

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Young Thai people, as the next generation of workers, parents and citizens, represent the future of their country.** This stage of life is when personality, habits, lifestyles and skills are shaped and when previous investments in education and health can be reaped. Therefore, an inadequate transition into adulthood can have very negative long-term impacts that will be costly to mitigate later in life. Ensuring that young people become healthy, educated and productive workers, citizens and parents needs to be regarded at the center of the country's development strategy. This need is acute in the case of Thailand, which has been experiencing dramatic social and economic changes that have given its young people a much broader range of choices, while also giving rise to new risks that could threaten their development.

**Thailand's current demographic profile points to the relevance of youth issues and the urgency of addressing human development challenges.** The youth population ratio has been declining steadily since peaking at 22 percent around 1990, mainly due to delayed marriages and declining fertility rates. The projected youth population ratio for 2050 is 11.7 percent. This trend suggests that the abundant young labor on which Thailand has relied for economic growth will be soon in shortage. To maintain its future growth and competitiveness, Thailand will need to place renewed emphasis on strengthening the capabilities of its young people and boosting productive opportunities for them. It will also need to help youth avoid risky behaviors as well as provide second chances to those youth who may be suffering the consequences of poor decisions.

**This Thailand Social Monitor provides an overview of the challenges facing Thai youth today, identifying the factors that make them vulnerable and outlining possible policy directions in moving forward.** This Social Monitor studies three key transitions faced by Thai youth, using the youth development model proposed by the World Development Report 2007. This model helps provide an understanding of the interactions among the various factors that affect youth development and how they influence in three important life transitions, namely: *growing up healthy, learning for work and life and moving from school to work*. In this model, the role of public policy is to help youth succeed in the transition to adulthood by *broadening their opportunities, expanding their capacity and providing them with second chances* to overcome negative outcomes. These areas are the three youth policy lenses through which policy priorities are assessed throughout this report.

## Growing Up Healthy

**Changing cultural values and behaviors, together with the epidemiological shift the country is undergoing, have presented new health-related challenges for youth.** Traffic accidents and HIV/AIDS have become the leading causes of death among youth, while chronic diseases developed from unhealthy habits formed during youth have become one of the major causes of death for adults. Evidence indicates that smoking, alcohol consumption and drug use have been rising among youth in Thailand in recent years. In addition, a large percentage of Thai youth reports engaging in unsafe sexual relationships and at younger ages, which has led to increased prevalence of early pregnancies.

Influencing health habits and lifestyle formation during youth is critical for avoiding the loss of productive human capital and increases in future health care expenditures. Using the three policy lenses of the youth development model, this report highlights the need to promote youth health in the following areas:

***Expanding opportunities*** – Creating an environment for the young to practice healthful behaviors, making risky behaviors costly and limiting the opportunities for them. Policies that could help expand youth opportunities to make healthy decisions include: enforcing bans on advertisement of tobacco and alcohol and restrictions to their consumption by age and in public places; providing the means required to practice healthy behaviors, such as condom provision; and subsidies and taxation policies to decrease the cost of healthy options and increase that of unhealthy ones. Evidence in high- and middle-income countries shows that an increase in the price of tobacco products through taxation reduces the demand significantly, particularly among young people and the poor.

***Improving young people's capacity*** – Providing young people with the knowledge to make informed choices and with the skills to negotiate safe behaviors with peers and partners. Mechanisms or programs to reach youth could include school-based tailored programs, peer education and mass media programs, innovative campaigns making use of new technologies and popular public personalities and sponsorships of youth events. Programs should be

comprehensive and diverse in terms of both the risks to be prevented-given that most risky behaviors tend to reinforce each other-and the tools used to reach youth.

***Providing second chances*** – For young people harmed by poor health decisions or environments, adequate youth-friendly treatment and rehabilitation services are needed. Young people consulted have highlighted the importance of drug treatment and rehabilitation services that are provided on a voluntary basis and are accompanied by follow-up services. Health services for the treatment of sexually transmitted infections are also essential. It has been estimated that less than 5 percent of young people are being reached by adequate HIV/AIDS prevention services in Thailand

## Learning for Work and Life

**Despite Thailand’s great progress in extending primary and lower secondary education during recent decades, further challenges remain.** Despite recent progress, it appears that Thailand’s education system is not producing enough qualified graduates to meet the rapidly evolving demands of the labor market. One of the main challenges is to encourage students to stay in school beyond lower secondary school since upper secondary education enrollment rates are still low, particularly in the vocational track. The quality and equity of secondary education, the efficiency of public expenditures and the provision of second chances for children who drop out of school early are additional areas for further improvement

Public interventions to provide young people with the skills and knowledge necessary to be productive workers and to become committed parents and citizens could focus on the following areas:

***Expanding opportunities*** – Improving the quality and relevance of education to prepare youth to meet the demands of the labor market. Recent efforts to improve the quality of secondary education to prepare young people for higher levels in Thailand need to be strengthened and complemented. Very few Thai students score in the top proficiency levels for mathematics or reading according to international assessments, while a very large proportion are performing at or below the most basic level of mathematics, science and language ability.

