

# Thailand's commitment to global cooperation on NCDs: acting together now



The Third UN High-Level Meeting on Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) at the UN General Assembly in 2018 was a watershed moment for global cooperation on NCDs.<sup>1</sup> It was the first gathering of heads of state and government to discuss the critical issues associated with NCDs since the member states of the UN committed to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015.

Premature deaths from NCDs, though tragic, are largely preventable. NCDs account for 15 million premature deaths across the world each year.<sup>2</sup> In Thailand, NCDs are responsible for 71% of all deaths.<sup>3</sup> The probability of premature deaths from cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes, and chronic respiratory disease in Thailand is 16%.<sup>3</sup> NCDs, therefore, are exerting a serious toll on our economies and societies—a situation that is likely to worsen if we do not act now.<sup>4</sup>

As was the case with HIV/AIDS, national responses towards NCDs require cooperation from all sectors, with the government, private sector, and civil society working closely together. Thailand's well documented and successful response to dealing with the HIV/AIDS epidemic included ending mother-to-child transmission of HIV as well as syphilis.<sup>5,6</sup> The response to HIV/AIDS required us to challenge and then change established social norms and behaviours. The Royal Thai Government is thus committed to ensuring that the same happens in the case of NCDs.

The World Health Assembly endorsed a set of evidence-based best buys and cost-effective interventions to tackle social and commercial determinants of NCDs. These can provide global leaders with a clear template on what to do.<sup>7</sup> What is most important now is how these interventions are implemented, and the responsibility for implementation lies with every national government. Almost all these interventions require multisectoral cooperation that extends beyond the health sector.

In Thailand, the Prime Minister's Office is now leading the NCD response, bringing together organisations from education, agriculture, law enforcement, finance, transport, academia, and civil society. In August, 2018, the Royal Thai Government hosted a joint UN mission, under the Interagency Task Force on the Prevention and Control

of NCDs, where ten UN agencies worked together with national experts to identify the challenges and priorities for governments in sharing lessons on how to implement effective national NCD multisectoral action plans, which also included discussions on the development of a stronger UN response to NCDs in Thailand.

The latest WHO Progress Monitor suggests that Thailand has done well when it comes to developing effective policies and plans for NCDs.<sup>8</sup> However, our challenge is to move beyond policies to focus on implementation. The Royal Thai Government is now working with industry and communities to reduce the amount of salt that Thai people are consuming, as levels of sodium intake in Thailand are over twice the WHO recommended levels.<sup>9</sup> The Royal Thai Government is also steadily increasing taxes on tobacco and alcohol. Recently, we introduced a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs) as a way of reducing the consumption of unhealthy drinks,<sup>10</sup> while the industry in Thailand is already responding by reducing levels of sugar in SSBs.<sup>11</sup> We are working to remove tiers on cigarette taxes and to increase taxes on shredded tobacco. The Royal Thai Government has also announced a ban on trans fat in domestic and imported food products that will take effect from Jan 9, 2019. Correspondingly, the Cabinet of the Royal Thai Government has taken on the role of a national promoter for bolstering physical activity

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For the United Nations  
Interagency Task Force on the  
Prevention and Control of  
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[www.who.int/ncds/un-task-force](http://www.who.int/ncds/un-task-force)



Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha at an event to encourage Thais to use bicycles in their daily lives

to increase public awareness about the benefits of living active lifestyles.

The Cabinet has also passed tighter regulations on tobacco control. We have seen tobacco use decrease from 32% in the early 1990s, to under 20% in 2017.<sup>12</sup> We have also recognised the dedicated efforts by anti-tobacco movements and civil society organisations to achieve these results, as they have worked relentlessly to achieve such high public health goals. They have provided leadership and wisdom to ensure that solid policies are developed and implemented through powerful social movements. We are fortunate that many of our public health experts and social leaders continue to champion the fight against NCDs, and we look forward to more joining the national response, working, for example, with the Thai Health Promotion Foundation.

The Thai people are immensely proud of their health-care system and we will continue with our commitment to invest in universal health coverage (UHC). Our evidence shows that UHC not only provides health security to all, but also helps prevent poverty and overwhelming expenditures from medical bills, while at the same time encouraging consumption and stimulating the economy.<sup>13,14</sup> Thailand, therefore, considers UHC as an investment rather than as a financial burden for the country. However, without accelerating efforts to prevent NCDs, the costs of treatments could ultimately jeopardise the sustainability of our UHC. While health promotion and disease prevention have been part of the Thai UHC scheme since 2001, it is crucial that we act even more in this area.

The Royal Thai Government is committed to the following: first, to make NCDs a top development agenda and lead the national multisectoral effort by holding government ministries accountable for developing and enforcing legislations; second, to monitor progress on NCDs by reporting to the Cabinet and the public annually; and, third, to invest more in health promotion options that make healthy choices easily available and accessible to people. We in Thailand are convinced that a healthy population is central to the country's development. We remember what Thailand's father of modern medicine and public health, Prince Mahidol, taught us: to put the interests of people before self and commercial interests when it comes to the development and implementation of public policies.

The theme of the next Prince Mahidol Award Conference to be held in Bangkok, between Jan 29 and Feb 3, 2019, will be The Political Economy of NCDs: A Whole of Society Approach. The conference will be the first major opportunity for the global NCD community to learn and share experiences since the UN High-Level Meeting. With the huge social and economic challenges ahead of us stemming from NCDs, we cannot afford not to act now.

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I am the Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Thailand. I declare no other competing interests.

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