UNICEF Thailand from then to now

1946
UNICEF is established in the aftermath of World War II

1953
Mass tuberculosis (BCG) vaccination campaign kicks off a permanent BCG vaccination programme

1964
Promotion of primary education begins with teacher training and awareness-raising projects

1960
Clean drinking water and sanitation programmes start in rural areas, as well as corn-soy milk distribution to reduce protein deficiency

1989
The United Nations adopts the Convention on the Rights of the Child, now the most widely and rapidly accepted human rights treaty

1992
Thailand signs and ratifies the Convention on the Rights of the Child

1977
The National Public Health Care programme launches to make basic health services accessible to all

2004
Child Protection Act passed, greatly increasing legal protection for children

2005
UNICEF responds to the devastating tsunami, spending more than US$11 million on recovery programmes

The Cabinet Resolution on Education for Unregistered Persons is passed so that, regardless of their legal status or nationality, every child is entitled to 15 years of free education
The Child Support Grant scheme is introduced for children under the age of 1 from poor families.

The Control of Marketing of Infant and Young Child Food Act is passed to protect breastfeeding.

Legislation requiring iodization of all salt for human consumption takes effect.

Thailand eliminates mother-to-child transmission of HIV.


Thailand expands the Child Support Grant to children under the age of 6 from poor families.

The Online Birth Registration system becomes available at public hospitals.
History of UNICEF in Thailand

UNICEF began providing assistance to Thailand in 1948. Back then, UNICEF focused on children’s health, nutrition and household sanitation: fighting life-threatening childhood diseases, providing clean drinking water and safe sanitation facilities in rural areas, and distributing corn-soy milk and iodized salt. A mass tuberculosis vaccination campaign launched in 1953 made way for a permanent programme, and in 1964, UNICEF started promoting primary education with teacher training.

Since then, the situation of children in the country has changed dramatically and UNICEF’s work has refocused to supporting the Government in designing and implementing laws and policies that promote child well-being and rights. Over the past seven decades, what remained unchanged is UNICEF’s commitment to ensuring that the benefits of Thailand’s rapid and impressive development reach the poorest and most vulnerable children and families.

All UNICEF’s work is underpinned by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the most widely ratified human rights treaty in the world. Thailand adopted the CRC in 1992, committing to guaranteeing that children’s civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights are fulfilled.
Recent achievements for children in Thailand

- Legislation requiring iodization in all salt for human consumption took effect in January 2011. Years of advocacy work by UNICEF and partners promoted iodine as an essential micronutrient for brain development.

- UNICEF provided technical and financial assistance for the Online Birth Registration System that went national in 2013 to link information of babies born in hospitals with the civil registration office. The birth registration rate sits at 99.8 per cent nationally.¹

- One of UNICEF’s advocacy priorities has been the Child Support Grant programme launched in 2015 for poor families with infants under 1 year of age. It was then extended in 2016 to families with children aged up to 3 years and further extended in 2019 for children up to 6 years with the support and advocacy efforts of UNICEF and partners. These families also received an emergency top-up for three months during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

- In 2016, Thailand became the first country in Asia, and among the first in the world, to achieve the elimination of mother-to-child transmission of HIV and syphilis, bringing the rate to below 2 per cent. UNICEF and partners worked in myriad ways to keep children free of HIV and to help them live a healthy and fulfilling life when testing positive.

- UNICEF supported the Government in the development and implementation of its first five-year National Child Protection Strategy launched in 2017.

- UNICEF supported the Government to enact the Control of Marketing of Infant and Young Child Food Act in 2017 to help protect against aggressive marketing of breastmilk substitutes.

- Every three years, UNICEF and partners contribute funding and expertise to conduct the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey that provides data on the health, development and protection of children and women across Thailand. The data is critical for shaping policies to promote the well-being of children and women.

- During the third and worst wave of COVID-19 in 2021, UNICEF supported Thailand’s most vulnerable children and families through the distribution of hygiene kits, information booklets, cold-chain equipment for vaccine transportation and storage, and life-saving oxygen concentrators for hospitals. To keep these families safe and healthy, UNICEF supported their access to basic services disrupted by the pandemic, helped prevent their separation due to COVID-19 isolation measures and promoted safe breastfeeding. UNICEF also provided over 10,000 young children from low-income and migrant families with books and toys during school closure, while advocating to prioritize teachers for vaccination and supporting safe school reopening efforts.

