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Policy Brief: 4



Thailand's Ambitious Environmental Vision Needs Youth Involvement

For the past five years, the Government of Thailand has been implementing Thailand 4.0, a value-based economic model driven by innovation, creativity and technology that focuses on social and environmental sustainability. Youth education is considered crucial to achieving this goal.

In a recent three-country study commissioned by UNICEF and UNESCO on advancing an inclusive green economy through empowerment and participation of young people in the Greater Mekong region, some of the participating Thai youth indicated they were not well informed about the green economy and how they could find a place within it, or contribute to its expansion in Thailand. The young respondents did not have adequate information and knowledge on green jobs. Nor had they thought about working in green industries.

Despite mention of environmental training programmes targeting youth and children, the government, private sector and environmental specialists included in the study could not cite any sustained and scaleable efforts by either the Government or the private sector that promoted youth engagement for a green economy. "We have not set up a clear platform for youth to be involved," acknowledged one of the government officials in the study. They all agreed that the Government and private companies could do more to engage youth in environmental movements.



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I don't think enough attention about the environment is given in the education system, especially in local schools.

– Thai youth ”

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We should encourage youth to make a difference, and they need to be heard by the Government and other people.

– Thai youth leader ”

Policy landscape in Thailand

Thailand became a party to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in 1991 and ratified the Paris Agreement on climate change in 2016, affirming its commitment to move towards a low-carbon and climate-resilient society.

- In its Nationally Determined Contribution, the Government committed to reducing the country's greenhouse gas emissions by 20 per cent from the 2005 business-as-usual levels by 2030.¹
- The country's main emission sectors are energy and transport.

Thailand currently follows its Climate Change Master Plan, 2015–2050, a National Adaptation Plan, 2015–2023 and an overarching 12th National Economic and Social Development Plan, 2017–2021. The previous Economic and Social Development Plan (2012–2016) laid the foundation for low-emission green growth.

Through its Thailand 4.0 strategy, the Government promotes 'thinking innovation', which directly involves the education system as well as social innovation. It also promotes a bio-circular-green economy, which is a new economic development model that applies the sufficiency economy philosophy and aims at empowering local economies and increasing GDP growth while being eco-friendly. The new model targets local economies to be more self-sufficient but will also enable Thailand's capacity to achieve the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals.

Thailand's 20-year National Strategy, 2018–2037 emphasizes the education of youth to boost economic potential and inclusiveness. While foundational skills such as numeracy and literacy remain necessary foundations, students also need to develop "21st-century skills" (e.g. adaptability, critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving and collaboration), to thrive in this dynamic century of ever-rapid change and uncertainty.

The second National Child and Youth Development Plan 2017–2021 also includes aspects relevant to youth development, aiming to improve the quality of life of children and youth and enabling them to adjust to global change.

¹ UNFCCC. 2020 Thailand Updated NDC.



Stakeholders consulted in Thailand

The UNICEF and UNESCO study set out to gauge (i) the level of awareness of environmental and climate change among young people; (ii) their participation in policy-making, movements or training for green jobs; and (iii) their sense of ability or empowerment from that involvement.

The young participants in Thailand ranged from high school students aged 15–18 in Bangkok and rural Chiang Mai Province to working youths aged 18–24 in Bangkok.

In addition, the adults who were individually interviewed included four policy-makers, three civil society and social enterprise officers, an environmental science expert, three green business owners and three youth leaders.



Findings

Awareness and participation

With no significant differences between the male and female participants as well as the urban and rural participants, the Thai youth expressed awareness of policies regarding industrial standards. Some of them knew of policy interventions to specific sectors as opposed to the overall emission targets or environmental sustainability goals. For example, they knew the purpose of the carbon credit tax was to control carbon emissions and the tax-reduction incentives promoted the use of electric cars or even public transportation.

Some were also aware of regulations needed for industrial standards promoted by the Ministry of Industry, like the International Organization for Standardization.

Most of the Thai youth said they used social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube and Twitter to share their concerns on contemporary issues, including environmental degradation and climate change. They agreed that social media is one place where they are not only vocal about their concerns but they can start or follow a trend or a movement. But the young people in the study agreed there are few opportunities to participate in government policy-making processes generally, including regarding environmental issues or their development.

Schools, universities and the Government have provided some extracurricular support in the form of training or activities and campaigns. Examples of these included waste collection campaigns, plantation of mangroves, making of straw pillows, Rotaract Clubs² and work with ethnic groups. There are also some volunteer activities and camps at schools for young people that focus on environmental conservation. The participants highlighted activities organized by community groups including waste collection and training on planting trees. Some of the youth participants had attended a training workshop with youth from other provinces on environmental issues targeting local communities. Overall, the youth participants were mostly unaware of the support for green skills development from civil society organizations and United Nations agencies.

Several of the adult participants thought that the national planning processes do not give young people opportunities to share their opinions. There is no formal platform for such inclusion, but some of the interviewees were optimistic that this will gradually change. As international policies become more inclusive of youth, these interviewees believed that Thai organizations will do more to engage with youth.

The young people agreed that lack of knowledge and possibly time limited their participation in green movements and activities. Others felt discouraged by the continuous counterproductive behaviour of the government and people in society.



