

**Development of Mechanisms to Enhance Participation
For the Well-Being of Children, Youth, and Family**

1. The future of Thailand is dependent on high quality children and youth, who should be brought up in a strong family so that they can be good adults in the future. However, presently many of these children and youth do not have a sense of direction in their development, in the physical, social, behavioral, intellectual and spiritual spheres. In addition, there are Thai children who are in need of special protection over and above the protection normally given to children by society. These can be divided into 17 groups according to nature of their problems: orphans, abandoned, sexually harassed, involved with drugs, stray children, trafficked children, disabled children, those used as child labor, children going through the judicial process, refugees, tribal children, those living in slums, those without nationality, children of construction workers, children affected by disasters or hazardous substance, and children living in poverty¹.

2. At present, it has been found that such children and youth are facing nutrition problems resulting from overweight and obesity. In the future, children will become unhealthy due to too much eating, as the social values and eating habits are changing to consumption of fattier and high cholesterol food. Moreover, a significant problem which has long existed is hunger and starvation, found among people who are poor and disadvantaged. Also, there is a trend among women, especially female teenagers, to be slim and skinny. This leads to a number of newborn babies weighing less than 2,500 gram which is lower the standard specified as proper by the Ministry of Public Health. Malnutrition is another severe problem which will significantly affect the physical condition, the brain and intellectual development of Thai children in the future.

3. During the past 10 years, problems in the behavior of children and youth have been increasing so rapidly that it is a cause for concern. These problems have arisen from children and youth themselves, their families, or their surrounding environment². Epidemiological surveys have shown that a high number of Thai children and youth have problems in their mental health and behavior to an “abnormal” degree, such that they needed to see experts on mental health and psychiatrists. Such problems are depression, suicide, rowdy behavior, rule-breaking, aggressive and violent behavior, and sexual problems³. The economic, social and political crisis has naturally escalated the severity of such problems.

4. Apart from the above, consumption of drugs, formation of gangs, and other forms of dysfunctional groupings also pose problems. From the data gathered on alcohol consumption, it was found that patients suffering from chronic alcoholism also include children under the age of 15. Although the number of this group of patients is still not high, but it indicates that alcohol consumption is spreading more into the children and youth group. As for smoking, it

¹ Summary of Situation Report on Children Office of Welfare Promotion, Protection and Empowerment of Vulnerable Groups

² Duangtip Teerawit 2006, Health Situation of Children and Teenagers. Office of Health Information System Development, under the supervision of the Public Health System Research Institute. This study received a grant from the Office of the Health Promotion Foundation

³ Chuenrutahi et.al. 2006, The Health of the Thai People. Institute of Population and Social Research, Mahidol University. Study under the work plan to develop health information, supported by the Thai Health Promotion Fund. Nakorn Phatom: Amarin Printing.

has been found that in Thailand the average age that people start to smoke is between 15-24⁴. As for sexual behavior, the result from a study done with 11,297 people aged between 13 and 22 shows that the pattern of sexual intercourse of youth has changed dramatically. The new pattern includes multiple sleeping partners, switching sleeping partners, and sexual intercourse at early age. The lowest age of sexual intercourse was found to be 9 years old for males and 10 years old for women. Furthermore, it has been found that teenagers who had beliefs condoning sexual intercourse are likely to have 2.9 times more sexual experience for male teenagers and 3.9 times more for female teenagers, when compared with teenagers who do not have ideas condoning sexual intercourse⁵. When teenagers engage in sexual risk behavior, there is an increased trend of HIV virus infection, especially among those aged between 15 and 19. Another issue that has arisen is the fact that rape or sexual assaults performed by children and youth have increased and they are now at more than 2 cases per day. Among the victims of such cases were children under age of 15, whose rate of being raped on average is 2 cases a day⁶.

