



Note for the Record

Second Meeting of the United Nations Thematic Working Group on Noncommunicable Diseases, 10 October 2019, Bangkok, Thailand

Introduction

The second meeting of the United Nations Thematic Working Group (UNTWG) on noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) was held on Thursday 10 October 2019 from 1.30 PM to 3.30 PM at the UN Conference Centre in Bangkok, Thailand. The meeting was co-chaired by Ms Deirdre Boyd, UN Resident Co-ordinator for Thailand and Dr Suwannachai Wattanayingcharoenchai, Director General, Department of Disease Control, Ministry of Public Health. The list of attendees is attached.

The UNTWG was established on 5 April 2019 to jointly address the serious threat of NCDs in Thailand. The UNTWG is a unique partnership that brings together government ministries, civil society organizations and UN agencies to discuss progress and challenges related to the implementation of the recommendations of the United Nations Inter Agency Task Force (UNIATF) Mission (28-30 August 2018).

Agenda 1: Update/progress on implementation of UNIATF recommendations

Key updates/progress with reference to UNIATF recommendations¹:

- # 1.1: The national NCD multisectoral committee will be chaired by the new health minister who is also the Deputy Prime Minister. This is a good opportunity to increase engagement of various government ministries for the NCD issues.
- # 1.2: UNDP will convene a multisectoral seminar on 27 November to discuss the linkages between NCDs and SDGs and to identify appropriate actions by different sectors.
- # 1.6: ThaiHealth in collaboration with seven national health agencies is developing the concept for a learning hub for global health, universal health coverage and health promotion. This includes designing learning programmes, tools and activities with a focus on strengthening the capacity of change agents and networks across nations.
- # 2.2: UNEP in collaboration with the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment and Chulabhorn Research Institute conducted and disseminated results of a study on health and economic impact assessment of air pollution in Thailand. The findings of the study will be used for continued advocacy for driving actions to control air pollution.
- # 2.3: MoPH has built a policy forum for sodium reduction, which includes participation from the civil society. The main objective of the forum is to identify critical barriers in policy development and implementation and take targeted action to address the barriers. UNAIDS conducted a situation assessment of NCDs among people living with HIV. This will help to better understand the interface between NCDs and HIV and should facilitate engaging a larger number of civil society organisations in the NCD agenda.
- # 3.1: Ministry of Finance increased the tax on “roll your own” tobacco from 1 October 2019. A UN joint press release for the World No Tobacco day (31 May), touching on increased tobacco taxation, was issued as a partnership initiative of WHO, UNDP and the RC’s office.

¹ <https://www.who.int/thailand/activities/catalyzing-multisectoral-actions-to-reduce-ncds-risk--factors>

- # 3.2. Ministry of Finance progressively increased the tax on sugary beverages (as planned) from 1 October 2019.
- # 3.4: Ministry of Public Health enforced the plain packaging regulation with effect from 10 September 2019.
- # 4.4: UNICEF jointly with WHO, FAO and WFP convened a partners' meeting on 6 September to highlight the emerging burden of childhood obesity and the need to ban inappropriate marketing to children of unhealthy food and beverages. A technical working group will continue working on drafting the scope of the regulation in consultation with stakeholders.

Action points:

- WHO to explore and support assigning ThaiHealth as a global collaborating centre for health promotion
- UN agencies to continue supporting government ministries and civil society in implementing the UNIATF recommendations.

Agenda 2. Promoting healthy lifestyles in educational settings

Key observations/discussion points

- Since 2008, the Office of Basic Education Commission, Ministry of Education has sent out a series of letters to all education institutions requesting for cooperation to ban carbonated and sugary food and drinks in schools.
- A major challenge is that the policy is on a voluntary basis and currently implemented only in a limited number of public schools.
- Available evidence shows that voluntary measures are not effective in implementing public policies. Given the dramatic rise in obesity and other NCD risk factors, stronger measures are needed to curb the availability of unhealthy food and beverages in educational institutions.

Action points:

- MoPH and MoE to work together with support from UN agencies to move forward a ministerial regulation to ban the sale of carbonated and sugary drinks in all educational facilities.

Agenda 3. Promoting healthy lifestyles in organization settings—proposal for adoption of healthy lifestyle policies by government and UN agencies

Key observations/discussion points

- In the context of UNIATF recommendation # 1.5 (to identify champions in health and non-health sectors), and to set a good example for Thai youth to adopt healthy lifestyles, it was proposed that government agencies, especially the ministry of public health and the UN set an example for promoting healthy behaviours. For example:
 - *Ensure that all government and UN premises are smoke free*
 - *Ensure that all government and UN premises are alcohol free*
 - *All functions/receptions of UN and Thai Government are smoke free and alcohol free*
 - *Cafeterias and meetings/receptions to serve more healthy food options which are low in salt, sugar and fat, and high on vegetables and fruits*
 - *Offer options for subsidizing healthy food in cafeterias*

- *Serve and subsidize healthy beverages such as water and avoid serving sugary drinks*
- *Include appropriate breaks during meetings, with opportunities for physical activity*

Action points:

- MoPH will invite public and private organizations to participate in a competitive campaign for adopting healthy lifestyles at work places. The UN will come up with a note on actions taken/suggested guidelines for reducing NCD risk factors within UN premises.

Agenda 4. Tobacco control—burden and challenges

Key discussion points

- Tobacco use continues to impose a high health and economic toll. New products such as e-cigarettes are posing a serious threat to the nation's youth.
- Amidst much industry pressure, the Prime Minister showed great leadership by supporting the ban on e-cigarettes, citing the need to prevent harm to children and young people.
- There are strong laws for tobacco control but their enforcement is weak.
- Currently half of all smokers in Thailand use "roll your own" tobacco or RYO. Even though tax on cigarettes has increased over the years and is nearly 75% of retail value (as recommended by WHO), smokers switch to RYO cigarettes, which are much less expensive.
- More investment is needed by the government to support smokers to quit tobacco use and ratify the WHO FCTC Protocol to Eliminate Illicit Trade in Tobacco Products.

Action points:

- UN agencies to continue to advocate and provide technical support to the government for prioritizing tobacco control with proper budget allocation, better enforcement of laws, investing in tobacco cessation, adopting a single tax rate, and acceding to the WHO FCTC Protocol to Eliminate Illicit Trade in Tobacco Products.

Agenda 5. Closing and next steps

Key discussion points:

- Progress to address NCDs is stalled by industry interference and political inertia.
- It is important to communicate the findings of the UNTWG to the Prime Minister through appropriate channels, such as through the national NCD multisectoral committee, or by arranging another meeting with the Prime Minister, as appropriate.

Action points:

- Secretariat to circulate the minutes of the second UNTWG meeting
- Partners to continue meeting informally to make progress on implementing the UNAIDS recommendations
- The third UNTWG meeting will be hosted by ThaiHealth on Thursday, 2 April 2020

Annex: List of participants

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