

# **Thailand Progress on Sustainable Development**

## **Goals 4, 5, 8, 11 and 13: policy and literature review**

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## OVERVIEW

In the 2024 Sustainable Development Report, Thailand is ranked 45th out of 167 countries, with an SDG Index Score of 74.7. This score is above the average for countries in East and South Asia (66.5), showing that Thailand performs better than many others in the region in terms of progress toward the 17 goals (Sachs et al., 2024). Meanwhile, Thailand's Spillover Score is 87.4, which reflects how the country's policies and consumption patterns affect other countries' ability to achieve the SDGs. A higher score means fewer negative impacts, such as pollution embedded in imported or exported harmful goods. Thailand's high score suggests it has relatively limited negative effects on other countries as it works on its own goals (Sachs et al., 2024).

### **RQ 1: What progress has the UK and Thailand made on meeting key SDGs relevant to our themes? (Goal 4, 5, 8, 11, 13)**

#### **GOAL 4 – QUALITY EDUCATION**

According to the Thailand Ministry of Education (2024), Thailand has taken steps to improve access to quality education for all people. The government provides 15 years of free education from kindergarten through high school. The program includes support for tuition, learning materials, school uniforms, and other costs. These efforts help reduce the financial burden on families and give more children a chance to go to school (Ministry of Education Thailand, 2024). Many national plans support education. These include the 20-Year National Strategy (2018–2037), the 13th National Economic and Social Development Plan (2023–2027), and the National Education Plan (2017–2036). These plans aim to improve education quality, teacher development, and curriculum updates. They also focus on making sure students gain skills that match labor market needs.

One key factor is that access to early childhood education has improved. From 2016 to 2019, the rate of children enrolled in early learning increased from 84.7% to 86.3%. Graduation rates for primary and lower secondary education also went up. In 2019, 98.2% of students completed primary school, and 96.9% finished lower secondary school. However, upper

secondary graduation dropped slightly, from 81.7% in 2016 to 78.6% in 2019. Gender parity improved during this period across all education levels (Ministry of Education Thailand, 2024).

To support students who dropped out, the government launched the “Bring Students Back to School” project in 2020. This project helps locate and identify children who have left school or are at risk of leaving. It connects these students with flexible learning programs to bring them back into the system. The Ministry of Education works with local education offices to carry out this program. To follow up with students, officials visit their homes and utilize local data. In 2021 and 2022, the project helped thousands of students return to school. Another policy, called “Thailand Zero Dropout,” started in 2024. It focuses on using many types of data and creating a referral system to completely stop school dropouts. The policy is supported by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Interior. It involves provincial governors and education officers in each province. The goal is to create a system where no student is left out of education, no matter their background or location (Ministry of Education Thailand 2024, pp. 2–3).

Thailand has also worked to improve vocational and higher education. Policies now support more flexible and practical learning. This includes internships, workplace training, and active learning models. One example is the competency-based curriculum, which focuses on helping students gain skills that match labor market needs. This curriculum includes both classroom learning and real work experience. The government also created the National Credit Bank. It allows students to collect learning credits from different places, including formal and informal learning. These credits can be used later to complete education or apply for jobs. In 2024, the Ministry of Education promoted vocational learning through projects like Cooperative Education and Work-Integrated Education (CWIE) and the New Generation Graduate project, which connect students with businesses. The aim is to produce graduates who are ready to work in new industries and help the country meet labor market demand (Ministry of Education Thailand, 2024, pp. 3–5).

For students with disabilities or from minority groups, Thailand has made progress in inclusive education. In 2022, 80,000 children with disabilities were enrolled in mainstream schools. The government also provided over 50,000 scholarships to students from low-income families. These efforts help more children continue school without financial stress. Thailand has also developed teacher training programs to support children from ethnic and indigenous communities. These programs focus on respecting cultural differences and helping teachers communicate better with children in their local languages. The country also uses online learning tools to reach students in remote areas who cannot easily attend regular classes. These actions support equal education access for all students, including those from special groups (Ministry of Education Thailand, 2024, pp. 6–7).

Thailand has improved its adult literacy rate over the past few years. In 2021, the literacy rate for people aged 15 and older reached 94.1%, which was higher than 93.77% in 2020. This improvement reflects the role of community learning centers. These centers are managed by the Department of Promoting Learning. These centers provide adult education, basic literacy classes, and skills training. They are especially important in rural and remote areas. The centers help people gain skills for work and everyday life, especially those who missed out on school earlier in life (Ministry of Education Thailand, 2024, p. 7).

Education in Thailand also now includes content about sustainable development, human rights, gender equality, and global citizenship. These topics are added to school curricula through the national education framework. The goal is to help students understand global and local problems and become more responsible. Lessons cover the importance of peace, protecting the environment, and respecting diversity. Schools are encouraged to use eco-friendly teaching practices and digital tools. These programs aim to prepare students to live and work in a global society and take part in sustainable development (Ministry of Education Thailand, 2024, p. 8).

## **GOAL 5 – GENDER EQUALITY**

Thailand has a legal system to support gender equality. The Gender Equality Act was passed in 2015, aiming to stop people from being treated unfairly because of their gender, which also includes protection for LGBTQI groups (UNDP, 2019). The Constitution also supports equal treatment by requiring the government to consider gender when planning budget allocations. Some areas, like Surat Thani, have tried using gender budgeting (United Nations, 2021). The government has also added gender goals to national plans. These goals are part of the Twenty-Year National Strategy (2018–2037) and the 12th National Economic and Social Development Plan (2017–2021). These plans help Thailand follow the global goals set by the United Nations (United Nations, 2021).

Coming to the update report released by the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific - ESCAP (2025)—Thailand, along with other countries in the Asia-Pacific region has made some improvements in promoting gender equality. However, progress is still slow, and there are big gaps in the data. This makes it challenging to measure how far the country has gone toward meeting all targets under Sustainable Development Goal 5.

Some progress has been made in areas where data is available. One of these areas is women's access to mobile phones. More women in Thailand now own mobile phones, as the indicator illustrated in 5.b.1 in the report shows. This change is important because it helps them connect with others, get information, and access digital services. The report also shows improvements in gender equality in education. For example, there is now better balance between boys and girls in average years of schooling, reflecting greater equality in educational opportunity, which is important for long-term social and economic development.

Another area that shows progress is labor force participation. More women are working or seeking employment, which reduces the gap between male and female participation in the workforce. This means that women are taking on jobs and contributing to the economy at a

rate closer to men. But even with these improvements, progress in other important areas remains very slow.

