



Leave No One Behind...Mission Possible for Thailand

By

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Excellencies, distinguished participants, ladies and gentlemen,

I am delighted to contribute opening remarks at the 15th Thailand's National Health Assembly.

This innovative and participatory platform provides a space for public policymaking that prioritizes human development, health and social equity.

Thailand is a leader in sustainable and equitable human development.

In fact, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) awarded its first Human Development Lifetime Achievement Award to His late Majesty King Rama the Ninth of Thailand¹ for his dedication to the country's poorest and most vulnerable.

His late Majesty foresaw a world with no one left behind before this became a central pledge of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Thailand continues to show the world how this pledge can be realized.

It is the first middle-income country to establish universal health coverage.²

Thailand's approach is pro-poor, pro-vulnerable and truly 'universal,' as it extends coverage to undocumented foreign migrant workers.³

Thailand has demonstrated leadership more broadly, from its inclusive COVID-19 response and recovery to its robust HIV response, from its focus on pandemic preparedness⁴ to its dedication to tobacco control.

¹ <https://newdelhi.thaiembassy.org/en/content/the-religious-ceremony?cate=614489aad04d1e09fa498c92>

² <https://eng.nhso.go.th/view/1/home/Japan-Thailand-set-a-mission-on-a-healthier-world/326/EN-US>

³ <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2016/03/31/469608931/only-one-country-offers-universal-health-care-to-undocumented-migrants>

⁴ <https://www.pattayamail.com/thailandnews/world-health-organization-thanks-thailand-for-successfully-tackling-covid-19-416007>

Indeed, Thailand is the first country in Asia and among low- and middle-income countries to introduce plain packaging for tobacco products.⁵

Tobacco control, including Thailand's recent tobacco tax increases,⁶ benefits low-income people the most.⁷ It also benefits marginalized and vulnerable people such as LGBTI people, persons with disabilities, and people with mental health conditions.

Thailand's innovative pathways for sustainable and equitable development have provided a model for many developing countries to follow.

Thailand has also provided hope and inspiration across the world that leaving no one behind can be possible.

Today the world needs an urgent boost in hope and inspiration.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, and for the first time ever, UNDP's Human Development Index value has declined—for two years straight.⁸

Systems for health remain under strain. Vulnerable populations continue to be impacted most acutely. Over one billion people still don't have access to COVID-19 vaccines, undermining the promise of a fair recovery.

Meanwhile, multiple other intersecting crises – such as war, inflation, shortages of food and energy, and the climate crisis – are also taking a huge toll on health and the pledge to leave no one behind.

Global life expectancy has dropped for first time since the UN began tracking it in 1950.⁹

We have lost precious ground on HIV and malaria, while TB deaths have increased for the first time since 2005.¹⁰

Cholera outbreaks are on the rise¹¹ and the climate emergency is exacerbating health disparities worldwide, hitting poorer countries hardest.^{12,13}

⁵ <https://www.who.int/thailand/news/feature-stories/detail/thailand-becomes-first-in-asia-to-introduce-tobacco-plain-packaging-who-commends-efforts#:~:text=WHO%20commends%20efforts,Thailand%20becomes%20first%20in%20Asia%20to,plain%20packaging%3B%20WHO%20commends%20efforts&text=World%20Health%20Organization%20commended%20stronger,plain%20packaging%20for%20tobacco%20products>.

⁶ <https://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/2318478/aiming-to-be-smoke-free>

⁷ https://cancercontrol.cancer.gov/sites/default/files/2020-06/m21_16.pdf

⁸ <https://report.hdr.undp.org/>

⁹ <https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2022.01.14.22269109v1.full>

¹⁰ <https://apps.who.int/iris/rest/bitstreams/1379788/retrieve>

¹¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/31/health/cholera-outbreaks-vaccine.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare>

¹² [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(22\)02028-1/fulltext#.Y2Z_gGhF90N.twitter](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(22)02028-1/fulltext#.Y2Z_gGhF90N.twitter)

¹³ <https://www.ft.com/content/06b52342-c855-49b7-af86-a234f628361?sharetype=blocked>

It is precisely in these difficult and uncertain times, we must chart an ambitious and bold new course for people and planet.

We can do it.

UNDP's last Human Development Report, while bleak, offers a clear message of hope: if we have the power to create a new geological era -- the "Age of Humans" -- then, surely, we also have the power to choose change.

The seeds of change have been sown during COVID-19.

Our collective sense of urgency, and our openness to innovation and partnerships to tackle complex problems at scale, must now be harnessed to leave no one behind.

Since the very start of the pandemic, UNDP has been proud to support the Royal Thai Government's COVID-19 response and recovery effort. We supported data-driven efforts, helping to protect vulnerable people, build resilience, and advance progress towards the SDGs.

This work, and UNDP's broader work with partners to support countries, has reinforced the importance of prioritizing equity, of ensuring holistic approaches to complex challenges, and of giving a seat at the table to everyone affected, *and especially those most affected*.

It has also revealed important policy and programmatic opportunities for leaving no one behind.

For example:

- Driving and investing in technological advancements and innovation;
- Ensuring inclusive, gender-sensitive responses and decision making; and
- Advancing a health- and equity centred response to the climate crisis.

Thailand can once again pave the path forward.

Consider the challenge of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and mental health, which is confronting rich and poor countries alike.

Scaled up investments for NCDs and mental health are crucial to shore up defences against pandemics, regain lost ground on the SDGs, and deliver on the pledge to leave no one behind.

Tackling NCDs and mental health requires a solid triangle of knowledge, social movement and political engagement.

Thailand, and indeed this Assembly, has shown that such a triangle is the best way to move a mountain^{14,15} and bring about equitable and sustainable development.

UNDP values its role as integrator of the ‘Triangle that Moves the Mountain’, contributing evidence-based guidance, supporting whole-of-government -and society action, and advocating for and realising equity, inclusion and rights for all.

For example, UNDP has been proud to partner with the Royal Thai Government and WHO on scaling NCD responses.

Thailand can also pave the path forward in showing that leaving no one behind requires more than available and affordable basic services – it also requires removing all barriers to access.

Such barriers include outdated and harmful punitive laws, stigma and discrimination.

Through our work on SDG localization, UNDP is supporting Thailand to ensure equal access to health and social services for marginalized communities.

Finally, to leave one behind, we must work across disciplines like never before to scale integrated solutions. The Prince Mahidol Award Conference is an example of this. UNDP is a long-standing partner and co-convenor of PMAC. We look forward to supporting the 2023 conference and its timely focus on climate change, environment and biodiversity.

Excellencies, distinguished participants, ladies and gentlemen,

How we invest and act now, and how we come together or not, could define generations to come and the very future of our planet.

The vision which Thailand and UNDP have long shared is still within our reach.

Ambition and hope are still alive.

With our sister UN agencies and all partners, please count on UNDP’s continued support to Thailand, demonstrating to the world that “Leaving No One Behind is a Mission Possible.”

Thank you for your kind attention and I wish you a successful assembly.

¹⁴The ‘Triangle that Moves the Mountain’ approach is well-known among Thai people. It is also the principal strategy of the National Health Commission Office of Thailand, the custodian of the National Health Assembly. <https://en.nationalhealth.or.th/visionandmission/>

¹⁵<https://movendi.ngo/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Thamarangsi-2009.pdf>