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# UNICEF'S RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN THAILAND

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## Overview

The COVID-19 pandemic, affecting Thailand and its people for over 18 months, has had a heavy impact on children and young people: affecting their safety, their well-being, and their future. The socio-economic impacts of the containment measures put in place to curb the spread of the virus have further exposed and intensified existing vulnerabilities.

Despite stimulus measures put in place by the Royal Thai Government, an estimated additional 1.5 million people are projected to have fallen in poverty in 2020 due to loss of income, increasing the poverty rate by 2.6 percentage points to 8.8 per cent.<sup>1</sup> The Education Equity Fund (EEF)<sup>2</sup> reports that the number of learners meeting the criteria of being “extremely poor” increased by 30 per cent in the 2020-2021 school year due to the impact of the pandemic on household incomes, severely affecting future education prospects for many children.<sup>3</sup>

Over 13 million children and young people have experienced learning loss due to closures, and over a quarter of respondents to a survey in 2020 said they did not have access to the internet at home, making distance learning a challenge. Approximately 800,000 young children aged 3-5 years are currently unable to access school meals due to the closure of Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres, while nearly 7 million children benefitting from school feeding programmes nationwide face additional risks with schools remaining closed.

Increased isolation, the rise in online interaction, economic hardship, and other stress factors increase the potential of domestic violence, abuse, bullying, and exploitation for women and children. Suicide rates have also increased,<sup>4</sup> including cases of parents who have taken their own lives after being unable to provide for their families. Interpersonal relationships within families and immediate society are being put under increased strain, especially for people of diverse genders.

Unemployment rates, which had remained low for a decade, started to increase significantly in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, increasing from 0.98 in 2019 to 1.69 per cent in 2020, with unemployment among 15-19 and 20-24 year olds particularly high at 9.4 and 7.9 per cent respectively as of the 3rd quarter of 2020.<sup>5</sup>

All of these challenges can be lessened if we come together to provide information and assistance to curb the spread of the disease, invest in child protection services, work to address the socio-economic impacts of lockdown measures, and fight to maintain investments in children and young people. By working together, we can keep millions of girls and boys healthy, safe, and learning. UNICEF is working to ensure that children and young people do not suffer the long term effects of this crisis by working with partners in the public and private sectors, in civil society, and with children and young people themselves to ensure that the many challenges are addressed with sustainable solutions. What we do for, together with, and on behalf of children now, will determine their fate, and that of the nation, for years to come.

UNICEF support is guided by the following **principles**:

1. Ensure that **children, especially the most vulnerable**, receive the necessary **care and support** in response to their needs in these times of crisis.
2. Through partnerships, **complement and support the government, civil society and the private sector** to respond to this crisis and mitigate its impact on children and their families.
3. Lead strong **coordination** of the response with the **wider United Nations** to ensure synergies and maximize the impact of our joint response.
4. Articulate a response that **strengthens public social service systems** in the long run and builds **resilience** in institutions, communities, and families.

1 World Bank Group. 2021. *Thailand Economic Monitor: Restoring Incomes; Recovering Jobs*. World Bank, Bangkok.

2 The EEF provides targeted support to disadvantaged children and students, as well as teacher development, across all levels of education.

3 รายงานสถานการณ์ความเหลื่อมล้ำทางการศึกษาหลัง โควิด-19 | กสศ. (eef.or.th)

4 Statistics from the Department of mental health show a 22 per cent in the first six months of 2020, compared to the same period in the previous year.

5 National Economic and Social Development Council. 2020. *Social Outlook Q4*. (based on Labour Force Survey by the National Statistical Office)



## Risk communication

As COVID-19 has spread, so has misinformation. UNICEF Thailand continues to support the national COVID-19 response plan under the leadership of the Ministry of Public Health, working with the UN system, health experts and with partners to promote facts over fear, and to bring trustworthy guidance to parents, caregivers, community leaders, health workers and educators. We have supported Ministry of Public Health capacity building workshops and outreach on vaccine hesitancy, low vaccine uptake, and concerns over vaccination among pregnant women. To support the Government's communication efforts, UNICEF, in partnership with International Health Policy Program Foundation (IHPP), also conducted research into COVID-19 vaccine acceptance in the Thai population, to better understand and address existing trends. Responses from almost 200,000 people aged 15 and over surveyed in the study revealed that vulnerable and minority groups were at particular risk to misinformation.