The context for children — a development success story

In less than a generation, Thailand has transitioned from a lower to upper-middle income country and has been widely recognized as a development success story. The proportion of the population living below the poverty line decreased from 67 per cent in 1986 to 7 per cent in 2020. Over those years, the country has sustained strong growth and eliminated extreme poverty.

The Government recognizes that investing in early childhood development is strategically important for achieving the rights of all children, with 9 out of 10 children aged 3-4 years developmentally on track in health, learning and psychosocial well-being. Child health care and immunization rates are almost universal at the national level, reflected by relatively low child mortality rates at 9 per 1,000 live births. In the last 10 years, access to education for children has greatly expanded, underpinned by an education policy that provides 15 years of free education for all children. Around 95 per cent of primary-school age children in the country attend school.

However, this success story has not benefitted all children and families equitably. Thailand’s wealth inequality is among the highest in the world, and children with disabilities and those who are migrants, ethnic minorities, stateless or from a poor family can often be left behind.

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UNICEF Thailand Country Programme

Despite Thailand’s economic progress in recent years, some regions and groups of people have been left behind and those most disadvantaged are children. The UNICEF Thailand Country Programme (2022-2026) envisions that all children and adolescents, especially the most marginalised, have their rights progressively fulfilled and develop to their full potential in an inclusive and protective society.

The programme was developed in close consultation with the Government of Thailand, the United Nations Country Team and key partners and stakeholders. It reflects the impacts of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and directly contributes to the priorities and strategies proposed in the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework 2022-2026 for Thailand (UNSDCF) to help advance the long-term national priorities of the 13th National Economic and Social Development Plan (NESDP) and the shared global Sustainable Development Goals.

The programme addresses key child deprivations across all age groups alongside a dedicated focus on early childhood and youth.4 Interventions aim to get more children, especially the most disadvantaged, developmentally on track and support them to complete an equitable education with better learning outcomes. The programme aims to protect children from violence and other rights violations and provide them with social protection measures that can withstand the ever-changing environment they are growing up in. It also aims to engage young people to build solutions towards a more resilient, greener and inclusive society.

4 In this document, adolescents are defined as boys and girls aged 10 to 18 years, while young people are defined as those aged 10 to 25 years.
UNICEF Thailand’s programmatic pillars

1 Early Childhood Development

The issue

Many children in Thailand lack appropriate care and stimulation in their early years. Too few parents are engaging with their children in a meaningful, responsive and caring way that supports healthy development. Violent discipline is often practised by parents, and almost one in five children aged 0 to 4 years old live neither with their mother or father.

The nutritional status of children under 5 years is also a concern, as indicators for stunting, wasting and overweight have deteriorated in the last five years. Only 14 per cent of infants in Thailand are exclusively breastfed during the first six months of life.

Family-friendly workplace policies such as parental leave and affordable, accessible, quality childcare are needed across Thailand, so that parents can securely bond with their babies in those first few critical years of life.
**UNICEF action**

The *Early Childhood Development (ECD) programme* will contribute towards a national vision that aims for the holistic development of all children from birth to 6 years of age – meaning that a child is physically healthy, mentally alert, emotionally sound, socially competent and ready to learn.5

The ECD programme will support parents, caregivers, teachers and service providers to create a nurturing and caring environment for children in their early years of life. It will strive to improve access to quality and affordable childcare, early learning opportunities and pre-primary education so that children are ready to start school and reach their full potential. There will be an enhanced focus on the most disadvantaged children through support for disability-inclusive, gender-responsive and rights-based early childhood development. UNICEF will also work with existing health and nutrition services to ensure nurturing care practices are integrated into their services.

UNICEF will support research and generate data that can help build evidence to inform policy for better early learning and development outcomes for children across Thailand. Through collaboration with government, civil society and academia, UNICEF will improve the financing of ECD centres and develop a parenting framework so that families can engage in practices that support their children to develop in those early years of life.

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2 Education

The issue

The past decade has seen enormous improvements in access to education for children, with primary school enrolment almost universal. Disparities become more evident at the secondary level, with lower and upper secondary school enrolment at 86 and 69 per cent respectively.6 The largest proportion of children not in school are from disadvantaged communities, migrants or children living with a disability.