One of the main problems is the small number of women in leadership positions. In 2023, women held only 23% of seats in national parliaments in ASEAN countries, including Thailand. This rate is the highest it has ever been, but still lower than the global average of 27%. Similarly, indicator 5.5.2 from the report, which measures the proportion of women in managerial positions, indicates slow growth in women's representation of individuals in leadership positions within both government and the private sector is being discussed. It also shows that men still make most of the decisions in politics and public life, and women are not yet equally represented in management positions (ESCAP, 2025).

In addition to these issues, there are still serious problems that do not have enough data. For example, the report states that there is insufficient information to evaluate the situation regarding indicator 5.4, which pertains to unpaid care and domestic work. Unpaid labor is a major barrier for many women, especially mothers and caregivers, because this unpaid work reduces the time that women can spend on education, paid employment, or community activities. Other topics that lack enough data include violence against women (5.2) and early marriage (5.3). These are serious human rights problems that affect women's health, safety, and freedom. Without full statistics, it's hard to know how common these issues are in Thailand or if they're improving.

Overall, only 3 out of 14 official indicators for SDG 5 and 3 proxy indicators had usable data in Thailand's context. This means that fewer than half of the required indicators are available for review (ESCAP, 2025). Without complete data, it is difficult for policymakers to fully understand the situation and design effective responses.

## **GOAL 8 – DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH**

Thailand has experienced stable economic and employment growth over the years. However, its progress toward achieving Sustainable Development Goal 8 has been slow,

and indicators show negative results. This situation is similar in many countries in the Asia-Pacific region. Goal 8 is one of the lowest-performing goals in this region (ESCAP, 2025b, p. 5). Also, Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress (2025) pointed out that Thailand still struggles with informality in the labor market, youth unemployment, poor working conditions, and unsustainable resource use.

Before COVID-19, Thailand had strong economic growth. For example, from 2015 to 2019, GDP per capita in the region grew at an average of 3.9 percent per year. This growth was higher than the global average. It helped many people move out of poverty, while the pandemic stopped this progress. Economic recovery after the COVID-19 crisis has been uneven. In 2024, the region's GDP per capita was more than 7 percent lower than what was expected before the pandemic.

- 1) Informal employment continues to dominate the Thai labor market. About two-thirds of workers in the Asia-Pacific region are informally employed, which is the same situation as in Thailand. Informal workers often lack job security, legal protection, and access to social services. Many of them work in retail or food services, which have been slow to recover post-pandemic. As a result, workers earn less and face more financial insecurity.
- 2) Youth unemployment is also a concern. In 2023, 21.4 percent of youth aged 15 to 24 in the region were not in education, employment, or training, and Thailand follows this trend. Since 2015, the change in this number has been very small. It only dropped by 0.8 percentage points. Young women face more barriers than young men. The difference between male and female NEET rates in the region is 19 percentage points compared to the percentage in the global gap, which is 11 points.
- 3) Labor rights and working conditions remain weak. Thailand shares many of the problems seen across the region. There are high rates of occupational injury and low compliance with labor laws. Many workers are not allowed to form or join trade unions. Workers' rights to

strike are often denied. Violence and harassment of union leaders have been reported in several countries, including Thailand.

4) Gender inequality is another barrier. In 2024, women in the region earned only 44.2 cents for every dollar earned by men. This rate is better than the 40.6 cents in 2014. But it still reflects a serious gap. In Thailand, women face similar problems. They often do more unpaid care work. They are underrepresented in high-paying jobs. They are also more likely to be affected by automation. This increases pressure on their job security and income.

There has been some improvement in financial inclusion. By 2021, 84 percent of men and 81 percent of women in East Asia and the Pacific had access to a bank account or mobile money service. Thailand has followed this trend. More people can now save money and access credit. This helps both individuals and small businesses. However, economic growth in Thailand is still tied to high resource use. Material consumption in the region has grown rapidly. In 2020, the Asia-Pacific region used 56 percent of the world's materials. This includes Thailand. The region is the largest consumer and importer of raw materials. Thailand needs to do more to separate growth from environmental damage.

## **GOAL 11 – SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES**

The 2024 SDG Report (Sachs et al., 2024) highlights that Thailand is making moderate progress towards Sustainable Cities and Communities (SDG 11), although on track, but the current trajectories are unlikely to meet the 2023 goals. The shortfall could be due to the challenges in urban air pollution and limited access to public transportation. Some key indicators are discussed in more detail in the following.

Thailand has demonstrated steady progress in reducing the "Proportion of urban population living in slums," decreasing from 15.61% in 2000 to 6.8% in 2020, with a trajectory that aligns with the SDG 11 target (SDG Index, 2025). This improvement reflects ongoing efforts in urban infrastructure, housing policy, and poverty alleviation. However, the indicator remains classified under "challenges remain," indicating that while progress is

measurable, full achievement has yet to be reached. Although the Baan Mankong Program predates the adoption of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, having been launched in 2003 by the Community Organizations Development Institute (CODI) Thailand, it continues to contribute meaningfully to today's global development agenda. In contrast to the top-down nature of many urban development initiatives, Baan Mankong empowers communities to lead their own upgrades through infrastructure subsidies and low-interest housing loans. By 2018, the program had improved the living conditions of more than 100,000 households, upgrading over 1,000 low-income communities across 300 cities in Thailand (CODI, 2018)

For the indicator "Access to improved water source, piped," Thailand has demonstrated a continuous upward trend, reaching 92.51% within its urban population in 2022, up from 71.13% in 2000 (SDG Index, 2025). While this progress places the country in the "on track or maintaining SDG achievement" category, the concurrent classification of "challenges remain" highlights persistent disparities in access. Official statistics may obscure infrastructural and spatial inequalities, particularly in informal settlements and peri-urban areas where piped connections remain unreliable or unaffordable. The National Statistical Office of Thailand (NSO) and UN-Habitat have both noted that while coverage rates are high, the quality and sustainability of access remain contested, especially among migrant and low-income urban communities. Therefore, despite the surface-level progress, Thailand's urban water infrastructure reflects deeper governance and equity challenges that may hinder full realization of SDG 11 by 2030.

The indicator "Annual mean concentration of PM2.5" for Thailand remains a critical concern under SDG 11, with a reported value of 23.50  $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$  in 2022 - substantially exceeding the long-term objective of 6.3  $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$  (SDG Index, 2025). The stagnation of PM2.5 levels over the past two decades, fluctuating largely between 23 and 28  $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ , reflects a failure to reduce air pollution at the pace required for sustainable urban development. This persistent elevation in fine particulate matter is primarily attributed to seasonal agricultural burning and transboundary haze, especially affecting northern

provinces like Chiang Mai during the dry season. The health implications are profound; Parasin & Amnuaylojaroen (2022) have linked elevated PM2.5 levels to increased respiratory and cardiovascular morbidity and mortality. Despite policy efforts, such as revising national air quality standards to align with WHO guidelines, the classification of this indicator as "significant challenges remain" underscores the need for more effective interventions. Without a transformative policy shift - particularly in emissions regulation, urban planning, and environmental governance - the prospect of Thailand meeting SDG 11.6 by 2030 remains slim.

