the ability to utilize their skills and abilities to contribute to society and drive progress and innovation.

Risk factors that contribute to being NEET include gender, ethnicity, health, low educational attainment, and poor socioeconomic conditions.²² Additionally, the skills taught in Thai schools do not align with the current market realities, and public employment services do not provide adequate guidance for the 21st-century knowledge-based economy, such as digital literacy, green skills, and critical thinking.

What Adolescents and Young people say...⁸

- The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a rise in the number of NEETs, according to **36%** of surveyed individuals.
- When asked about adults in Thai society listening to children, **60%** gave a rating below 5 out of 10.
- Access to services remains a challenge, with **21%** finding it hard to access health services and **48%** unsure where to get mental health support. **22.5%** don't know where to find mental health care.

UNICEF's Call to Action:

- **Establish one-stop service centers across the country that can provide integrated and targeted service delivery for young people and NEETs at sub-district levels.** Such centres can provide a comprehensive and tailored support package for young people, including consultations on available public services and financial and compensation support, engagement activities for young people at risk of dropping out of school and school dropouts, and accessible funding options to support underprivileged youth.

Issue 5

Inclusive services for children with disabilities

In Thailand, there are an estimated 139,000 children with disabilities, most of whom come from low-income households. However, only a small number receive government support for their disabilities. The reason for this is because the eligibility criteria for disability benefits are strict and there is no effective system for referring people to these benefits.²³ The Disability Grant only covers 20% of expenses for adults with disabilities and 25% for children.²⁴

The impacts can be far reaching, such as in education where children with disabilities are being excluded from essential educational opportunities. According to the National Disability Survey (2017), around 38% of children with disabilities were out of school due to a number of factors.²⁵ One of the main reasons is the inaccessible education environment which makes it difficult for these children to attend school. The lack of accessibility to educational institutions affects the children's ability to gain knowledge and skills that are essential for their future. Additionally, many families struggle to afford transportation and other education-related expenses, making it even more difficult for children with disabilities to attend school. These financial constraints further exclude them from accessing essential educational opportunities and hinder their overall development.²⁶

While data is lacking, we do know that children with disabilities are overrepresented in institutional care. However, institutional settings may not be the best place to provide the specialized care and support children with disabilities need. Additionally, institutional care usually lacks continuity in care and attachment to caregivers, which can have negative effects on the child's emotional and psychological development. Therefore, it is better for children with disabilities to be raised in family-like settings, such as community-based care and foster homes, where they can receive individualized care and attention and form attachments to caregivers.

UNICEF's Call to Action:

- In line with the 2007 Persons with Disabilities Empowerment Act, **adopt a biopsychosocial and functional model** for the determination of disability status and eligibility for disability benefits.
- **Increase the transfer value of the Disability Grant** to ensure adequacy and effectiveness.
- **Adopt a multi-tier Disability Grant** to allow adjusting the amount of benefit to respond to the special needs of the different groups within people and children with disabilities.
- In line with the overall goals of Education Development Plans for People with Disabilities, **ensure that education is accessible and inclusive for children with disabilities and adequate systematic support is provided**, in terms of human resource, curriculum, infrastructure, materials, digital equipment and assistive devices, to ensure retainment and learning outcomes.
- **De-institutionalise all children with disabilities to promote community-based solutions.** Community-based solutions involve providing support and services to children and their families within their own communities which can provide better access to services and opportunities to be more integrated with the community, which is more beneficial for children's development and well-being.

Issue 6

Ensuring online safety for children

The digital environment is increasingly becoming a part of children's daily lives in Thailand, with 94% of children aged 12-17 using the internet on a daily basis.²⁷ Unfortunately, this exposure has also brought on numerous dangers. According to the Thailand Disrupting Harm report, 9% of children have experienced sexual exploitation online and 8% have been pressured to generate and send sexual materials.²⁸ Alarmingly, a quarter of children aged 9 to 18 in Thailand have reported producing self-generated child sexual abuse material, often used for bullying and sexual exploitation online.²⁹

A significant number of children in Thailand are unaware of the risks of online exploitation and abuse, with 47% not knowing where to seek help if they or a friend were sexually assaulted or harassed.³⁰ The low reporting of such cases, with only 1% to 3% of children reporting to the police, is also attributed to the caregivers' lack of awareness.³¹

Several initiatives aimed at making the internet safer for children exist, but they are fragmented, insufficient in scope, and lack coherence in strategy and messaging. Additionally, the current legal framework does not adequately address all forms of online child sexual exploitation and abuse. There is a need for a more comprehensive approach to tackle the issue and ensure the safety of children in the digital world.