A new COVID-19 [landing site](#) was set up to reach children, young people and their families, with trustworthy information, podcasts, videos, toolkits on how to stay healthy, and to find support on mental health issues. A series of booklets with information on risk prevention and reduction, as well as on home isolation, were distributed to vulnerable communities. A children's activity booklet explained how to stay away from germs and viruses, and UNICEF hosted Facebook live events provided young people with the chance to discuss their concerns with health professionals.

In addition to nationwide campaigns, more recent efforts have focused on vulnerable populations. UNICEF has supported the COVID-19 prevention **training of 8,000 community members** in high-risk poor urban areas in 9 provinces.



Almost  
**425,000** people across  
**23** provinces were reached with  
targeted messaging on health and  
preventive measures in 2020.

UNICEF COVID-19 related content on social  
media reached people almost **60 million**  
times, with over **2.3 million**  
**engagements** recorded.

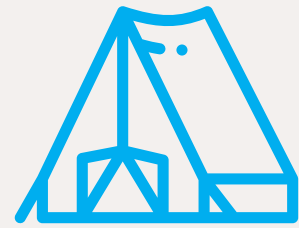
Facebook posts, press releases, public  
service announcements (PSAs), and  
podcasts produced by UNICEF staff and  
volunteers provided critical information on  
sanitation, social distancing, and other  
life-saving information.

**180,000** children and adults were  
reached with **20,000** copies of a  
home isolation booklet prepared by UNICEF  
in partnership with WHO and IOM in Thai,  
Burmese, Khmer, and Lao to target  
vulnerable migrant communities.

# Supplies

Turning words into action, UNICEF support has also centred around providing vital supplies to enable vulnerable children and their families to protect themselves and to flourish. Throughout the crisis we ensured that children and young people, in the community, and in facilities such as juvenile training centres, observation and protection centres, welfare and protection centres, migrant learning centres as well as schools for children with disabilities, had adequate food and non-food items including hygiene supplies and learning supplies. Staff and volunteers were also provided with protective equipment.

As prevention turned to cure, and with the generous support of donors, we provided the Thai health services with cold chain equipment including fridges and freezers for the storage of vaccines, and with oxygen concentrators for the treatment of severely affected COVID-19 patients.



**With the help of local civil society partners and generous donors, hygiene supplies and relief items were provided to:**

over **210,000** children in ECD centres, schools, residential care facilities, and juvenile detention/training centres nationwide

almost **30,000** migrant families and over **25,000** migrant children in 128 migrant learning centres, 68 private residential care homes and in 120 migrant shelters

over **200,000** children and families in disadvantaged and vulnerable situations in the slum areas of Bangkok, in construction camps, in markets and in high-risk areas in the surrounding provinces.



**550** oxygen concentrators  
were delivered to hospitals and field  
hospitals in severely affected areas.

## Social protection/policy

Beyond initial response, and in order to better advocate on behalf of children and families struggling as a result of the socio-economic downturn, we collaborated with UNDP to carry out a major socio-economic impact assessment to inform the national contingency masterplan on the government's COVID-19 response. Partnership with UNFPA and UN Women on a needs assessment and gap analysis on gender-based violence under COVID-19 identified key areas for multi-agency collaboration. Together with the results from several large-scale online surveys on the economic and social impact of COVID-19 targeting families with young children, children living without their biological parents (Children Left Behind) and young people, UNICEF was better able to understand the impact faced by these vulnerable groups, informing UNICEF's response plan and advocacy with other stakeholders.

The increase in number of 'extremely poor' children and young people due to the impact of the pandemic on household incomes, is of great concern. Helping the Government to provide a safety net for those most affected by the economic fall-out has been a key focus of our efforts since the start of the crisis. At the onset of the crisis, and in co-operation with the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security (MSDHS), ILO, IOM and UN Women, successful UNICEF advocacy, putting social protection front and centre of COVID-19 response, resulted in a scaling up of existing social transfers including the Child Support Grant (CSG), the Disability Grant and the Old Age Allowance, and in over 800,000 children continuing to receive school lunches, ensuring access to nutrition under lockdown. Following consistent UNICEF advocacy, efforts to connect families to life-saving services continued in 2021, with the recently announced government scheme to provide a one-time grant of 2,000THB (+/-US\$60) per student to families in need nationwide to cover income loss, alongside a scheme to mitigate the rise in costs associated with distance learning (such as internet use).



