WHO WE ARE

World Health Organization (WHO) supports and adds value to the Royal Thai Government and other stakeholders in improving the health of all people living in Thailand and in promoting Thai expertise around the world. The WHO Country Cooperation Strategy (CCS) for 2017–2021 brings together more than 60 stakeholders in health, including Government, academia, civil society, and other sectors to work together on Thailand’s most pressing health issues. WHO’s work in Thailand focuses on six strategic priorities: (1) Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR); (2) Global Health Diplomacy (GHD); (3) International Trade and Health (ITH); (4) Migrant Health (MH); (5) Non-communicable Diseases (NCD); and (6) Road Safety (RS).

Key figures

The WHO Country Office has a team of 26 administrative and professional staff co-located at the Ministry of Public Health (MOPH). Circa 5.4 million USD were spent in 2018 on activities and personnel.

WHO Thailand in 2019

Thailand continues to make great strides in public health and 2019 was no exception. With its accomplishments being globally recognized, Thailand continued its leadership by promoting health for all the High-Level Meeting on Universal Health Coverage (UHC) at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in September. Meanwhile, the country held a general election in March 2019 which elected a new parliament and resulted in a new cabinet.

The year 2019 saw Thailand take bold action in its bid to reduce road traffic injuries and deaths with the introduction of a demerit point system. Meanwhile, it became the first country in Asia to legalize the medical uses of marijuana after the government removed cannabis and hemp from the list of controlled substances. Progress aside, the country has myriad health challenges, including an ongoing measles outbreak, growing AMR and the increasing burden of NCDs.

Throughout the year, WHO continued its focus on the six programme priority areas as part of the CCS which follows a unique collaborative model and uses an innovative funding mechanism. In 2019, the WHO headquarters evaluation office led a mid-term evaluation of the CCS to assess progress and draw emerging lessons. The findings will help tune and solidify this innovation.
Highlights

- Thailand introduces increased taxes on sugar-sweetened beverages (SSB) and roll-your-own tobacco (RYO).
- Thailand introduces a demerit point system to strengthen enforcement of road safety laws.
- A nationwide assessment of International Pharmaceutical Coordination (IPC) capacities is carried out.
- Thailand’s Emergency Medical Team (EMT) becomes the first in the Region to achieve WHO verification.
- The country achieves hepatitis B control ahead of the 2020 target.
- Medical marijuana use is legalized.

Key Activities and achievements in 2019

Thailand takes strong action against tobacco

There are an estimated 10.5 million smokers in Thailand and half of them use RYO tobacco.

While the tax rate on cigarettes is high, tax on RYO tobacco has been negligible. Since late 2018, the WHO Country Office has been supporting the Ministry of Finance (MoF) to reform its tobacco tax policy, especially in regards to RYO tobacco. In a significant step towards curbing tobacco use, in 2019 the MoF increased the tax rate on RYO tobacco by 20%. This considerable rate hike will not only increase the retail price but is poised to reduce sales by 7%. Higher tobacco prices are expected to reduce the current smoking rate from 19% to 13.8%, equating to 240,000 fewer smokers. About half of smokers who quit can avoid dying from a smoking-attributable disease which suggests that up to 120,000 deaths from smoking can be averted through this intervention.

Accelerating action against NCDs

In 2019, WHO catalyzed the establishment of the UN Thematic Working Group on NCDs (UNTWG), which was formed to implement the recommendations of the high-level 2018 United Nations Interagency Task Force Mission on NCDs to Thailand. UNTWG is a unique partnership comprising of 10 UN agencies, 10 government organizations – including representation from the Prime Minister’s office – and civil society representatives.

To date, seven of 17 recommendations from the 2018 mission have been implemented under the guidance of the UNTWG. Full implementation of the recommendations, such as addressing interference from the tobacco, alcohol and food industry, will have an important impact on morbidity and mortality from NCDs, the leading cause of death in Thailand.

Meanwhile, in an encouraging step towards addressing NCDs, the food industry agreed to reduce sodium content by 10% over two years, following WHO technical support. The reduction will be in four categories of food products: instant noodles, instant congee, snacks and condiments.

The MoF, with WHO support, also developed a proposal for a selective tax on sodium to encourage the industry to reformulate products high in sodium. Also on salt consumption, the Country Office supported the first national survey that measured sodium via a 24-hour urine sample. It showed that sodium consumption among the population was almost twice the WHO recommended value.