² Rotaract Cubs bring together people aged 18–30 to exchange ideas with leaders in the community, develop leadership and professional skills and have fun through service. See www.rotaryroyalhuahin.org/page/the-role-of-rotaractors.



Empowerment

Schools are providing some foundational and theoretical knowledge that may help young people understand the environmental issues and nudge them towards a green economy and green jobs. However, only a few of the youth participants said that they have learned skills in school that could help them to be employed in green jobs.

Most of the youth believed that schools have not empowered them with the skills needed for green jobs, and thus they did not talk about green jobs as a career path. The rural youth had been more exposed to vocational subjects that helped them understand the nature of some green jobs. And yet, they and many of the adult interviewees agreed that schools in rural areas do not have the same capacity as schools in urban areas in terms of quality, resources and access to information.

According to the interviews with green business owners, they and other green businesses provide training for new employees as well as set up activities in local communities. They believed the private sector has done much work on its own to support the transition to a green economy and capacity-building for its workforce. The youth participants were unaware of these opportunities.

The green business owners expressed concern that youth movements related to climate change risk being seen more as a sign of dissent than positive action for change. This, they added, might explain why there were few youth-led environmental campaigns. Although there are some youth leaders, motivators and influencers in the country, they also were described as needing to be careful about not saying the wrong thing and remaining 'apolitical'.

The Thai youth leaders in the study seemed the most hopeful that young people's awareness and participation is blooming. "At first, it did not seem like I can change anything," one youth leader said. "But being surrounded by people who want to do more, you start to push and do things. That is contagious, and the community grows, more solutions emerge. The solidarity that we are not alone, we can help each other to achieve. It helps when there are more people. Networking and collaborating with their available resources."

Recommendations for government action to partner with youth as agents for change



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What can be done [to encourage young people to pursue a green job] is education—kids spend five days a week at school. Teachers can have a big impact on teaching kids about what is happening in the world and how we can fix it. Local government can set an example for children and do campaigns on how to change the world and to have a greener lifestyle. Kids learn by example; this can have a huge effect. Private companies can do the same thing. ”

– Thai youth leader

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Youth should participate in designing the curriculum regarding climate change, sustainability and other environmental issues. ”

– offered one the green business owners

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“There is strength in numbers. They learn that if they work together and express their opinion, they have the power to change. Encourage young children to make the difference, and they need to be heard by the government and other people. There is hope that we can change. When kids come to [an] event, [they] are inspired that things can be changed. They learn to take risks and push forward, be more resilient and have compassion for themselves and others. ”

– Thai youth leader

- Incorporate the concept of green economy as part of the Thailand 4.0 policy. The Thailand 4.0 strategic plan already includes social and environmental sustainability. Although it prioritizes education as the basis of economic development, its focus is more on innovation and digital transformation. Training and education should extend to green skills, and more emphasis should be placed on an attempt towards an inclusive society and sustainable development through the greening of businesses.
- The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation could incorporate the concepts of green schools, green education system and a green technical and vocational education and training (TVET) system into the national education and strategies with a transparent budget allocation. They should also produce a more inclusive TVET programme to provide additional opportunities for girls. Provide more opportunities for communication and counselling for youth so they can discuss and explore more career options and connect the sustainability concepts they have learned.
- The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation could be more active in making sure the training of teachers on environmental issues, climate change and green skills are provided in all government schools. Incorporate green skills in the curriculum and discuss green jobs as potential career options with real-world examples of how it can provide financial security.
- There were suggestions for the Ministry of Energy and the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources and to each promote awareness and create a platform to educate youth on renewable energy and how to reduce energy consumption at home. But coordinating all the ministries to work together emerged as the more efficient route to ensuring that youth are supported in different areas, including potential employment and green jobs. Policies and interventions related to youth are often handled by the Ministry of Education while environmental and climate change issues are handled by the Ministry of Environment, and the issues related to employment are handled by the Ministry of Labour. There is currently a lack of coordination among the ministries, especially when it comes to addressing environmental issues, with considerable room for them to work together.

When it came to suggesting how young people could better participate in climate actions, including the green economy, individuals across the Thai study had encouraging and empowering approaches such as co-creation on green social innovations through participation in UNICEF's and UNDP's Generation Unlimited Youth Challenge and Youth Co:Lab initiatives.



“Greening the Mekong: Action for a Greener Economy with Children and Youth” is a study to better understand the opportunities and barriers for young people to integrate sustainability into their current and future economic activity. Awareness of sustainability issues has grown over the past decade, but does not always result changes to the way we live and work. This series of policy briefs examines current levels of awareness and support mechanisms in Cambodia, Thailand and Viet Nam, and explores opportunities to empower youth to play more active roles as agents of change for a greener planet.

The full report and policy briefs can be accessed at:



- UNESCO website: <https://bangkok.unesco.org/content/report-greening-mekong-action-greener-economy-children-and-youth>
- UNICEF website: <https://www.unicef.org/eap/research-reports>

Published in 2021 by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 7, place de Fontenoy, 75352 Paris 07 SP, France, UNESCO Bangkok Office and UNICEF

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TH/DOC/SHS/21/023-P4-ENG

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