**Data** collected from almost **80,000 vulnerable families, children and young people**, surveyed in collaboration with the National Statistical Office and partners, improved understanding of the many **impacts of COVID-19** allowing to better assess needs and target responses.

**Over 8 million beneficiaries, including 1.4 million vulnerable children** under six benefitted from the emergency top-up of the CSG, receiving transfers of 1,000 Thai baht (approximately US\$32) for three months during the COVID-19 crisis.

## Early Childhood Development (ECD)

The COVID-19 crisis could have lifelong consequences for children. Protecting vulnerable young children, and enabling them to thrive, is a priority. Fear in communities has heightened as cases have risen, and the well-being of children is affected by a lack of access to services and the loss of, or separation from, family members. Mothers have been fearful to breastfeed in case of contamination. Promoting facts over fear, we published guidelines on minimizing family separation which were widely reproduced in the media alongside recommendations regarding safe breastfeeding for mothers during the crisis.

The closure of early learning centres and schools has meant not only a loss of learning, but also the inability of young children in need to access school lunches. We successfully advocated with the Department of Local Authorities to maintain continuity of school lunches during closures, supported the safe re-opening of over 18,000 ECD centres, and the development and dissemination of Safe School guidelines, along with orientation of teachers and caregivers.

Keeping young children learning despite the closures has also been a priority, and we have teamed up with partners to distribute education supplies, in the form of *Magic Boxes* containing learning materials and toys. These are critical for young children's development and resilience as they support children's creativity, self-confidence, communication skills, and cognitive functioning, especially in highly stressful situations such as the COVID-19 crisis.

Successive waves of COVID-19 outbreaks in Thailand have put a strain on health services, challenging their ability to provide essential care to young children and parenting guidance, both in urban and rural communities. To ensure a continuity of care, UNICEF worked with implementing partners and their volunteer networks to provide capacity building for health staff and volunteers, providing foundational training in first aid, case management, and childcare and parenting skills, thus bridging the gap.



**650,000** children reached and supported by UNICEF guidelines and empowerment of teachers and caregivers.

**8,360** vulnerable children under 6 in low-income and migrant communities in high risk provinces severely affected by COVID-19 reached with UNICEF Magic Boxes.



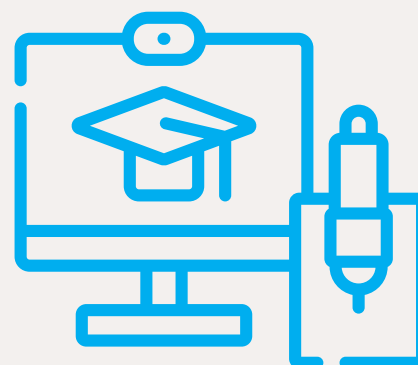


## Education

Lockdown measures put in place to stop the spread and lessen the effects of COVID-19 triggered an end to face to face contacts, affected learning for over 13 million children and adolescents, while at the same time highlighting the need for digital access in homes across the country and the importance of a more resilient and inclusive education system which can respond effectively to changing circumstances.

In co-operation with the EEF, UNESCO, and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), UNICEF consistently advocated for mitigating the impact of COVID-19 on education, addressing the digital divide, and safe re-opening of schools. Addressing weaknesses across the school system exposed by the pandemic, aiming to build back better, UNICEF and partners consulted over **30,000 young people**, teachers, parents and administrators, and worked to develop a draft national curriculum and a skills framework highlighting core competencies, including digital skills required to improve use of remote technologies nationwide.

Migrant children and youth have been particularly affected by the side-effects of the COVID-19 crisis. All except one of 63 migrant learning centres (MLC) in Tak province, (which hosts close to 10,000 children), have remained closed since March 2020 due to the ongoing outbreak. UNICEF provided almost **8,500 children** from MLC's with material support (including wifi routers, internet packages, thermal scanners, stationery, floor mats, audio speakers, printing of and distribution of worksheets) to support home-based learning.



Over **10** million children

are benefitting from Safe School Guidance, an Operations Resource pack and a Teacher's Manual developed with national education authorities to ensure they enjoy a safe and healthy return to school.