***Improving young people's capacity*** – Addressing financial constraints to enable young people to pursue upper secondary or higher education. The direct and opportunity costs of education beyond the lower secondary level deter Thai parents from sending children to school after the compulsory level. Different student loan programs/schemes need to be developed and tested to ensure that young people have the means to stay in school, regardless of their social and economic background.

***Providing second chances*** – Providing second chances so underprivileged youth can integrate or reintegrate into the education system. Non-formal education has the potential to play a stronger role in providing second chances or alternatives to out-of-school youth, given its flexible nature.

## Moving from School to Work

**Making the successful transition from school to work is a challenge for many young people in Thailand.** Although the incidence of child labor has fallen in recent years, some youth drop out of school and start to work too early, which can affect future productivity and income. At the same time, youth with higher levels of education face difficulty finding employment in high-skilled sectors and occupations because they lack the qualifications sought by employers. Thailand will therefore need to focus on human capital development, emphasizing innovation and the development of skills and technological capabilities.

Key policy areas to help youth enter the labor market successfully include the following:

***Expanding opportunities*** – Generating more positive employment opportunities for youth. Mainly through demand-driven mechanisms, measures could include such as Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) programs, which provide financial assistance for in-need households to send children to school; strengthening the labor market information system to provide timely information that would help match supply and demand for labor; promoting rural off-farm work opportunities; facilitating the successful integration of young migrant workers; and facilitating self-employment through the provision of financing and other support. As a complementary measure, a continued focus on eliminating child work is also needed.

***Improving young people's capacity*** - Improving the capabilities of the young people to meet market needs. Schools need to become a bridge between education and employment. To ease the transition between the school and the workplace, more programs involving on-the-job training are needed. Additionally, the diversification of education and training options to accommodate varied student needs/capabilities as well as market needs should be considered.

***Providing second chances*** – Helping those who have dropped out of the labor market to reintegrate into it. The main second chance program offered by the Ministry of Education is the Non-Formal Education system. Other innovative approaches used in other countries should be explored to complement this effort.

## Youth Policy and Institutional Framework

**Both the policies and the agencies in charge of youth have changed numerous times, undermining their effectiveness.** Young people today will be the leaders of tomorrow. A nurturing environment can support the realization of their full potential—a society that invests in education and its children and provides them with an equal chance to learn and to be; a society that promotes better and healthier quality of life, both physically and mentally; a society that kindles more and better jobs for shared economic growth and well-being; and a society where good governance prevails and is guided by high ethical and moral principles.

Thailand has had many policies and plans related to youth development over the past few decades. Currently, the responsibility for youth policy formulation and coordination lies within the recently established Ministry of Social Development and Human Security. However, the responsible Bureaus do not have the required capacity to undertake such a paramount task, particularly in terms of coordinating the efforts of several different Ministries and agencies involved in youth-related issues.

Key areas for improving the Thai youth policy and institutional framework include: ensuring that youth policy is a long-term policy commitment of the State and not merely of a given government; providing effective coordination

of all policies that directly or indirectly affect youth; ensuring that youth policies and plans are better translated into agencies' programs and activities and establishing adequate mechanisms of accountability for youth outcomes; developing tools to measure both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of youth policy initiatives; and institutionalizing consultation mechanisms that allow youth groups and civil society organizations to participate in policy formulation as well as implementation.

Building the next generation of Thailand human capital requires a concerted effort. The four main ministries responsible for promoting the country's youth development agenda-Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Public Health and Ministry of Justice-must work towards ensuring that every stakeholder-including other governmental departments, NGOs and the private sector-come together to bring about an enabling environment for youth of all walks to thrive and realize their full potential. Moreover, policymaking must also be in tune with reality. It needs to listen, understand and incorporate the voices and vision of youth, the central stakeholder in this process, in order to be grounded on the will and aspirations of the next generation.