5. The Child Watch project of “Ramjit Institute” has done research on behavior of children and youth in 2008 and found that the number of teenager mothers conceiving a child increased consistently during 2005 to 2008: the number was 77,092 in 2008, while it was only 68,385 in 2007. In addition, data taken from Dr. Warapohn Phantukomol—a paediatrician at a clinic for teenage pregnant mothers, Ramathibodi Hospital—indicated that the teenage pregnancy problem has been increasing its severity. The rate of teenage mothers conceiving a child is as many as 140 cases per day, which is considered a very high number. This could lead to a problem in which mothers are not ready to bring up their children, and they might suffer from economic problems as it would be difficult for them to find work. A possible consequence is they might incur physical, mental, emotional and social problems and thus display aggressive behavior. According to a one month statistical collection, there were over 3,000 cases of group fights, and a shocking increase in cases where children and youth were physically abused. A number of factors are responsible for inducing children and youth to do wrong, resulting in a behavioral crisis. The first is the lack of affection and good upbringing by their families, especially their parents. The second is peer influence and surroundings that encourages such behavior such as night clubs and media trumpeting violent news⁷. Another factor is the changes in the economy and society which has changed the culture and life style of Thai families. For example, there are couples who live together but have not applied for marriage registration⁸. As a consequence, the marriage registration rate decreased from 26.59 couples/1000 families in 2006 to 18.94 couples/1000 families in 2008⁹. Living together without a marriage certificate makes things easier for couples to end their relationship and decide to move out on their own should marital problems occur. Moreover, many couples prefer to leave their family and live by themselves, resulting in an increased number of nuclear families from 12% in 2000 to 54.5% in 2008¹⁰. When the family becomes smaller, there is less caring, affection, and support in times of emotional troubles. This has resulted in family

⁴ Siriporn Kaophuthai 2006. Health Behavior of Children and Youth, Office of Health Information Development, under work plan of the Public Health System Research. Study received funding from Thai Health Promotion Fund.

⁵ Varunee Fongkaew et.al. 2006. Protection and Decrease in HIV Infection among Teenagers and Youth: The Current Situation. Chiang Mai. Project on Development of Youth, Family, and Community, Faculty of Nursing, Chiang Mai University. Received funding from Office of Higher Education Council

⁶ Siriporn Kaophuthai 2006, *ibid*

⁷ Siriporn Kaophuthai 2006, *ibid*

⁸ Office of Women and Family Affairs, 2008.

⁹ Department of Local Administration, Ministry of Interior 2008.

¹⁰ National Statistical Office 2008.

members having more stress, depression and emotional instability¹¹. Furthermore, the tight economic situation has made family members being less able to spend time together. This in turn results in less family bonding. The National Statistic Office has reported that parents spend 9 hours per day at work and only 2 hours per day with their families; this is different from the past when mothers usually stayed at home looking after their family members.

6. The State of Well-being in Thai Society Report 2002-2004 by the Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board indicated that the Thai family institution faces a lack of awareness in its roles and responsibilities. And it is also facing a problem of more broken families. Such problems have negatively and seriously affected the love and bonding in Thai families and needs a prompt solution. The family warmth index has consistently declined in the past 5 years, from 66.09 in 2002 down to 62.42 in 2006. An important cause was the families' lifestyle and behavior which adheres to materialistic values rather than to development of family members' quality of life. Furthermore, the rate of divorce has also continuously increased. As a consequence, a lot of children now have to stay with either their fathers or mothers, increasingly in a nuclear family setting. The key factor behind the problem is the deteriorating, weakening family institution, which as we all know is an important basic institution to nurture a pleasant, desirable personality of children and youth. The weakening of the family institution in turn results from the effects of and changes in economy, society, and politics. Parents do not have sufficient time to give guidance or take care their teenage children. Parents lack the knowledge and understanding on bringing up their children, especially on communicating with their children. Together with the fact that children and youth, especially teenagers, are full of curiosity, want to experiment and be independent, it is understandable for them to have arguments or conflicts with their parents. The increasing conflicts and weakening bond between family members have resulted in children and youth having inappropriate growth and development and as a consequence this has generated problem behaviour.

Mechanisms to promote well-being of Thai children, youth, and families

7. The rapid changes in the country's economic and social situation have negatively affected the lifestyle and well-being of Thai children, youth and families. The state realized the significance of such problem and issued a Child and Youth Development Plan to cover the period of the 8th National Economic and Social Development Plan (1997-2001) as well as other policies and acts of legislation as follows:

7.1 Family Institution Development Policy and Strategy 2003-2013. The National Committee to Promote and Coordinate Work on Women and Family Affairs (as it was called then) assigned a working group to prepare and draft the above policy and strategy, as well as an operational plan to strengthen the family as an institution. On 18th May 2004, the Cabinet approved the above policy, which consists of 4 strategies as follows:

- (1) Holistic strategy for the development of families, in terms of its capacities.
- (2) Strategy for establishment of social protection insurance for families.
- (3) Strategy for building up a systematic mechanism of management to strengthen the family.
- (4) Strategy to strengthen the potential of social networks so that they can help strengthen the family institution.