UNICEF leveraged ongoing work with the ICT teachers' network in the Southern Border Provinces and **built capacity of 150 teachers** on **use of remote technologies to support 6,000 students.**

In a comprehensive health project in Bangkok and Chiang Mai, **228 youth** from schools and communities were empowered as **peer educators** to deliver health promotion and risk reduction messaging while providing referral to necessary services.



## Adolescent and Young People's development

Adolescents and young people have been deeply affected by the ongoing COVID-19 crisis. Repeated lockdowns and resulting school closures have meant an increase in the dropout rate and have forced millions of young people to spend prolonged periods of time at home. Mental health and psychosocial wellbeing, especially of adolescents, remains an urgent priority. Several surveys conducted in 2020 to understand the impact of COVID-19, indicate that mental health is among the top concerns. 7 in 10 children and young people felt the pandemic had affected their mental health, causing stress, worry, and anxiety.



In 2020 **Lovecarestation** extended reach to more than **1.8 million persons**, a 42 per cent rise in use, and more than **30,000 adolescents and young people** received online counselling services. Over the past 2 years the website received over **8 million pageviews**, with approximately **4 million unique users** accessing adolescent health information.

We therefore put an emphasis on psychosocial support, extending services on [Lovecaresation.com](https://lovecaresation.com), an online platform for sexual and mental health, to provide easy access to information and online counselling sessions. Facebook lives sessions with medical professionals reached almost **9,000 people**. In collaboration with Government and private sector partners, we organised *The Sound of Happiness* campaign, to overcome stigma attached to mental health issues by bringing to life the voices and experiences of people who struggled with mental health challenges during their youth, while promoting current services and platforms for adolescents to seek professional help. A new mobile application called *HERO* (Health and Education Reintegrating Operation) was piloted to connect schools and hospitals, strengthening mental health screening and referral systems.

Giving agency to young people as active participants in society is central to our philosophy. Since the start of the crisis, the 'I Am UNICEF' volunteering platform mobilised almost **18,000 supporters** and engaged volunteers in various opportunities such as COVID-19 response, support to adolescent mental health, and raising community awareness to end violence against children.

Building on an existing programme, **63 migrant youth leaders** were empowered to provide preventative information and psychosocial support on COVID-19 to more than **2,000 caretakers, children, and youth** in migrant communities in Chiang Mai province. In a comprehensive health project in Bangkok and Chiang Mai, **228 youth** from schools and communities were empowered as peer educators to deliver health promotion and risk reduction messaging while providing referral to necessary services.



Podcasts and songs specially produced for ***The Sound of Happiness*** campaign, aimed at **raising awareness of adolescent mental health** received more than **5,000,000 views**.

Mental Health promotion materials produced for COVID-19 response received more than **500,000 views**.

**4,400 people** viewed a UNICEF Facebook Live session entitled ***"SOS: Secret of Success"*** aimed at providing tips for adolescents to overcome learning difficulties and a space for discussion on ways for young people to **cope with mental health issues**.

**4,500 people** viewed a UNICEF Facebook live event entitled ***"Money matters"*** aimed at engaging young people in learning and discussing the need for **new skills** (in this case saving and investing money) in the **post-COVID-19 era**.

## Child protection

As communities are disrupted, children already at risk of violence, exploitation and abuse will find themselves even more vulnerable. Lockdowns, family loss of income, and existing issues of mental health lead to concern of a possible increase in violence against children. UNICEF is working to prevent this pandemic from turning into a crisis of child protection.

UNICEF developed Guidance for government personnel on child protection in the community during COVID-19 with several ministries (Social Development and Human Security, Public Health, Interior and Education) and ensured its distribution nationwide. Together with the national health authorities we also supported the development of Guidelines for the protection of children in state care nationwide, as well as in over 200 registered private residential care facilities.

Regular internet use during lockdown, and later as part of school learning, poses additional risks for online abuse. UNICEF supported the development of Guidance and a framework to protect children from sexual abuse and violence during COVID-19 along with Guidance for mobile operators and online content providers, aimed at helping to keep children safe off-and-online during COVID-19. We also distributed online safety tips to families. UNICEF continues to

strengthen existing hotlines and helplines, providing child protection counselling and case management through regular monitoring of the services.

UNICEF supported capacity strengthening for NGOs in child protection and psychosocial first-aid, starting new partnerships with Friends International and Proud Association to support risk communication, community engagement (RCCE) activities, and to provide in person psychological first aid and children's activities in major migrant communities in Bangkok and other severely affected provinces during the second wave.

