Youth at Odds in a Globalized World

Thailand as a Case in Point for Policy Action

Thailand is often cited as a development success for reasons ranging from its smooth transition out of poverty to its proactive stance in combating the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Yet a closer look reveals a more complex situation. In middle-income countries like Thailand, rapid social and economic change is posing a number of challenges and risks for the large generation of young people who are growing up in a globalized world.

Young people in Thailand are struggling to navigate a rapidly changing environment, frequently experimenting as they go. This struggle is reflected in some alarming new trends, such as steadily increasing rates of new HIV infections among 15-24 year olds—in spite of declining rates among other age groups. It is also reflected in fears among parents and teenagers that teens are ill-prepared to succeed in a global economy. At the same time, a "global youth culture" is exposing young people to goods and lifestyles that encourage risk-taking. And while the specifics may vary, many of these by-products of globalization present similar challenges to youth and their parents in other countries undergoing a rapid transformation from one generation to the next.

The largest generation of young people in the history of the world is currently residing in poor and middle income countries. Increased policy attention is needed to help this new generation not only cope, but thrive in the dynamic environment created by globalization and economic development.

National and international policies need to be creative, coordinated, and comprehensive. They need to avert risk behaviors and negative outcomes while encouraging positive investments during this critical stage of life. To be most effective, youth-oriented policies must encompass the full spectrum of issues that affect young people's lives—including school, work, family, health, and leisure. Policies also need to build bridges among young people, parents, and communities.

This policy advisory outlines the research findings and policy recommendations from a study on youth and globalization in Thailand conducted by the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), Mahidol University, and Princeton University.

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Research Findings

1. **Thai youth today are immersed in a culture of risk.**

   a. **Sexual risk taking** for young people is taking new forms.

   - Young men are more aware of the risks associated with visiting sex workers in brothels, but commercial sex now also takes place in karaoke bars or restaurants.

   - Young people are more likely than previous generations to have sex in dating relationships; but young men feel they do not need to use condoms with girlfriends. Consequently, unwanted pregnancies and unsafe abortions are becoming more prevalent among young women.

   b. **Other forms of risk taking** are increasingly common among young people. Global youth culture puts pressure—especially on young men—to use drugs and alcohol, or to join gangs and partake in violent activities.

2. **Thai youth are aggressively oriented toward a global youth culture.**

   - Globalization is fueling consumerism among young people, especially for status symbols such as designer clothes, mobile phones, and motorcycles.

   - Young people are subject to strong pressures from the media and their friends to spend money and experiment with or engage in risky activities.

3. **Youth and adults are concerned that young people do not have the skills, education, and job opportunities needed to succeed in the global economy.**

   - Most parents and youth consider high school and college education to be essential for success in the current economy, but many believe that it is affordable only for the wealthy. Awareness about scholarship options is low.

   - Family finances often mean that young people need to work and attend school at the same time; however, this is not currently an easy combination.

   - A lack of jobs in rural communities forces young people to move to cities, where they often lack social support and are exposed to risks.

4. **Parents and communities are struggling to respond to the needs of youth in the context of globalization.**

   - Many parents lack the resources and wisdom to help their children transition to adulthood in an increasingly complex, modern world.

   - Consumerism, peer pressure, and the desire for goods creates distrust and distance between parents and their children.

   - Healthy youth-oriented activities that can provide alternatives to risky behavior, such as sports or youth clubs, are limited or nonexistent in communities.

Policy Recommendations

1. **Policy initiatives need to address young people's needs across multiple sectors, including health, education, labor, sports, and community development.**

   In many countries, including Thailand, most youth-oriented policies have focused on education, and more recently health because of HIV/AIDS. However, as the research findings indicate, HIV/AIDS is just one outcome of risky behaviors by youth in Thailand. In particular, unwanted pregnancies, drug and alcohol abuse, and violence pose a threat not only to health, but to social stability as well. Moreover, modernization presents challenges for young people on a number of fronts—in terms of economic success, health risks, social support, and leisure—that are interrelated. This requires a comprehensive approach to developing youth programs and substantial inter-agency cooperation across sectors.

2. **Young people need a greater variety of educational and employment opportunities, and information about these opportunities needs to reach the underserved.**

   Government initiatives need to promote a wide range of modern, technical, and vocational skills, and facilitate the combination of schooling with work. They also need to provide non-formal training to young people in their twenties who missed out on the expansion of education opportunities that began in the late 1990s. Young people need access to comprehensive life skills education, including sex education, financial literacy, and money management skills. In addition, it is important that young people and their families, especially in rural areas, are well-informed about schooling and job options and can take advantage of them.

3. **To foster a supportive environment, policy initiatives need to target not only youth, but parents and communities as well.**

   Community development, education, and health initiatives need to strengthen the ability of parents and other adults to support young people through the challenges of growing up in a rapidly modernizing society. Such initiatives also need to promote a wider range of extracurricular activities and social venues for young people, with the support and involvement of communities.

Research for Policy Action: Adolescents and Migration in Thailand

In 2001, three research institutions—two in the U.S. and one in Thailand—initiated a three-year study to examine the impact of globalization on youth in Thailand and propose policy recommendations based on the findings. The International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), the Institute for Population and Social Research (IPSR) at Mahidol University, and the Office of Population Research (OPR) at Princeton University explored the experiences of youth in Kanchanaburi, a province in western Thailand. Extensive data were collected, using participatory and qualitative methodologies, from young people, their parents, and community leaders about the needs of youth and their exposure to risks and opportunities. This work was supported by a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

For more comprehensive findings and recommendations from the study, see *Youth at Odds: Thai Youth's Precarious Futures in a Globalized World.* Institute for Population and Social Research (IPSR), Mahidol University, International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) and the Office of Population Research (OPR), Princeton University. 2005.

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