Regarding "Population with convenient access to public transport in cities" indicator, in 2020, only 26.49% of Thailand's urban population had convenient access to public transport, as defined by proximity to a public transport stop within 500 meters for low-capacity systems or 1,000 meters for high-capacity systems (SDG Index, 2025). This figure places Thailand significantly below the global average of 51.6% and the Asian urban centers' average of 29%, highlighting substantial gaps in the country's urban transport infrastructure. The lack of trend data further complicates assessments of progress over time.

### **GOAL 13 – CLIMATE ACTION**

Thailand's trajectory toward achieving Sustainable Development Goal 13 (SDG 13) - Climate Action - reflects a growing policy commitment but remains fraught with systemic and implementation challenges. Despite positioning itself as a regional actor in climate policy through updated Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and a long-term low-emission strategy, the country continues to face mounting pressure to translate these ambitions into measurable, transformative action. The *Sustainable Development Report 2024* categorizes Thailand's overall progress on climate-related targets as insufficient, raising concerns about the country's ability to meet its 2030 commitments under the Paris Agreement (Sachs et al., 2024).

The trend in Thailand's "CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from fossil fuel combustion and cement production" indicates a gradual rise. In 2022, the emissions level stood at 3.78 tCO<sub>2</sub> per capita,

representing a modest decline from the peak observed around 2016–2017. The trajectory since 2000 indicates a persistent increase until the mid-2010s, suggesting accelerated industrial activity, urbanization, and fossil-fuel dependency during this period. Although recent years have seen a plateau and slight reduction - likely due to a combination of economic restructuring, energy efficiency measures, and possibly pandemic-related economic slowdowns - the pace of decline is insufficient. The Sustainable Development Report 2024 confirms that Thailand is not on track to meet the 2030 climate goal, with this indicator classified as showing a stagnating or rising trend (Sachs, Lafortune, & Fuller, 2024). Although emissions from cement production have stabilized in recent years, accounting for around 21.15 million tonnes in both 2021 and 2022 (CEIC, 2024), no significant reduction has been observed. This lack of consistent decline highlights the challenges Thailand faces in aligning industrial emissions with its net-zero commitments.

Thailand’s “GHG emissions embodied in imports” have received limited attention in national climate policy but represent a growing dimension of the country’s carbon footprint. The indicator provided a value of 2.19 tCO<sub>2</sub> per capita in 2021, an increase from 1.81 tCO<sub>2</sub> per capita compared to the prior year. According to the Sustainable Development Report 2024, this indicator is marked as “stagnating,” suggesting minimal change in recent years and signaling Thailand’s increasing integration into global value chains without corresponding emissions accountability (Sachs, Lafortune, & Fuller, 2024). As a manufacturing and export-driven economy, Thailand imports a significant volume of intermediate goods, particularly from high-emitting sectors such as electronics, chemicals, and machinery. The absence of comprehensive tracking or carbon-adjusted trade metrics in Thailand’s national reporting further complicates efforts to address this challenge. Without a shift toward sustainable procurement policies and international cooperation on consumption-based emissions accounting, this indicator is unlikely to improve in time to meet the 2030 targets.

Thailand's performance on the SDG 13 indicator "CO<sub>2</sub> emissions embodied in fossil fuel exports" is currently marked as "trend information unavailable". This classification reflects a lack of publicly accessible, disaggregated data on emissions specifically associated with fossil fuel exports. Given that Thailand is a net importer of fossil fuels, with minimal export volumes compared to regional energy exporters like Indonesia or Malaysia, the emissions embodied in its fossil fuel exports are presumed to be low. However, the absence of precise data hinders a comprehensive assessment of this indicator. This data gap underscores the need for enhanced emissions tracking and reporting mechanisms, particularly concerning trade-related emissions, to facilitate a more accurate evaluation of Thailand's progress toward its climate commitments. The Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report 2024 notes that progress on SDG 13 in the region is among the slowest across all goals, driven by both climate vulnerability and gaps in governance (ESCAP, 2024).

**RQ 3: In each context what policy/legal initiatives have been made in explicit response to the SDGs?**

**GOAL 4 – QUALITY EDUCATION**

The government of Thailand is working hard to make sure that everyone has access to a complete and high-quality education system. This includes people who live in remote places or are having trouble with living cost. This effort means improving the quality of education by putting an emphasis on training teachers, keeping courses up to date, and encouraging lifelong learning that is in line with the needs of the job market. Additionally, there is a focus on lowering educational inequality by meeting the wants of disadvantaged groups, like disabled people and kids from poor families. The key to success in education will lie in good management, which will require cooperation from all areas, including the business and community sectors, in order to create chances and support long-term growth in education.

Thailand seeks to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals - Goal 4 in education with the implementation of many major strategic frameworks. These include the 20-Year National Strategy (2018-2027), which focuses on raising educational standards and cultivating 21st-century capabilities, and the 13th National Economic and Social Development Plan (2023-2027) that proposes educational changes, aiming at establishing a high-quality, inclusive education system, decreasing educational inequality, improving teachers and educational professionals, and incorporating technology into digital learning environments. Furthermore, the National Education Plan (2017-2036) focuses on encouraging lifelong learning and minimizing inequities to support students' overall development, assuring both academic performance and well-being.

Thailand also partners with ASEAN member nations and international organizations to establish educational declarations and joint statements addressing access to education and promoting lifelong learning. These promises demonstrate a commitment to developing an education system that satisfies society's and the economy's long-term demands while

preparing citizens for future change. To meet the key Sustainable Development Goals, one of the key policies supporting Thailand's commitment to SDG 4 is the "Thailand Zero Dropout" initiative, which was launched in May 2024. This initiative focuses on reducing the number of children and youth who are out of school. It uses integrated data systems and promotes flexible learning environments tailored to individual needs. The Ministry of Education (MoE) and the Ministry of Interior work together on this policy through Provincial Education Committees. These committees include both provincial governors and education officers. According to Ministry of Education (2024), the initiative helped more than 20,000 children and youth across 25 provinces. The government plans to expand the program to all 77 provinces starting in 2025.

The Thai government also responded to the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic by increasing funding per student (MoE, 2024). The support covered various areas to help maintain learning continuity, including a 20% rise in teaching-related costs, a 15% boost in funding for learning materials, and an extra set of school uniforms for students from low-income families. Funding for student development activities also increased by 30%. School lunch subsidies were adjusted based on the size of each school to make sure all students had access to proper nutrition.