When children tested positive in the community, UNICEF advocated against unnecessary separation of children from families, and together with local authorities, we also supported the establishment and management of community isolation protocols, including through case management and provision of equipment and supplies.

The recent Foster care initiative will support the Department of Children and Youth in providing foster grants and Antigen Test Kits (ATK) for 300 kinship and foster families taking care of children separated from their families due to COVID-19.



Almost **20,000** children benefit from Guidelines for the protection of children in residential care.

**8,193** online counselling sessions were conducted (with Child Line Foundation) through ChildLine hotlines/helplines providing psychological first aid, child protection counselling and support (including referrals).



## Accelerating the COVID-19 Recovery

Building community resilience approaches to address physical, social, and economic vulnerabilities is a key part of our plans for a post-COVID-19 recovery that reduces vulnerability to future disasters. Our approach will focus on:

- implementing parenting programmes focusing on family strengthening
- continuing to facilitate psychological First Aid for children and families in homes and communities
- implementing child protection case management to include migrant and stateless children and online protection.

We will also prioritise the strengthening of sustainable systems to support the rights of children and young people and build opportunities to fulfil their potential. Efforts will target:

- education workforce strengthening & strengthening systems for equity
- adolescent health
- promoting participation of networks of marginalized young people
- innovative skills building programmes including modernizing Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) for young people
- local ecosystems for cultivating youth employability and social entrepreneurship.

## Partnerships

Much of our work relies on collaboration with partners, with the Royal Thai Government, with civil society organisations and within the UN family. Implementing partners at the grass roots level within vulnerable communities have enabled us to continue to reach the most vulnerable children and their families.

Working with a series of implementing partners meant that UNICEF was able to organise several surveys, canvassing vulnerable groups such as families with young children, children left behind (CLB), young people, and poor families in the Southern Border Provinces (SBP), the data from which was used to contribute to national policy discussions for the Thai National Economic and Social Development Council (NESDC) contingency masterplan on COVID-19.

With benefits beyond the pandemic, the following partners were instrumental in outreach and advocacy efforts:

### Royal Thai Government

- Bangkok Metropolitan Administration
- Education Equity Fund
- Ministry of Education, The Office of the Permanent Secretary, The Office of Basic Education Commission, The Office of the Education Council
- Ministry of Information and Communication Technology, National Statistical Office
- Ministry of Interior, Department of Local Administration
- Ministry of Justice, Department of Juvenile Observation and Protection
- Ministry of Public Health, Department of Mental Health, Department of Health Service Support and Department of Health
- Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, Department of Children and Youth
- Tak Provincial Social Development and Human Security Office
- Southern Border Provinces Administration Centre

### Civil Society Organizations and Academia

- Childline Thailand Foundation
- Diocesan Social Action Centre of Suratthani Catholic Foundation
- Foundation for Children with Disabilities
- Friends International
- Help Without Frontiers
- Holt Sahathai Foundation
- International Health Policy Program Foundation
- Klongtoey DJung (Komol Foundation)
- Mind Venture
- One Sky Foundation
- Path2Health Foundation
- Planned Parenthood Association of Thailand
- Prince of Songkla University, Pattani Campus
- Proud Association
- Raks Thai Foundation
- Right to Play Thailand Foundation
- Save the Children Thailand
- The Children and Youth Council of Thailand
- The Foundation for Rural Youth
- The Foundation for Slum Childcare
- The Institute of Population and Social Research
- The Life Skills Development Foundation
- The Migrant Workers Rights Network
- The Thai Red Cross Society
- The Thailand Development Research Institute
- World Vision Thailand

UNICEF is working with the generous support of institutional, corporate, and individual donors to support children, young people, and families affected by COVID-19. This support is more important than ever as together we seek to build a brighter future for the children and young people of Thailand, despite these difficult times.

Generous contributions have helped in: the delivery of preventive messaging; the purchase and distribution of supplies including cold chain equipment (including freezers and fridges for the storage of vaccines) and oxygen concentrators; procuring *Magic Boxes*; procuring tablets for institutionalised young people to communicate with their families while isolated; the training of healthcare workers; the establishment of community isolation facilities; counselling for young people; and advocacy efforts.

We would like to thank the following donors for their continued support:

- USAID
- The Government of Japan
- Unilever
- Google
- SC Johnson





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