UNICEF's Call to Action:

- **Ensure the upcoming National Child Protection Strategy 2023 to 2027** cover all child protection issues affecting children in Thailand and needs to have adequate financial allocations for its implementation.
- Amend the existing penal code, procedural and special laws **to criminalize all forms of online child sexual exploitation and abuse** including online grooming, sextortion, cyberbullying, etc.
- Encourage private sector, especially tech companies, to play an important role in **creating a safer digital Thailand for children and young people.**

Issue 7

Increasing investment in social service workforce

Investing in social workers and child protection officers is not only the right thing to do, but it is also economically sound. By ensuring that vulnerable children have access to the services they need, we can help reduce the costs of child maltreatment, yield economic returns, and build a brighter future for all children in Thailand.

Thailand has the lowest number of social workers in the region, with just four social workers for every 100,000 people, compared to 17 in China, 23 in Cambodia, 21 in Malaysia and 16 in Vietnam.³² This lack of social workers is further compounded by the fact that very few specialize in children's issues, and there is no clear system in place for recruiting, retaining, or rewarding social workers for their work with children.

The current concentration of social workers at the provincial level leaves many children with limited access to proper services. The low budget allocated to the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security (MSDHS) for hiring and managing social service workers only exacerbates this the problem. For example, the Ministry of Public Health has 30 times more staff budget than that of MSDHS.³³ The current spending of Local Administration Organization (LAOs) on social service workforce is also limited, with only 305 LAOs out of 7,848 LAOs with a social work position.³⁴

To address this shortage, there needs to be a significant investment in social workers who specialize in child protection. An additional 6,666 child protection officers would be needed nationwide to bring the ratio of social workers to children to 1:2,000, costing THB 840 million annually.³⁵ However, this investment would be well worth it, as it would help reduce the costs incurred from child maltreatment, which currently amounts to 3.4% of Thailand's GDP or 15.7 trillion THB per year.³⁶ Additionally, the investment would yield economic returns, with clear evidence that a 1% investment in social protection can result in a 0.7-1.9% return on investment.³⁷

To build a competent child protection workforce, financial investment is not enough. A proper structure must be put in place to support social workers' recruitment, training, and retention. This could be achieved through a combination of government hiring, outsourcing services to civil society partners, and leveraging volunteers. With the proper workforce in place, children and families in need would be able to benefit from case management and targeted services that meet their individual needs, ensuring that they are not left behind.

UNICEF's Call to Action:

- **Increase the proportion of the social services workforce to 1:2,000 children** with a focus on children and families in all local administration organisations across Thailand. There should be at least one social service workforce, if possibly social worker, in each local administration organization (sub-district and provincial level), to focus on children and families.
- **Dedicate more resources to strengthening the social welfare workforces**, with effective workforce development. With THB 839,880,000 per year, Thailand can save around 15.7 trillion THB per year, which is cost by child malnutrition every year.

Contact information

For more information, please get in touch:

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- For media inquiries, Nattha Keenapan, Communication Officer of UNICEF Thailand (nkeenapan@unicef.org)
- For inquiries in English, Yoonhee Jeong, Partnerships Specialist of UNICEF Thailand (yojeong@unicef.org)

1 Defined as under 18 years old. Data is from https://data.unicef.org/resources/data_explorer/unicef/?ag=UNICEF&df=DM&ver=1.0&dq=THA.DM_POP_U18...&startPeriod=2022&endPeriod=2022.

