

Addressing the Issues of **Non-Thai** Education System in **Thailand**



Save the Children



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This is a summary of the Save the Children “Every Last Child” Campaign launch event, expressing the views and opinions of education experts, development partners, media and children. The event was held on 1 June 2016 in Bangkok, Thailand.

Thailand has made bold commitments to realize the right to education for all children in the country, as called for under various laws and regulations. The 1999 Education Act guarantees the right of all children, without discrimination, to a quality education. A Cabinet declaration in 2005 reaffirmed the right of all children, including non-Thai children living in Thailand, to receive an education. Furthermore, the government announced the extension of a mandatory free education from 12 years to 15 years in 2009.

Thailand has a long history of hosting migrants and refugees from neighbouring countries as they flee conflict and poverty. The majority of migrant children in Thailand, 61% (or 225,000), are still not in school despite the existing Education for All (EFA) policy. Moreover, only 3% and 1%, respectively, are reported as enrolled in lower and upper secondary levels. Access to primary and lower secondary education is very high in Thailand, except for migrant children. ²

If we want to achieve our education breakthrough in Thailand, getting migrant children and children from ethnic minority communities into schools is a priority. Save the Children and partners have demonstrated success in improving enrolment for vulnerable children. In the Bang Khun Tian District of Bangkok, local government, schools and civil society have been working together to enrol migrant children in schools and ensure they learn. What has emerged is an innovative model facilitated by the Foundation for Rural Youth (FRY) that has successfully engaged migrant communities, schools and local policy makers in the pursuit of realizing Thailand’s EFA policy.

Much of the reason for limited enrolment is due to discrimination and social exclusion, similar to those of ethnic minority children often called “non-Thai.” When schools’ budgets limit enrolment, for example, school directors give Thai children priority. Additionally, many migrant families are not aware of their right to education, they lack the Thai language skills to enrol and participate in school, or fear that using government social services will put them at risk of deportation or jail. Although the EFA policy exists, there is no implementation guidance for local education authorities and particularly school directors, creating confusion and limiting enforcement to ensure the policy is implemented. There is also no system of data collection on children out-of-school and most national data excludes unregistered families and children, so

¹ <http://www.unicef.org/thailand/education.html>

² Save the Children International, World Education 2015, Pathways to a Better Future: A Review of Education for Migrant Children in Thailand. A Situational Analysis of Two Communities: Bangkok and Mae Sot

that stateless children are unrepresented when decisions are made regarding budget allocation or school capacity needs.

Even if migrant children are enrolled in schools, the lack of language support programs puts them at a huge learning disadvantage as they are both trying to learn the Thai language and other subjects taught in Thai. Being deprived of their right to an education and future livelihood puts children at higher risk of trafficking and engagement in dangerous work. With the advent of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), migration in Thailand is likely to increase, making these problems even more severe if structural issues that exclude children from accredited education and other public services are not addressed. Without coordinated efforts to strengthen EFA and Sustainable Development Goal implementation for children on the move in Thailand, children will continue to be out of school, left behind, and their future placed at risk

Policy Implementation

Ever since Thailand has enforced its Education for All Act it has developed multiple policies increasing Thailand's capacity to educate all children. Some of these policies have helped not only Thai children, but also migrant children such as non-formal education programs. However, at this moment in time many of the policies are either not being fully implemented or are having limited impact due to certain constraints. Identification and lack of accurate data on children out of school, the inability to recruit teachers who speak non-Thai languages, attitudes of the Thai public and school administrators, limited co-ordination between government agencies, and lack of recognition of alternative learning centre certificates are some of the key constraints.

Resources for Implementation of Quality Education Programs

Thailand has made great progress in expanding basic education. The Office of the Basic Education Commission (OBEC) has 30,816 schools under its care in 325 districts, with a target group of approximately 7,000,000 students. However, providing a quality education for all can maximize students' potential in joining Thailand's skilled workforce. Rural and distant village schools are severely underfunded making it difficult to deliver quality education because of inadequate teaching materials, poor physical infrastructure and inexperienced teachers. Many non-Thai speaking children such as migrants and ethnic minorities live in these underserved areas, making it even more difficult for them to receive a quality education. Additionally, alternative education options are often limited for this group. The Office of Non-Formal and Informal Education (ONIE) only has the capacity to provide non-formal education programme service for about 10 percent of estimated 200,000 out-of-school migrant children in Thailand in 2014.