Moreover, in order to improve learning experiences, the MoE introduced the "Happy Learning" approach. This approach places student well-being and engagement at the center of the educational process. The ministry updated the curriculum and teaching methods to reflect global trends and local needs. The new curriculum helps students build practical skills, supports income generation while they are still studying, and improves their chances of employment after graduation. These changes aim to make learning more relevant to students' lives and the demands of the labor market.

In 2020, the MoE launched another important project called "Bring Students Back to School." This initiative identifies students who have dropped out or are at risk of doing so. Its goal is to reintegrate them into the education system. The project involves collaboration

among 12 government agencies and departments under the MOE. One of the main tools used is a digital platform called the “Bring the Children Back to School” application. This platform helps keep a detailed database on students and tracks the reasons why they left school, offering support tailored to each case.

To guide its SDG 4 efforts, the MoE also formed a special committee dedicated to sustainable development in education. This committee is responsible for creating a framework, setting clear guidelines, and defining objectives for implementing SDG 4 policies. It also reviews the SDG 4 Roadmap, monitors progress, and addresses challenges that may arise during implementation. Through this committee, the government aims to ensure the overall success of its education-related sustainable development goals (Ministry of Education, 2024).

In the field of higher education, the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research, and Innovation (MHESI) has taken steps to align with global standards. It introduced the Higher Education Development Plan (2021–2027), which focuses on building skills for sustainable development. One of its key projects is the Thai MOOC platform, which offers free online courses to support lifelong learning. MHESI also launched the Higher Education Sandbox, a program designed to develop new and responsive academic offerings that meet urgent national needs. These programs are less restricted by traditional curriculum rules, allowing more innovation in higher education (MHESI, 2024).

Even with these reforms, Thailand still faces challenges in improving educational quality. Results from national tests such as O-NET and international assessments like PISA remain low. The upper secondary school graduation rate declined slightly, from 81.7% in 2016 to 78.6% in 2019. However, there has been steady progress in gender equality in education. From 2016 to 2019, the Gender Parity Index increased at all education levels, showing that more girls and boys now have equal access to education (Ministry of Education, 2024).

## **GOAL 5 - GENDER EQUALITY**

In support of the Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) objectives established by the United Nations, Thailand has implemented measures to promote gender equality. One of the biggest actions the government took was passing the Gender Equality Act in 2015. This law officially bans all forms of gender-based discrimination and recognizes that not everyone fits into just male or female categories. It aims to protect people with different gender identities, including those who are transgender or gender non-conforming. This act created two special groups—the Committee for the Promotion of Gender Equality and the Committee on the Determination of Unfair Gender Discrimination. In addition, the Women Development Strategy (2017-2021), developed by the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, also sets out goals, objectives and targets in the area of gender equality which will be steering tools for effective budget allocations. These groups investigate and help solve complaints about unfair treatment based on gender.

Women Development Strategy was signed in July 2017, which the United Nations Country Team (UNCT) in Thailand and the Royal Thai Government (RTG) signed the United Nations Partnership Framework (UNPAF) for Thailand 2017-2021, with the goal of advancing sustainable people-centered, equitable development for all Thais by 2021. In 2017, UN Women headed the Gender Theme body, which served as an advisory body to the UNCT on gender issues in support of UNPAF implementation and improving the UN's collective influence in achieving gender equality and women's empowerment, and also led the 2017 UNCT CEDAW Reporting. Since July 2019, the theme group has been changed to the Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI), chaired by UN Women and UNDP, with the TOR revision to include support to the implementation of UNCT accountability frameworks and recommendations, including facilitation of the System-wide Action Plan (SWAP) on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, as well as through the UNCT performance indicators for gender equality and the empowerment of women (the “scoreca”) UN Women co-leads the UNCT SDG Results Group on Peace and Governance with UNDP (since February 2018) and the COVID-19 and Gender-based Violence (GBV) Sub-group in Thailand (since May 2020) to address immediate needs, actions, and services

to prevent and respond to GBV during COVID-19, as well as longer-term development of services, systems, and structures to protect the affected women and girls, men and boys from all forms of violence, with active engagement and involvement (UN Women Asia and the Pacific, n.d.).

Another major step forward happened in 2024, when Thailand became the first country in Southeast Asia to allow same-sex couples to marry legally. The Marriage Equality Act changed the language of marriage laws to be gender-neutral which means that two people of any gender can now marry and enjoy the same rights as opposite-sex couples, including inheritance, adoption, and the ability to make medical decisions for each other. This was a historic change that many people in Thailand and beyond celebrated. It also shows that the country is trying to meet SDG 5 goals, especially those related to equal rights and ending discrimination. Still, changing the law is only the first step. Making sure that government offices, schools, hospitals, and other services treat same-sex couples fairly in practice is another challenge. Some regions may not accept the change right away, and public attitudes might vary. This could lead to situations where people are still treated unequally, even though the law says they should not be (The Guardian, 2024).

Thailand has also worked hard to fight human trafficking and gender-based violence. One of the key laws in this area is the Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act, which was first passed in 2008 and later updated in 2015 and 2017. This law punishes those involved in human trafficking with serious penalties. If the victim is a woman, child, or person with a disability, the penalties are even stronger. The law does not just focus on punishment; it also talks about helping survivors. It provides them with shelters, medical care, legal advice, and sometimes financial compensation. In 2019, Thailand took another important step by starting to use the ASEAN Gender-Sensitive Guidelines for Helping Women Victims of Trafficking that victims must be treated with respect, be able to make decisions about their care, and should not be judged. Law enforcement officers and social workers are encouraged to receive special training so they can offer better help to female survivors. However, studies show that while these tools and policies exist, they are not

always used correctly. Some officers have not been trained well, and in some cases, women who are supposed to receive help end up feeling controlled or judged. They may be placed in shelters where they cannot move freely or find work, which goes against the idea of helping them regain control over their lives (UN Women & ODI, 2020).

Thailand also works with other countries to fight trafficking and support gender rights. For example, it is a member of ACTIP, the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, especially women and children. This is a legal agreement among Southeast Asian countries that focuses on preventing trafficking, punishing traffickers, and helping victims. Thailand also signed the Palermo Protocol, a United Nations treaty that sets global rules for stopping trafficking. Another important step was joining the COMMIT Process, which helps countries in the Greater Mekong Subregion—like Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam—work together to stop trafficking. These agreements show that Thailand wants to be a leader in the region. But again, there are problems with turning these promises into real action. For instance, even though ACTIP has been ratified, some of its ideas have not yet been fully added to Thailand’s domestic laws. Also, the region lacks a strong system for checking whether countries are doing what they promised. There is no formal ASEAN-level group that monitors or punishes countries that fail to follow through (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2025).