2 This is in line with Thailand's commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Target 4.2 which calls for ensuring that *"all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education."* Recently the National ECD Policy Committee proposed the "3 Accelerates, 3 Reduces, and 3 Increases" model to rebuild child development post-COVID-19, including to strengthen ECD centers, families, and communities. This model has the potential to make a significant difference in the lives of young children in Thailand.

3 <https://www.unicef.org/thailand/reports/thailand-multiple-indicator-cluster-survey-2019>

4 A 2019 survey of Bangkok highlighted that more than 20 per cent of children aged 0-5 years, mainly from vulnerable or migrant families, do not attend any childcare programmes due to the non-availability of affordable and quality services. And those below three years who receive services do so either from the health sector or attend private nurseries, the latter imposing considerable financial burden.

5 UNICEF High Frequency Rapid Survey.

6 Devercelli, A. and Beaton-Day, F. 2020. Better Jobs and Brighter Futures: Investing in Childcare to Build Human Capital. Washington DC. World Bank. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/35062>

7 World Bank. 2020. Human Capital Country Brief - Thailand. Washington DC. World Bank. Available at: <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/7c9b64c34a8833378194a026e4e247-0140022022/related/HCI-AM22-THA.pdf>

8 The survey "Situation of Children and Youth in Thailand in 2022" is a joint project between the Children and Youth Council of Thailand (CYCT), the Department of Children and Youth (DCY) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). Its objective is to understand current issues experienced by children and youth in Thailand, including the impact of the ongoing COVID-19 crisis on their lives. The survey aims to produce a report to be discussed at the regional and national Child and Youth Council Assemblies with the aim to provide recommendations to key stakeholders, such as government agencies, the private sector, civil society, and related sectors, on how to improve the lives of children and youth in the country. The online survey was disseminated from 22 July to 2 September 2022 through the communication channels of CYCT, DCY, UNICEF, and the Office of Basic Education Commission (OBEC), Ministry of Education. As a result, 55,641 young people aged 10 – 25 from 77 provinces responded to the survey.

9 <https://www.unicef.org/thailand/reports/thailand-multiple-indicator-cluster-survey-2019>

10 <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/629491593349736808/pdf/Thailand-PISA-2018-Brief.pdf>

11 World Bank. 2022. Creating Markets in Thailand - Rebooting Productivity for Resilient Growth. Washington DC. World Bank. Available at <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/468721645451588595/pdf/Creating-Markets-in-Thailand-Rebooting-Productivity-for-Resilient-Growth.pdf>

12 These include the Thailand 20-Year National Strategy with its implementation through the 13th National Economic and Social Development Plan (NESDP) and Thailand 4.0, all of which reflect the opportunities and constraints of the Thai education system. Recently, Thailand also re-committed to strengthen education during the [Transforming Education Summit in 2022](#), with an enhanced focus on accelerating education recovery to address the impact of the pandemic, strengthening the links between education and employability, revisiting education financing and making it more equitable, improving the quality of teacher professional development, and enabling digital transformation.

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- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Internet Foundation for the Development of Thailand. Child Online Protection Guidelines 3.0 – 2022.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 ECPAT, INTERPOL, and UNICEF (2022). *Disrupting Harm in Thailand: Evidence on Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse*. Global Partnership to End Violence against Children Full [English](#) Report, [English](#) Advocacy Brief, Full [Thai](#) Report, [Thai](#) Advocacy Brief.
- 32 THE SOCIAL SERVICE WORKFORCE IN THE EAST ASIA AND PACIFIC REGION: MULTI-COUNTRY REVIEW OCTOBER 2019 (<https://www.unicef.org/eap/media/4561/file/workforce.pdf>).
- 33 Thailand budget information 2015.
- 34 Minutes of DSW working group to advocate for social worker position in LAOs, on May 26, 2022
- 35 Based on recommendations in <https://www.unicef.org/media/133416/file/PROPOSED%20GUIDANCE%20ON%20DEVELOPING%20MINIMUM%20SOCIAL%20SERVICE%20WORKFORCE%20RATIOS.pdf>
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