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“Opportunities for Education in Thailand”
by
Anand Panyarachun

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Chatrium Hotel Riverside
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Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to be here with you in my capacity as UNICEF’s Goodwill Ambassador for Thailand.

At the outset, let me thank Khun Arthorn Techatada (**คุณอาทร เตชะธาดา**), CEO of Elite Creative Company Limited, for organizing this event and inviting UNICEF to be part of it.

Tonight I will talk about a topic that is close to my heart, namely education to prepare Thailand for the world of tomorrow.

As many of you know, Thailand is facing a crisis in education, from both the perspectives of learning and equity.

Let me address first the issue of learning. You may have heard of the PISA International Assessment. The results of that assessment for Thailand tell us that too many of our young students (at the age of 15) are not meeting basic levels of literacy and numeracy skills. Indeed, we have seen a sharp drop in performance for Thailand from 2012 to 2016.

But it is not just international assessments that tell us that we have a learning crisis. The results of national secondary school exams¹ also point to low learning outcomes. Mean student scores were recorded below 50% in 8 out of 9 subjects.

Thailand's education system simply focuses too much on rote learning rather than skills development. This means that schools are not preparing young people for the world of work of tomorrow.

But we need not despair as there are solutions that can take our education system to a higher level of performance.

¹ Ordinary National Education Test or ONET

The first is to invest early with well-funded quality “Early Childhood Development” services for all children between the ages of 3 to 5.

We need to ensure that educational services are staffed by high-quality and skilled teachers who can nurture the holistic development of children and build the foundation of future learning.

Increased subsidies should also be provided to the parents of young children from poor backgrounds attending Early Childhood Development services, so that they can also enjoy a healthy diet and other essentials for development.

The second area to reform is the school curriculum. There should be greater focus on skills development - fostering creativity and innovation as well as greater emphasis on subjects such as science, technology, engineering and mathematics. This is needed in both primary and secondary school to equip young people with the relevant skills to compete and be productive.

The education system needs to work together with business leaders and employers to identify those key skills for the future and design school programmes accordingly.

An overhaul of national exams and assessment of learning is also required. We want a less rigid focus on testing memorization and knowledge, and more emphasis on skills development.

And the third part of the solution is to enhance the quality of teachers by investing in pre-service and in-service teacher training focusing on practical skills, and active teaching and learning.

Let me now turn to the **equity crisis**, and here I am referring to the vast disparities in accessing education in Thailand.

If you are living in certain parts of this country, or are from a poor background, or are a migrant child, you are:

- Less likely to be in school, in particular for secondary education;
- More likely to attend a school that is under-resourced; and
- Less likely to be literate and to do well in learning assessment.

This is not a tenable situation for a country that aspires to move from middle to higher-income status.

There are opportunities now to address these inequities and give every child a fair chance.

The 2017 Constitution called for the establishment of a fund to address inequities in education and to support the education of poor children. I am pleased to note that the Equitable Education Fund Act came into force in May this year.

UNICEF research of school funding in Thailand has shown the need for greater equity in resource allocation to address disparities, in particular disparities based on poverty – which is the number one factor of exclusion from school in Thailand.

The research results also call for greater investments in poor families and schools which enroll large numbers of poor children to ensure a level playing field between performing and non-performing schools.

And money is not the only resource in education. The most important is human resources, namely the teachers. A more equity-focused

teacher deployment and motivation strategy is needed; one that ensures that we have our best teachers where we need them, teaching to those students who are in most need of support.

We also need to monitor how this money is spent – and by that I mean monitoring whether resources are reaching the children most in need, and monitoring results for the most disadvantaged children.

Only these actions will prevent young people, particularly from poor backgrounds, from dropping out of secondary school before acquiring the skills needed to find a decent job – leading to youth unemployment and discontent.

You may have noticed that I have been talking about all children in Thailand, and that includes migrant children, whose parents have come to Thailand to contribute to our economy and who have the same aspirations for their children as we have for ours.

We can be rightly proud of Thailand's education policy which grants access to school for migrant children. Even with these well intentioned policies, approximately half of migrant children in Thailand are out of school. These young people will be an important

element of Thailand's future and we cannot afford for them to be under-educated. Let us not close our eyes to this reality.

Ladies and gentlemen, I hope I have given a balanced account of the challenges we face in education as well as outlined some of the solutions.

There are compelling reasons for us to move forward.

First, every child – regardless of gender, socio-economic status, or location – has a right to a quality education, one that provides them with the knowledge and skills to achieve their full potential and contribute to society.

Second, education is a real game changer in terms of providing economic and social benefits to individuals and society.

Third, Thailand is a rapidly ageing society with a shrinking youth population. It is imperative for all children to receive a quality education so that they can contribute fully to our economy and support the growing dependency burden.

The frightening prospect for children born today is that by the time they reach adulthood, Thailand will be an aged-society with a dependency ratio of only 1.7 workers for every old person. This is compared to the current ratio of about 6 workers for every old person.

The high returns on investment in Early Childhood Development for individuals and society over the long term are, therefore, critical to overcoming this acute demographic challenge.

So let us work together to give every child a fair chance in life through quality education. We all have a stake in ensuring a more prosperous future for Thailand.

I thank you.