Quality of education is also an issue, and based on its comparative performance in international and national assessments, Thailand is considered to have a ‘below average’ performing education system. Foundational reading and numeracy proficiency levels in early grades are low, and the learning deficit in primary school often carries over to secondary school. Performance in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) also indicate low proficiency. A student’s performance is often dependent on their socio-economic status and whether or not Thai is the language spoken at home. Students from rural areas attending poorly resourced schools are also less likely to perform well.

There is a growing disaffection among school-going children, and their experience of school is affecting their learning, attendance and confidence. School leadership in Thailand does not currently address challenges relating to inclusion, child participation, safety and emotional well-being of learners.

And since the COVID-19 pandemic, over 13 million children and young people have experienced learning loss due to school closures during lockdowns. Limited household internet access for many students has made distance learning a challenge.

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UNICEF action

The Education programme strives to enable more children in Thailand to complete inclusive and equitable quality basic education that equips them with relevant knowledge and 21st century skills. There will be a focus on foundational learning and skills in the early years and secondary programmes that develop transferable skills to help learners transition from school to work.

UNICEF will work with the Government to develop and implement a new, inclusive curriculum that addresses the needs of all learners and embraces digital learning. Teachers will be trained to improve the areas that are most relevant to young learners in today’s world, such as STEM, digital competencies and workforce skills.

UNICEF will examine why vulnerable children are dropping out at the secondary level and target those learners with interventions that help them stay in school while also working with government to build policy that makes schools safer and more inclusive for all students. Generating evidence, particularly on gender-based and school-related violence, discrimination and mental health will be key to supporting the development of a national school safety and student well-being framework to guide schools.

UNICEF will lead knowledge sharing around a forward-looking research and evaluation agenda for the education sector in Thailand to inform policy and planning. The programme will also support the routine collection and sharing of national administrative education data and the mapping of inequity to inform planning and improve learning for Thailand’s most vulnerable children.
Young People’s Resilience, Connectedness and Empowerment

The issue

Young people in Thailand are increasingly at risk of mental health challenges as well as being overweight and obese. National data averages hide deep inequalities around rates of adolescent pregnancy, HIV and substance abuse, affecting those most vulnerable.

Youth unemployment has risen in Thailand, particularly since COVID-19 (7.5 per cent in 2020). Many young people are not qualified for the technical work and clerical support roles predominantly available while employers are reporting a shortage of the skills they need.

Recent youth protests in Thailand have seen young people voicing their needs on issues that affect their future such as climate change, human rights and education reform. Opportunities for young people to share opinions and influence decision-making are limited while existing mechanisms for participation are not inclusive of the voices of those from marginalised groups.
UNICEF action

The Young People’s Resilience, Connectedness and Empowerment programme will support young people to navigate these transitions and other trends that affect their lives. UNICEF will focus specifically on the health and well-being of young people, particularly on mental health and nutrition. The programme will aim to prepare young people for the workforce by building employability skills, particularly of those who are marginalised, and empower them to express their voices and connect with leaders and their community. By drawing on the strengths, potential and creativity of young people and their families, the programme will help confront major challenges and support positive change.

UNICEF will work with the Government to generate evidence that informs health policies and services for young people that address their specific challenges, such as obesity and adolescent pregnancy. Behaviour change campaigns will also be implemented to promote healthy lifestyles and prevent stigma against vulnerable groups.

The programme will support young people who are unemployed and remain outside of education and training by providing opportunities to improve their employability, such as STEM learning, skills training internships and career guidance.

The programme also recognises the enormous value of youth participation. UNICEF will work closely with young people as well as youth workers, policy makers and authorities to create spaces and platforms for young people to voice their opinions and influence decision-making on issues that affect their lives and future.
4 Child Protection

The issue

Many children in Thailand continue to face significant protection challenges, suffering from violence, exploitation, abuse and neglect, with 58 per cent of parents using violent discipline, and one in five young women married in childhood.7 Children with disabilities and those who are migrants or stateless face additional protection risks.

COVID-19 has heightened protection risks resulting from family separation. An estimated 55,000 children are growing up without parental care and are likely to live under institutional care, which is often unregulated.8

As internet use by children in Thailand continues to grow, the problem of sexual exploitation and abuse of children online has also increased. Nine per cent of internet-using children aged 12-17 (approximately 400,000) have been victims of online sexual exploitation and abuse in the past year alone.9 Of great concern is the vast underreporting, with only 1-3 per cent of children reporting their experience to the police.10

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8 The Department of Children and Youth and UNICEF. Review of Alternative Care in Thailand: Policy to Implementation with Special Focus on Children Affected by HIV/AIDS, 2015.
10 Ibid.
UNICEF action

The Child Protection programme addresses these challenges by working with the Government to strengthen the child protection system so that it incorporates prevention, surveillance and response.