Meanwhile, Thailand continued to make strong progress against hypertension. The Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) convened three meetings of the Strategic Technical Advisory Group (STAG) on hypertension, with technical support from WHO. Progress included developing public education materials and a social media campaign on hypertension awareness, completing of a rapid assessment survey to assess the quality of services, and an intervention study to enhance hospital-based screening.
Additionally, WHO convened a technical workshop to strengthen data quality for hypertension. Following the workshop, the MoPH and WHO prepared a comprehensive report on best practices and challenges in hypertension control. The report instructs primary care physicians to monitor individuals with raised blood pressure, to make early diagnoses, and to provide effective treatment as per guidelines.

**Thailand achieves hepatitis B control ahead of target**

In 2019, Thailand joined three other countries in becoming the first in the WHO South-East Asia Region to achieve hepatitis B control, with the prevalence of the disease dropping to less than 1% among five-year-old children. The MoPH set out to eliminate hepatitis B in its National Strategy on Viral Hepatitis B Prevention and Control (2017-2021). Thailand achieved this goal ahead of the 2020 Regional target.

Thailand introduced the hepatitis B vaccine nationwide in 1992, including a dose at birth and subsequent doses given at four and six months. Since 2008, a fourth dose was added at two months for all children, while children born to positive mothers receive an additional dose at one month. This achievement is not only the result of the hepatitis B vaccination rollout, but the country’s strong primary health care system and quality health staff, investment in local research and its robust cadre of immunization experts.

**Overcoming challenges on the path to measles and rubella elimination**

In 2019, Thailand recorded more than 3000 cases of measles and 24 deaths.

In response to the ongoing outbreak, an intensive immunization campaign was carried out in 2018 and 2019, with WHO support. This was followed by a nationwide selective “catch-up” campaign targeting half a million children aged one to 12-years-old that began in September 2019 and will be completed in early 2020. This will be followed by a campaign for 1.1 million young adults.

Moreover, since 2018 WHO has been assisting the MoPH to enhance its surveillance by supporting three consultants who work as technical officers at the Ministry.

In late 2019, the WHO Country Office conducted an international measles and rubella monitoring visit which examined Thailand’s measles and rubella control programme. The experts documented good practices and identified emerging lessons. WHO will continue to support the MoPH in closing the immunity gap in adults and strengthen measles and rubella surveillance on the country’s path towards elimination.

**Strengthening emergency preparedness**

In 2019, Thailand became the first country in WHO South-East Asia Region to get WHO classification for its EMT. The classification followed two days of intense evaluation by a team of experts from WHO Regional Office, the Ministry of Health of Indonesia, Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and the United Kingdom Emergency Medical Team (UK-EMT). This makes Thailand’s EMT the 26th team in the international roster of WHO classified, internationally deployable medical teams. Prior to certification, WHO worked with the country on a variety of activities including carrying out a sensitization workshop; training of potential EMT members; holding an EMT Coordination Cell workshop in Bangkok supported by WHO headquarters and the Regional Office for ASEAN countries; several mentor visits; logistics support; and two pre-verification assessment missions.
Addressing environmental health, including AMR

In alignment with the WHO CCS, the Country Office continue to provide technical and financial support throughout 2019 to address AMR through national working groups, workshops and meetings. Such activities focused on developing antimicrobial stewardship competency and competency assessment in pharmacists; mapping AMR research across sectors; monitoring of knowledge and awareness of antibiotics and antimicrobial resistance in the Thai population; and strengthening surveillance of antimicrobial consumption in all sectors.

Meanwhile, with IPC a key pillar of the National Strategic Plan on AMR, a nationwide assessment of IPC capacities at the health care facility level was carried out with WHO support. The country is also in the process of preparing to launch an initiative for Integrated AMR Management in hospitals which will link together work on IPC, AMR surveillance and antimicrobial stewardship with an overarching governance mechanism in health care facilities.

Advancing Thailand’s research agenda

The WHO Country Office provided invaluable technical input at a meeting of ASEAN experts on Zika virus preparedness and response, which was hosted by Thailand.

Throughout the year, WHO provided significant financial and technical support for Zika research, including a Zika virus pregnancy cohort and neonatal follow-up study, a nested vector control study and several other epidemiological investigations. The pregnancy cohort study is expected to provide information about rates of Zika virus infection in pregnancy in Thailand, as well as rates of related neonatal abnormalities.

Promoting health and well-being

WHO supported the sixth International Trade and Health Conference on November 19–20 in Bangkok under the theme, “ASEAN trade and health: seeking a common ground towards SDGs.” The conference discussed linkages between international trade and health and its implications for ASEAN countries.

