

# POLICY BRIEF

## POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE IN THAILAND

### 25 YEARS AFTER THE ICPD



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**T**hailand's achievements have been noteworthy. The health care system is strong. The Universal Health Coverage Initiative – the envy of many other countries aiming to improve their health care systems – has sharply reduced poverty arising from health emergencies; safe motherhood advances have led to very low maternal death rates; effective provision of family planning services has reduced unmet need for family planning to low levels; mother to child transmission of HIV has been eliminated. On the education front, secondary schooling is now accessible to most children, including those residing in remote areas; and the number of Thai workers with a bachelors degree has doubled in each recent decade.

This progress can be celebrated. Yet the challenges Thailand faces are immense. The key to becoming a developed country with stability, prosperity and sustainability by 2037, in accordance with the 20-year National Strategy Framework, is investment in human capital development, notably in the areas of education and health of the Thai people. In the face of a shrinking labour force, productivity of workers must rise significantly. Moving the economy up the value chain will require a much more skilled workforce. While educational progress has been significant, the quality and employment-relevance of Thailand's educational system requires improvement. Thailand's secondary school

Thailand has undergone remarkable demographic changes since the time of ICPD 25 years ago. Life expectancy has risen, fertility has fallen to well below replacement level, with a steadily declining number of births. As a result, the share of population in the working ages has increased, but both its share and numbers have now started to decline, and the population is ageing rapidly. These demographic changes bring both challenges and opportunities.

students' performance in science, reading and mathematics lies well below the OECD average, though it is better than some of its neighbouring countries. In a competitive world, it is necessary to aim high, and everything possible needs to be done to raise educational performance in Thailand and level the playing field by providing better educational opportunities for those disadvantaged by poverty or inaccessibility.

Thailand has responded positively to the ICPD vision for a comprehensive approach to population and development, including enabling people to make informed choices about their sexual and reproductive health as a matter of fundamental human rights. However, more can be done to broaden the concept of family planning to cover the variety of reproductive futures based on individuals' and couples' choices according to their specific fertility needs. The difficulties of balancing family-raising and work commitments experienced by many women underpin the very low level of fertility Thailand is now experiencing. Policies to address this must be sought, so that the desire to raise a family can be realized without compromising other desired aspects of a full life.



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Ensuring that the young generation realizes its full potential is of paramount importance for Thailand's future development. Therefore continuing issues facing young people, including differences in educational and other opportunities according to socio-economic background, a high prevalence of early union, especially among disadvantaged groups, and the need for effective access of the unmarried to reproductive health services, need to be addressed. Children of overseas migrant workers need access to educational and other opportunities.

Thailand's population has been rapidly ageing and this process will continue unabated over the coming decades. The proportion of citizens aged 60 and above will double – from 19 per cent in 2019 to more than one third of the total population by 2050. In 2018, the number of older persons began to exceed the number of children, and by 2035, there will be twice as many older persons as children. Planning for the upsurge in older persons will need to take into account the larger number of women than of men in the older population, and the increasing proportion of the older population who are aged 80 and over. Planning for the wellbeing of the elderly in Thailand has been proceeding well, with a succession of national plans and policies.

The rising educational levels and better health among older persons will enable most to be self-reliant. But many older persons in future will have few family members, who may be living elsewhere. For those with support needs, the family will continue to be important, but cannot be relied on to provide for all needs.



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Gender equity is an important aspect of development. While Thailand is doing well in provision of educational opportunities for girls and women, high levels of women's participation in the labour force, including in top management positions, and involvement in all aspects of community life, women remain under-represented in politics, have lower earnings than men, remain disadvantaged by norms about gender roles and continue to suffer from gender-based violence. Government programmes are addressing many of these issues.

**Overall, while recognizing that more needs to be done in many spheres, Thailand's planners are confident that they are moving in the right direction in formulating and implementing policies relating to population and development that will ensure a sustainable future for the country ■**



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