The programme will engage institutions, the private sector, communities and families to recognise and support children at risk from violence and exploitation including online abuse. UNICEF will support the development of child protection safeguarding policies in institutions that accommodate children, including within the education system. UNICEF will also engage with the private sector to prevent violence and promote digital literacy and resilience. Through advocacy efforts, caregivers, children and communities will learn how to detect and prevent abuse. Behaviour change strategies will address harmful gender and social norms and practices that promote or tolerate violence.

Child protection and juvenile justice services will also be strengthened for improved case management that ensures the equitable treatment of migrant and stateless children. Interventions to prevent the reoccurrence of abuse will be implemented as well as rehabilitation and reintegration services for juvenile offenders and survivors of abuse.

At the policy level, UNICEF will work with the Government and partners to reform child protection policies that would lead to a stronger social service workforce and information management system.
Social Policy

The issue

Many children in Thailand remain left behind despite economic growth in recent decades, and the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed these existing vulnerabilities. It is expected that an additional 1.5 million people have been plunged back into poverty.

Poverty rates reveal large geographical disparities across regions, with the far south of the country showing the highest poverty rate and rural areas more disadvantaged than urban areas. Migrant families, particularly those from Myanmar, and children living with disabilities are also particularly vulnerable to poverty and face a higher risk of violence, exploitation, trafficking and child labour.

About 1 in every 5 children in Thailand are living in multidimensional poverty, which is an index measuring deprivations beyond monetary poverty experienced in daily life, such as poor health, lack of education and inadequate living standards. If not addressed, inequalities can be passed down through generations in a cycle that has widespread negative economic, political and social consequences.

UNICEF action

The Social Policy programme aims to address the vulnerabilities of the most disadvantaged children in Thailand by supporting key social ministries and strengthening policies to reduce the poverty gap and address major aspects of children's well-being.

UNICEF will support the Government to generate quality data around the situation of children, including child poverty, that can be used to monitor progress towards achieving government commitments for children. The programme will focus on initiatives and measures that strengthen a coordinated approach to social protection across all sectors and will advocate for better public finance management for children. It will also aim to improve social protection schemes, such as Thailand’s Child Support Grant so that it can be accessed by all vulnerable children including those with disabilities.

GOAL

By 2026, more children, especially the most disadvantaged, benefit from an evidence-based, shock responsive, integrated and inclusive social protection system.
How UNICEF works

Through decades of experience, a broad reaching presence and influence, as well as being a trusted brand, UNICEF is in a unique position to advocate for children, leverage resources and convene partnerships and discussions that achieve results for children.

Over the next five years, UNICEF Thailand will continue to **work with all levels** of government and other partners, including NGOs, faith-based groups, the private sector, the media, influencers, other UN agencies and children themselves.

UNICEF Thailand will also continue to **mobilize resources** from both private and public donors to deliver initiatives that support government and partners working to improve the lives of children and realize their rights. The influence and networks of business will be leveraged to help shape policies and embed children’s rights into regulatory frameworks, business standards and broader conversations around sustainability.

UNICEF will harness the power of communication and public **advocacy** as well as partnerships with individual supporters, celebrities and influencers to promote child rights and effect positive change for children.

**Evidence generation** is a key element in successfully realising the goals of the Country Programme. UNICEF will invest in quality and equity-focused data and use it to guide inclusive policy planning. Ongoing investments in research will be made with improved methodologies and data that is better integrated across ministries and other stakeholders.

**Gender equity** is at the core of UNICEF’s work and aims to ensure that both girls and boys enjoy the same rights and opportunities, and are protected from harm. UNICEF will continue to address sexual and reproductive health and rights, promote inclusive and equitable service access, engage gender-transformative parenting programmes and foster the participation and leadership of women and girls in decision-making processes.

The proposed funding for the implementation of the 2022-2026 Country Programme is **US$70,250,000**. UNICEF Thailand is supported by generous contributions from a network of individual donors, government donors, the private sector and UNICEF National Committees.