¹¹ Office of Women and Family Affairs, 2008 ibid

7.2 The Prime Minister's Office issued a National Regulation on Promotion and Coordination for Strengthening the Family B.E. 2551 (2008). This regulation contained 3 key mechanisms to help set policies towards the family: mechanisms to make policy, to build up a body of knowledge, and to form social alliances for synergy. Committees have been formed consisting of experts in the field to run the mechanisms as follows:

- 1) National Committee for Family Policy and Strategy. This plays an important role in formulating national policy, strategy and plan for family strengthening, and proposes them to the Cabinet for approval.
- (2) Committee for Family Support and Development. This plays a significant role in providing guidance on family development, using results obtained from research studies and feedback from discussions in the National Family Assembly.
- (3) National Family Assembly. This is in essence an opening up of space for discussions, recommendations, and formulation of guidelines for family development. Those attending are families and various organizations from all parts of societies, both at the regional and national level. The National Family Assembly for 2009 issued the following demands:
 - (3.1) Push the local governmental organizations so they take a major role in drawing up work plans to strengthen the family.
 - (3.2) Promote education that is creatively designed to strengthen the family, this is to be done by establishing a dedicated organization for this purpose, its brief being to develop knowledge and innovations in creating the well-being of the family.
 - (3.3) Support the state media so that it has a strategy on communication and campaigning to enlist society to help in bringing about a strong family.
 - (3.4) Arrange for a study to be made of a social welfare system that is necessary for the family to function well, including for those families in difficult circumstances. Particularly, have the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security improve on the system of family support so that it will be congruent with the effort to increase the capacity of families with special needs. Also, arrange for community hospitals to set up family classrooms with a participatory mode of learning for families with special needs and run it on a continuing basis.

7.3 A Child Protection Act 2003 came into being and was enforced on 30th March 2003. The result was the birth of implementing mechanisms as follows:

- (1) Two national child protection committees were set up. The committee that is operating now is the second committee.
- (2) A Child Protection Committee for Bangkok and a Provincial Child Protection Committee were set up. These have the major functions of providing advice, setting guidelines for assistance, for protection of welfare, for promotion of good behavior and conduct. They also are authorized to investigate cases regarding child abuse. As a result of these mechanisms, a strategic plan for working cooperatively among all parts of society, at the provincial level was born.
- (3) Ministerial rules, regulations and bulletins derived from the Child Protection Act 2003 were issued to draw in related agencies to function together. Included was organization of training for personnel working together in the common endeavor.
- (4) Training has also been arranged for staff members in various agencies that were to implement the Child Protection Act 2003

7.4 The National Promotion of Children and Youth Development Act 2007, which came in to force on 13th April 2007, is an Act to further cooperation between the non-governmental organizations and the State. This act lays down guidelines and methods to promote development of children and youth in a way that would be in harmony with the present social value that says the new generation should participate and be responsible for their family, their community, society and the nation. To achieve these aims, children and youth councils at various levels have been organized. The result is that district level children and youth councils have been established in 877 districts around the country since 11th July 2007. Provincial level children and youth councils have also been set up in 75 provinces. And a Bangkok Children and Youth Council was established on 11th October 2007.

8. In addition to the establishment of implementation mechanisms as a result of the State's policy and legislation, there were also actions by agencies and organizations aimed at the enhancement of well-being and correction of social problems that negatively affect Thai children, youth and their families. Such actions are as follows:

8.1 Local governmental organizations have developed child care centers so that they would become learning centers for the community, as well as become a forum to share knowledge with parents who do not send their children to child care centers but raise them at home. The objective here is for every child in the community to receive full development support.

8.2 The academic sector also plays role i.e. educational institutions that offer study, teaching and research related to the family and youth. Examples are the National Institute for Children and Family Development of Mahidol University, the Department of Family Health of Mahidol University, of Sukhothai Thammathirat University, and other universities.

8.3 The mass media. The Thai public broadcasting service (PBS) television station has programs on enhancement of parental skills, skills on how to live together as a family, and social skills. The program targets parents, relatives, teachers, guardians looking after children, and other individuals that interact or are present with children. It also tries to get children, youth and the new generation to have a level and form of development appropriate for their age. There are also programs to help the new generation to be able to produce their own TV and radio programs. Then, there is the Public Relations department radio station which has a dedicated frequency for children and family topics (FM 105 MHz). The objective here is to open up public space for people from all parts of society to participate and exchange knowledge to enhance the state of well-being for children, youth, and families. The idea is change, to improve society through participation.

8.4 The civil society sector which includes NGOs, the business sector (such as the Siam Commercial Bank Foundation, the Siam Commercial Bank itself), Thai Life Insurance Company, AIS Company Limited, and various magazines, is also active.

Issues for consideration by the National Health Assembly.

It is requested that the Assembly consider document: Health Assembly 2/ Draft Resolution 1.