Thailand’s national development plans also include goals for gender equality. The 20-Year National Strategy (2018–2037) and the 12th National Economic and Social Development Plan (2017–2021) both mention the need to help women and girls. These plans cover a wide range of topics, such as health, education, leadership, and jobs. The plans also aim to increase the number of women in leadership roles in government and business. According to the Women in Business Report (Grant Thornton, 2020), Thailand has a higher proportion of women in senior leadership roles than the Asia-Pacific region and the world average. In Thailand’s mid-market corporations, women hold 32% of senior leadership roles, which is higher than the global average of 27% and the Asia-Pacific average of 26%. There have also been recent enhancements. The share of mid-market corporations with no women in

senior management has declined by five percentage points, from 19% in 2019 to 14% in 2020. Thailand's scores on this measure, like numerous other related variables, indicate higher diversity than the regional (20%) and global (17%) norms. Thailand also performs rather well in terms of having women in positions of power: 24% of CEOs / Managing Directors in Thailand are women, compared to 20% globally and just 13% in Asia Pacific. Women hold the most senior leadership positions in Thailand, with Chief Financial Officer accounting for 43%, making Thailand the world's highest percentage of female CFOs and the third-highest percentage of female CEOs. Many Thai mid-market enterprises are hoping to capitalise on the movement towards equality.

However, real change has been slow. As of 2024, women held only 19.4 percent of seats in the national parliament, which shows that men still dominate political decision-making (UN Women Data Hub, n.d.). Women also continue to face wage gaps and often work in lower-paying jobs, especially in the informal sector. These problems make it hard for women to gain financial independence and social power, even though the laws say they should have equal rights.

Another issue is how programs designed to help survivors of trafficking are often too narrow in focus. Research by UN Women and the Overseas Development Institute (2020) found that many support programs offer training only in traditional skills like sewing or cooking. While these skills are useful, they can reinforce old gender roles. Women are not always given the chance to train for jobs in higher-paying fields like technology or finance. In addition, many reintegration programs do not address the social stigma that survivors face, especially those who were trafficked for sex work. Some women avoid these services because they fear judgment or because they think the services will limit their freedom. For example, some shelters do not allow residents to leave freely or to work, which can make survivors feel like they are being punished rather than helped. These challenges show that there is a gap between what the laws and policies promise and what people experience on the ground.

Thailand also plays an important role in regional migration and trafficking patterns. The country is wealthier than its neighbors and attracts many workers from Cambodia and Myanmar. Many of these workers enter Thailand without proper documents, making them vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation. Women and girls from neighboring countries are often forced into domestic work or the sex industry, where they face abuse and have few rights. Thailand's laws do make these acts illegal, but enforcement is weak. Border officers and police are not always trained to spot trafficking victims, especially when those victims are undocumented migrants. Without better training and cross-border cooperation, many victims remain hidden and do not receive help (UN Women & ODI, 2020).

Thailand has also tried to include gender concerns in broader government planning. The Ministry of Social Development and Human Security (MSDHS) has led efforts to set up gender coordination centers in each province. These centers are meant to help local officials understand and respond to gender-related issues. Awareness campaigns have also been launched to teach people about gender equality. But these programs often face limitations due to funding and staffing shortages. Many local officers are still unsure how to apply national policies to real-world cases. For example, they may not know how to properly support a transgender person facing discrimination or how to identify a girl who has been trafficked into forced labor. Without ongoing training and strong monitoring, these efforts may not achieve their full potential (UNESCAP, 2021).

## **GOAL 8 - DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH**

In 2021, Thai government published *Thailand's Voluntary National Review on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (2021). The VNR emphasized the holistic approach and the state of being connected with each SDG that stakeholders play the important role in implementing and achieving SDGs.

Overall, the economic growth has slowed down because of exports decrease under the influence of global economy from 3.8 per cent in 2018 to 2.1 per cent in 2019, while in the aspect of real growth in GDP per person which indicated 3 per cent, showing similarity to

the last year. The growth rate exceeded the National Strategy's aim of 2.5% annual improvement in labour productivity from 2018 to 2022. This shows that the country's workforce productivity has improved.

The indicator, inclusive employment and decent work for all, shows equivalent data between men and women in terms of employment rate. In 2019, women received around 2.98 per cent higher salary than males. In 2019, men had a 0.2% greater unemployment rate than women, indicating a very tiny gender disparity in Thailand's economy. The child labour employment rate has likewise decreased from 6% in 2015 to 4% in 2018. However, the ratio of social assistance recipients to employed individuals is 43.41 per cent, which falls short of the National Strategy's goals. From 2018 to 2022, the National Strategy aspires to build a social protection system that will cover 70% of all employees (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council, 2021).

Moreover, Thailand continues to face challenges in developing its Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). In 2019, SMEs generated only 43.2% of total output, falling short of the National Strategy's aim. The Strategy intends to achieve a target of 45% between 2018 and 2022. In 2019, 22.63 per cent of youngsters aged 15-24 were not in education, employment, or training (NEET), up from 21.50 per cent in 2018. Poverty has played a significant role in this. Given Thailand's trend towards an ageing society, there are concerns about the long-term availability of workers.

The initiatives that Thailand has made to address SDG Goal 8 are mainly integrated into its overall development framework through the 20-Year National Strategy (2018-2037) and five-year National Economic and Social Development Plans. These frameworks use the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (SEP) to guide economic growth that is resilient, inclusive, and environmentally sustainable (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council, 2021).

One of the key components mentioned in the implementation is the promotion of the Bio-Circular-Green (BCG) Economy Model, which aims to promote value-added products, foster innovation, and create jobs that benefit long-term economic growth. The BCG Model is intended to rely on Thailand's natural and cultural resources while embracing new technology, such as digital products and social media, and local knowledge to increase productivity and employment prospects across sectors, including agriculture, tourism, and the digital economy.

Thailand also implemented the “Ad Hoc Masterplan under the National Strategy in Response to the COVID-19 Situation” to recover the economy. This initiative aims to upskill employees and workers, promote social protection procedures, and create job opportunities that are significantly affected by the pandemic. Section 40 of the Social Security Act further provides particular attention to the workers who are involving in the informal sector by offering them temporary financial remedies, and launching community-level employment programs to accept migrant labor and those who are currently unemployed.

Another initiative which called Khok Nong Na Model contributes to sustainable agriculture by reorganizing land and encouraging local innovation to increase productivity and food security, directly supporting SDG 8 with the improvement of rural incomes and establishment of grassroots employment. Additionally, Thai government created the Thai People Map and Analytics Platform (TPMAP) to better and more effectively identify vulnerable populations who are seeking employment and welfare support, thereby improving the efficiency, effectiveness, and equity of labor-related issues.