Importance of Quality Data

There is currently a lack of accurate data on out-of-school students on both national and local levels. Without sufficient data, policy-makers cannot make well informed decisions. At its current state, both OBEC and ONIE are trying to communicate with local authorities to collect accurate data on the local level, which will in the end lead to accurate data on a national scale.

Language Barriers

It is obvious that in many cases it is difficult to provide education to migrants when the education provided is not in the language that they speak. The best way to solve this is to have multi-lingual teachers. Sadly, this solution cannot always be utilized due to the shortage of teachers with such skills. It has been proven that children who are provided extra tutoring for Thai become more literate and more likely to continue their education at a normal pace.

Economic Barriers

It is common for students, both Thai and non-Thai, to drop out in the middle of the school year due to economic reasons. This causes problems when transferring grades between schools, because they have to do so in the middle of the semesters. However ONIE facilitates the transferring of grades mid-semester. Whether the barrier to using this service is parents' lack of awareness of the service or discrimination at the local level was not discussed.

Attitude and Awareness

It can be said with a degree of certainty that increased awareness and a change in attitude towards migrant children in the general populace is vital to meeting our education goals. It is quite common for migrant children to not have access to schools due to lack of documentation. It is understood that some of the school directors are not well aware of existing policies that address the migrant, the refugee and non-Thai speaking children. Dialogue needs to happen between the policy makers and implementers.

Additionally, the general public needs to develop a positive attitude towards the migrant children to ensure that discrimination does not keep students from enrolling and staying in school. The conversation must be started on various platforms such as media, social media and influential forums.

Learning Centers

Migrant learning centers are one way that communities have tried to alleviate the problem of access and support for non-Thai children's education. Despite good intentions, they usually lack the required standards to become recognized institutions in the eyes of the government. This then leads to the problem of having students graduating with unrecognized diplomas and transcripts, even though they are in many cases educated individuals capable of undertaking higher education. This destroys a lot of potential. ONIE has said learning centers that meet requirements can register, but bringing these learning centers up to standard can be expensive and time-consuming. The future of learning centers and their status should be brought for discussion between relevant government agencies and the learning center operators.

Migrants' Contribution to the Economy

The Government of Thailand recognizes the importance of the contribution of migrant workers in Thailand. It is also aware that well-educated workers, including migrant workers contribute more to the economy than uneducated ones and that educated individuals can contribute more positively to the society. It can also be said that if Thailand wants its economy to grow sustainably it must make education a priority.

Cooperation is Key within Government and Across Civil Society and the Private Sector

It is certain that non-governmental organizations (NGOs), government agencies and the private sector must cooperate to find effective solutions to the problem. Cooperation between these agencies would not only greatly increase overall effectiveness of policies, but also open up space to share data and have it be peer reviewed to allow for greater accuracy and precision. It can be said that cooperation between the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Interior, and the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security is extremely important due to their power projection and available databases.

The private sector in particular has the biggest need for educated workers. It is in their best interest to have a higher quality work force which can only be achieved through education. We should encourage the private sector to become more involved in the issue as they have the ability to invest in programs that civil society and sometimes even the government cannot afford. The new Ministry of Education structure will help facilitate the involvement of the private sector in education through new provincial education management bodies.

Outcomes and Next Steps:

- A comprehensive strategy must be developed towards ensuring quality data collection including co-ordination between government agencies, civil society and private sector stakeholders
- The government and civil society partners should explore opportunities to engage private sector involved in this issue
- Efforts need to be taken to influence public opinion positively towards these groups of children
- Budget sufficiency needs to be explored to ensure all children truly have the resources to succeed in Thai schools
- Summary of the panel discussion on "Every Last Child" will be distributed to government agencies and its stakeholders for further development

Panelists

- Mr. Hugh Delaney Chief of Education, UNICEF
- Mr. Payome Chinnawong Deputy Secretary General, Office of the Basic Education Commission (OBEC)
- Ms. Atchara Sakrajai, Deputy Secretary – General, Office of the Non-Formal and Informal Education (ONIE)
- Mr. Tim Murray, Senior Education Specialist, Save the Children
- Ms. Debbie See Vejjajiva Bazoo, Recording Artist and Actress