The conference identified priority research topics in several areas including: improved data on cross-border flows of health workers, health services, patients and finances; retrospective case studies on implementation and effects of trade policies on access to health services in different countries; non-health products with health impacts including the implementation of interventions to mitigate the adverse effects of tobacco, alcohol and unhealthy food; and the implementation of global and regional consensus agreements such as the ASEAN agreement on transboundary haze pollution.
Over the past two decades, the prevalence of overweight and obesity in Thailand has increased dramatically. Increasing tax on SSB is promoted by WHO as a “best-buy” intervention to help reduce sugar consumption and obesity.

In 2017, the MoF implemented a progressive tax on SSB containing more than 6 g /100 ml of sugar. In October 2019, the SSB tax rate increased as per the progressive SSB tax which dictates some adjustment every two years.

Over the course of the years, WHO has supported the initiative by conducting high-level advocacy, engaging with the beverage industry at public forums, issuing media statements and providing technical support.

The impact of this tax has been profound. For one, it encouraged the industry to reformulate its products and the number of SSB products with lower sugar content has increased (See Figure). Secondly, one year after implementing the tax, SSB prices increased by 11% and the sugar content in SSB declined by 9.6%.

Thailand takes strong action to curb road traffic accidents

In 2019, Thailand took strong measures in its bid to reduce road traffic injuries and deaths. Importantly, the Royal Thai Police amended the Road Traffic Act in 2019 and introduced a demerit point system. The Country Office supported this move by sharing international best practices, providing training on road safety legislation and engaging with the media to promote this system introduction. WHO successfully advocated for the demerit point system to include key risk factors such as drink-driving, non-helmet use, non-seatbelt use and speeding. Drivers will be given 12 points every year and if they reach zero, the driving license will be withheld for 90 days.

Meanwhile, the Country Office worked with WHO headquarters and the Regional Office to host the launch of the ASEAN-WHO South-East Asia Regional Network for Road Safety Legislators in Bangkok in August 2019. A Thai Senator was elected as the chair of the network and subsequently the parliament established a Committee on Road Safety in the Senate and a Sub-Committee on Road Safety within the Standing Committee on Transport in the House of Representatives, following WHO support.
These developments provided Thai legislators with an opportunity to learn from countries where parliamentarians have played major roles in developing road safety measures. WHO hosted a seminar in late 2019 on “Accelerating road safety towards sustainable transport: the role of parliamentarians” – the first parliamentarians from various sectors gathered to discuss the urgency of reducing road traffic deaths and injuries.

Meanwhile, in 2019 the country established the Thailand Science Research and Innovation Office in attempt to advance the use of evidence for developing social, economic and environmental-related policies. Following WHO-led advocacy, road safety was chosen as one of the 22 flagships of the Office. Funding was committed for road safety research 2020-2022, with the aim to reduce deaths by 5% yearly. Lastly, through the WHO CCS priority programme on road safety, a blueprint for road safety information and management systems was developed. The implementation of the blueprint will contribute to greater availability of data, data quality improvement and collaboration across various data collecting agencies.

Partnerships

The WHO Country Office continues to engage with a wide range of national and international partners. Examples of this in 2019 include the following:

WHO partnered with UNDP to convene a national consultation on “NCDs and SDGs” and developed policy briefs for non-health ministries on the impact of NCDs on health and development. In collaboration with UNICEF, WHO encouraged the MoPH to prioritize action on reducing childhood obesity.

WHO provided technical support to the Royal Thai Police to improve the Road Traffic Act to meet international best practices. As the majority of road traffic deaths and injuries in Thailand occur among young motorcycle riders, WHO provided technical advice to the Ministry of Transport in its efforts to introduce policies for motorcycle safety.

The Country Office also collaborated with the Embassy Friends of Road Safety, an alliance of embassies in Thailand to address concerns on road traffic deaths and injuries. In 2019, the group was led by the Belgium Embassy and continued to engage WHO in advocating for road safety. The British Embassy also supported the WHO-led initiative by enabling the sharing of road safety experiences from the UK to Thai parliamentarians.

Looking ahead

In 2020 and beyond, WHO will focus on CCS priority areas by utilizing support from all three levels of WHO. Some of the major initiatives and activities planned for 2020 include:

- Developing a Migrant Health Insurance Newsletter as an information and advocacy channel.
- Supporting the MoPH to close the measles immunization gap in the deep south provinces, along with young adults and migrants.
- Promoting legislation to restrict the marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages to children, and promoting simple hypertension treatment protocols.
- Generating evidence to implement more effective front-of-pack cigarette package labelling.
- Spearheading the 2nd National Forum on AMR.
- Advocating for motorcycle safety proved measures, such as motorcycle dedicated lanes, anti-lock braking system (ABS) and 100% helmet-use.