As for digital infrastructure, projects like Net Pracharat and Fringe Areas Internet have provided high-speed internet connectivity to tens of thousands of villages, allowing for digital participation and economic inclusion. Simultaneously, skills development programs such as Smart Farmer and community entrepreneurship training efforts seek to increase

digital literacy and entrepreneurial capacities among rural populations (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council, 2021).

In the VNR (2021), there is a case study conducted by Mae Fah Luang University which significantly presented the effectiveness of the implementation towards SDG Goal 8. Mae Fah Luang University's Area-based Social Innovation Research Centre (Ab-SIRC) took action to support migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, as government assistance reached only a limited number of them. Based in a border region, Ab-SIRC plays a key role in generating community-centered research and academic contributions. Through field surveys, the center discovered that many migrant workers in Chiang Rai were struggling to meet basic needs and had limited access to healthcare information and social security services. This issue was particularly severe among workers employed by small and medium-sized businesses that lacked formal employee support systems. In response, Ab-SIRC collaborated with civil society organizations to establish the Aid Coordination Centre for Migrant Workers in Chiang Rai. This center aimed to deliver essential support to affected migrants, offering services such as training on disease prevention for group representatives, distributing basic care packages, and facilitating connections with relevant agencies to help workers claim legal financial compensation.

Thailand has made positive approaches to achieve SDG Goal 8, including macroeconomic policy, sustainable financing, rural development, and social inclusion. By introducing Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (SEP) and supporting the Bio-Circular-Green (BCG) Economy, the country hopes to produce decent jobs and foster equitable economic growth.

## **GOAL 11 - SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES**

According to Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council (2021), Asia-Pacific has the highest rates of urban development and migration globally, and Thailand follows the global megatrends that urbanisation continues to rise. Thai Government, in responsible for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, has therefore developed a number of policies that support sustainability, such as the New Urban

Agenda (NUA), and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015-2030) to ensure safety, resilience in the process of urbanisation.

To better address SDG Goal 11, the government prioritises addressing home ownership issues through housing programs that benefit low-income earners, slum residents, and individuals with disabilities. Research indicates that the proportion of low-income slum inhabitants with inadequate housing reduced from 3.2% in 2015 to 2.73 per cent in 2017. The Land Consumption Rate to Population Growth Rate (LCRPGR), a key indicator of urban land use efficiency, increased from 0.97 in 2011-2016 to 0.96 in 2016-2019. The figure indicates that Thailand has slightly increased its land use efficiency. However, public transport is only available in the major centres. Only 24% of the metropolitan population has easy access to public transport.

Waste management in cities has also improved. The proportion of regulated trash to total waste increased from 17.30% in 2014 to 42.67% in 2017. Air quality remains an issue, particularly due to rising levels of fine particle matter (PM2.5 and PM10), which pose health risks.

Thailand is also increasing its funding commitment for urban culture and heritage conservation. In 2020, the allotted amount reaches 13.27116 billion Thai Baht. This represented an increase from 10 billion Thai Baht in 2017. The following sub-projects contribute to a regional cultural and heritage conservation plan: World Heritage Tourism, Historical, Cultural, and Religious Tourism, Natural Resources and Environmental Preservation, and Project Preventing Natural Resources and Environmental Degradation.

In terms of specific policies and implementation, the 20-Year National Strategy (2018–2037) and the Twelfth National Economic and Social Development Plan serve as umbrella frameworks guiding urban sustainability at the national level. A foundational policy for urban planning integrated with National Strategy in Thailand is the Town Planning Act B.E. 2562 (2019), which introduced a transparent and participatory town planning process

involving exploration, public consultation, and Cabinet approval. This law serves as the legal framework for sustainable urban development (NESDC, 2021, p. 50). Complementing this, the 20-year National Housing Development Strategy (2017–2039) outlines a long-term vision to address housing shortages, especially for low-income and vulnerable populations.

Among key housing projects is the Baan Mankong Project, a slum-upgrading initiative that supports low-income communities in accessing secure housing and improved infrastructure. As of 2021, it had benefited over 45,055 households (NESDC, 2021, p. 50). The Baan Toog Tua Thai (Affordable Homes) project extends government-subsidized housing to those earning under 40,000 Thai Baht monthly or who are unemployed, offering rental options starting at 999 Thai Baht per month. Over 3,202 units had been rented under this scheme by 2020 (NESDC, 2021). Another initiative, the Baan Por Pieng Chonnabot project (Sufficiency Rural Homes), focuses on renovating and rebuilding homes for people with disabilities, the elderly, and underprivileged families in rural areas—supporting over 62,795 households (NESDC, 2021).

In addressing sustainable mobility, Thailand has invested significantly in mega public transportation projects. In Bangkok, four mass transit lines, including 1) Green line (2) Blue line (3) Airport rail link (Phayathai-Suvarnabhumi) and (4) Purple line (Bang Yai-Tao Poon), totaling 153.8 kilometers are operational, and the government plans to complete 103 metro stations by 2029, according to the Mass Rapid Transit Master Plan in the Bangkok Metropolitan Region (M-MAP). Outside the capital, the Government has implemented a number of public transportation development regional projects, such as Phuket Public Transportation System Project, Public Transportation System Master Plan in Chachoengsao, Chonburi and Rayong Provinces for the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC), Khon Kaen City Bus Project, Phuket Smart Bus Project, and Udon City Bus Project (Udonthani) to reduce reliance on private vehicles and promote sustainable tourism (NESDC, 2021, p. 50).

Thailand also pursues urban resilience through integrated disaster risk management. This includes following the National Disaster Risk Management Plan and participating in

regional Urban Search and Rescue Advisory (USAR) drills aligned with International Search and Rescue Advisory Group (INSARAG) standards (NESDC, 2021, p. 50). Air pollution reduction is addressed through the 20-year Air Quality Management Plan (2018–2037), which includes initiatives like Smoke Crisis and Wildfire Prevention Project in the upper northern area of Thailand, the Air Pollution Health Risks Surveillance, and Prevention Project , and the establishment of an Environmental Watch Center in Chiang Mai (NESDC, 2021, p. 51).

Efforts to enhance urban livability include expanding green spaces and public recreational areas as a long-term policy. Green spaces promote environmental awareness and improve the quality of life for urban residents through recreation and natural paths. Projects include Pracharat Forest Park, Environmental Community Project for Green Spaces, and Thailand RTK GNSS Network. Thailand Creative & Design Centre (TCDC) collaborates with the government to establish creative areas, including TK Park and the Bangkok Metropolitan City Library. The private sector invests in public places, including Central World's Pathumvanaraksa Park and co-working spaces (NESDC, 2021). Additionally, Thailand encourages financing mechanisms to support sustainable urbanisation through green, social, and future blue bonds issued by the Public Debt Management Office (NESDC, 2021, p. 51).

### **GOAL 13 - CLIMATE ACTION**

To address SDG Goal 13 climate change, Thailand has implemented several policies and is committed to continuing efforts to prevent climate change and its consequences. Thailand has included the climate change agenda into the national framework for climate change, namely the National Strategy's (2018-2037) 3rd Strategic Guideline on “Promoting Climate-Friendly Based Society Growth” and Thailand's National Climate Change Strategy (2017-2037). In addition, Thailand has also built a policy framework to improve the tangible and effective implementation of national climate change policy across all sectors, which includes the Thailand National Adaptation Plan and the Nationally Determined Contribution Roadmap on Mitigation (2021-2030).

Thailand has effectively demonstrated its commitment to climate action. According to the Nationally Appropriate Mitigation Action, the country exceeded its 2020 target of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 7-20 per cent. Thailand submitted its Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change Secretariat on October 1, 2015 and an updated NDC on October 26, 2020. The first NDC intended to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 20-25% below anticipated Business As Usual (BAU) levels by 2030, a target confirmed in the updated NDC. In addition, the government issued national and bi-annual reports submitted to the Secretariat of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. The Third National Communication and the Third Biennial Update Report (TBUR) were both filed on August 29, 2017 and December 25, 2017 (Office of Natural Resources and Environmental Policy and Planning [ONEP], 2021, p. 56).

In the aspect of on disaster prevention, Thailand focuses on disaster prevention and risk reduction across all sectors, as outlined in the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015-2030). The National Disaster Risk Management Plan is an integrated and people-centered national framework that includes: (1) local capacity building, the community-based disaster risk management model, including community training on risk evaluation and basic coping mechanisms; (2) capacity building for the public sector and partners, such as disaster risk management and national crisis management drills; and (3) provincial disaster risk management plans, provincial supporting emergency plans, and local government's disaster risk management plans.

To enhance people's knowledge and awareness on climate change, Thailand has integrated climate change knowledge into its national core curriculum, as well as indicators and standards for three subjects: (1) mathematics, science, and geology; (2) social studies, religions, and culture; and (3) physical and health education. Additionally, the Department of Environmental Quality Promotion has released the Environmental Studies Activity Manual that offers climate change information for teachers to use as a teaching resource as

well as for the general public. These documents were sent to the network's affiliated organisations and schools (ONEP, 2021).

Furthermore, the ONEP claimed that Thailand has continuously improved its policies on climate change, which adapted various policies from distinct areas in different levels, even at sub-national level. Climate Policy Project was launched in the collaboration between Office of Natural Resources and Environmental Policy and Planning and German International Cooperation (GIZ), which aims to build local capacity for integrating climate concerns into provincial development plans. This project assists 60 provinces' central and local organisations in strengthening their capacity to integrate climate change into their development strategies. In 2020, the project launched the "Changwat Gao Glai Su Pai Climate Change" or "Progressive Provinces Against the Climate Change Threat" campaign to invite pilot provinces to apply for technical and academic support in incorporating climate change issues into their development plans. The initiative includes ten pilot provinces: Bangkok, Kanchanaburi, Chanthaburi, Chonburi, Chumphon, Tak, Maha Sarakham, Yasothon, Ranong, and Suphan Buri (ONEP, 2021, pp. 56).

On the mitigation front, Thailand joined the NDC Partnership in January 2020 to access international support, technology transfer, and best practice exchanges with other member states (ONEP, 2021). A major industrial initiative was the 2022 signing of an MoU between ONEP, engineering associations, and cement and concrete industry bodies to find alternatives to clinker—a major carbon-intensive construction material. This initiative aims to reduce 300,000 MtCO<sub>2</sub> annually from the Thai industrial sector (ONEP, 2021, p. 57). One case study shows private sector engagement complements government efforts. PTT Exploration and Production Public Company Limited committed to reducing emissions by 25% from 2012 levels. By 2020, the company had already achieved a 13% reduction—amounting to 300,000 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>—and is exploring the use of Carbon Capture Utilization and Storage (CCUS) as a future mitigation investment (ONEP, 2021, p. 58).

## **RQ 4: What other policy initiatives /legal changes are relevant for each country's progress towards the SDGs?**

### **GOAL 4 – QUALITY EDUCATION**

UNICEF's expansion of early childhood development and childcare services in Thailand - including the universalization of the Child Support Grant and the integration of Nurturing Care - has significantly enhanced children's readiness for primary education (UNICEF Thailand, 2024). While these efforts have yielded tangible improvements, they are primarily framed within the context of national human capital development rather than being explicitly aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Nonetheless, such initiatives are highly relevant to the SDG agenda.

Within the broader framework of SDG Goal 4, SDG Target 4.2 emphasizes the importance of early childhood development as an important foundation for future learning and wellbeing. In particular, it calls for "*By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care, and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education*" (United Nation, 2015). In response, according to the UN Annual Report 2024 Thailand, the country has made a range of policy measures focused on access to early childhood services. The Child Support Grant by UNICEF has emphasized to universalize this grant for children aged 0-6 years. In parallel, the Nurturing Care framework since 2018 has been integrated into health programs, scaling up initiatives such as **Parent Schools**, which have now reached 20 hospitals and trained 1,442 health professionals. Furthermore, collaboration with local governments has led to improved service delivery at 70 early childhood development centers nationwide (UN Annual Report, 2014).

The Third National Early Childhood Development Forum, which convened over 500 stakeholders, underscored the central role of play in cognitive and emotional development. Digital innovation also contributed to outreach, with the *Early Moments Matter on Mobile*

platform gaining 39,360 new subscribers in 2024 and evolving into a public-private partnership, further broadening its impact (UN Annual Report, 2024).

UNICEF Thailand and Central Food Hall/Tops launched the Every Child Can Read campaign to promote literacy among children. Though this campaign is nationwide, it's particularly focused on those from disadvantaged backgrounds (UNICEF Thailand, 2019). The campaign includes the A Book A Week initiative, encouraging families to engage in weekly reading activities. Collaborations with the Ministry of Education (MoE) have led to school-based reading programs, such as 'reading buddies' and competitions. Efforts also extend to establishing reading corners in Early Childhood Development Centres and deploying mobile libraries to remote areas, aiming to reach approximately 15,000 children (UNICEF Thailand, 2019). As of 2024, this initiative has impacted over 102,000 students, among which half of these students are girls across 200 schools in Thailand.

Another significant initiative contributing to SDG Goal 4 is the One Teacher Thailand (OTT) program, launched by UNICEF Thailand in 2015. It was first introduced in Thailand's southernmost provinces, which have long been affected by armed conflict. These disruptions have posed serious challenges to the education system, making traditional, face-to-face professional learning communities difficult to sustain. OTT emerged as a targeted response to these barriers, aiming to equip teachers with digital tools to ensure educational continuity and quality (Thang et al., 2025).

The program promotes self-directed and peer learning through information and communications technology (ICT), enhancing both teaching and learning. It empowers teachers to integrate digital technology into their classrooms, builds their competencies in using EdTech, and enables them to create inclusive, adaptive learning environments - especially crucial in times of crisis (Thang et al., 2025).

OTT gained nationwide momentum during the COVID-19 pandemic, when school closures and disrupted learning made digital readiness essential. By 2024, the program had significantly scaled up: it improved digital competencies and classroom management skills

for over 200,000 teachers across Thailand. In addition, virtual training on assessment data usage benefited 13,000 educators, while mobile libraries in five border provinces provided vital resources to 81 teachers and 14,279 children in remote communities. A learning loss recovery program in Samut Sakhon further demonstrated the program's adaptability, training 1,200 teachers and reaching 20,000 students across 120 schools (UN Annual Report, 2024).

## **GOAL 5 – GENDER EQUALITY**

Thailand has undertaken an array of complementary policies that strengthen the operationalization of Goal 5 (SDG 5): Gender Equality. As part of the country's national strategy (2018-2037), one of the goals is to create fairness and reduce inequality in all dimensions.

A foundational element is the Gender Equality Act B.E. 2558 (2015), marked Thailand's initial legislative effort to formally define and outlaw gender-based discrimination (OECD, 2020). This instrument not only prohibits gender discrimination and legally acknowledges diverse gender identities but also establishes enforcement mechanisms through the Department of Women's Affairs and Family Development (UN Woman, 2015). In 2020, UNDP Thailand collaborated with the department to publish an Operational Manual, offering standardized procedures for managing discrimination complaints, adjudicating redress, and structuring the Gender Equality Promotion Fund (UNDP, 2020). This prescriptive guidance ensures consistency in implementation across all administrative tiers, thereby institutionalizing legal protections for gender-diverse individuals under SDG 5.1 and 5.3.

In March 2025, UN Women, in partnership with Thailand's Ministry of Social Development and Human Security (MSDHS), launched two pivotal initiatives aimed at advancing gender equality and peacebuilding in Thailand's conflict-affected Southern Border Provinces (SBPs). The first initiative involves the establishment of Women's Empowerment and Learning Centres (WE Centres) in Yala, Pattani, and Chiang Rai,

designed to provide safe, inclusive spaces for marginalized women, including those with disabilities and from ethnic minority groups. These centres offer skills training, leadership development, and digital safety education, alongside economic empowerment opportunities such as social enterprise cafés and mushroom cultivation projects. The second initiative is the formation of a Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Network, which mobilizes women peacebuilders to participate meaningfully in conflict resolution and civic dialogue. Both programs emphasize locally led, inclusive development, recognizing the critical role of women in sustaining peace and addressing intersectional vulnerabilities. By embedding gender equality within community-driven peace frameworks, these initiatives mark a significant contribution to Thailand's implementation of SDG 5 and UNSCR 1325 (Narkvichien & Janthasing, 2025).

Thailand's educational reforms further support SDG 5 by integrating gender-responsive pedagogy and budgeting. Since 2015, the Ministry of Education has introduced curricular amendments that incorporate gender equity, challenge stereotypes, and promote inclusive representations from early grades (UN Women Asia-Pacific, 2019). The state's commitment to Gender-Responsive Budgeting (GRB) was constitutionally mandated in 2017; GRB requires ministries and local governments to conduct gender impact analyses within fiscal planning (OECD, 2021). A 2017 study in the Thai Journal of Public Administration noted the importance of GRB manuals, revised requisition forms, and legislative support to embed gender equity in taxation and expenditure systems (Rukhamate, 2017). Furthermore, analysis in the Multidisciplinary Journal of Science and Technology (2024) emphasizes that GRB enhances accountability and improves the efficiency of gender-targeted spending, recommending continual capacity-building for sustainability. As of 2025, UNDP reports that over 400 local administrative offices have been trained in gender mainstreaming, GRB, and LGBTI inclusion (UNDP Thailand, 2023), demonstrating measurable institutional reach across Thailand's public sector.

The national statistical apparatus is also being strengthened to support evidence-based gender policy-making. In 2024, the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security

collaborated with UNFPA, UNDP, and UN Women on a provincial pilot initiative—covering Chiang Rai, Udon Thani, Nakhon Ratchasima, Phuket, and Pattani—to refine sex-disaggregated data systems for monitoring employment, violence, health, and education indicators (UNFPA, 2025). This data modernization is critical, as UNDP statistics show that in 2021, only 15.8% of parliamentary seats were held by women, 20.2% of women aged 20–24 married before 18, and 9.3% of women aged 15–49 experienced intimate partner violence (UNDP Thailand, 2023). Enhanced data collection is thus vital to tracking progress across SDG targets 5.2, 5.5, and 5.6.

Thailand’s Voluntary National Review (2021) outlines a comprehensive, multisectoral approach to addressing gender-based vulnerabilities, particularly through its National Strategic Work Plan on Protection Against and Reduction of Teenage Pregnancies (2017–2026). This plan is bolstered by nationwide sex education campaigns and regulatory measures targeting high-risk environments such as entertainment venues. Concurrently, the government expanded emergency support mechanisms during COVID-19 by quadrupling urgent assistance phone lines, revealing both institutional adaptability and the persistent scale of domestic violence. Initiatives like the establishment of Coordination Centres for Women and Girls in the Southern Border Provinces and MoUs between public and private actors to combat domestic violence demonstrate an evolving ecosystem of gender-focused partnerships. Yet, while these initiatives reflect strong policy intent, their effectiveness hinges on consistent local-level implementation, sustainable funding, and inclusive outreach—particularly for women in marginalized or conflict-affected areas. Thailand’s VNR thus reveals both progress and persistent structural challenges in achieving SDG 5.

## **GOAL 8 – DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH**

Sustainable Development Goal 8 (SDG 8) aims to promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all. Kingdom of Thailand Sustainable Financing Framework (2020) serves as the key component that defines how the government mobilizes resources through Green, Social, and Sustainability Bonds to support development goals. Among the eligible social project

categories, the framework highlights “employment generation and programs designed to prevent and/or alleviate unemployment stemming from socioeconomic crises, including through the potential effect of Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) financing and support” and “access to essential services” such as education, vocational training, and healthcare (Kingdom of Thailand, 2020, pp. 9-10). This framework has directly supported the issuing of THB 30 billion (about USD 1 billion) in Sustainability Bonds, with proceeds going to projects in education and employment development that directly address SDG 8 indicators. The process comprises transparent tracking, third-party verification, and annual reporting, which increase Thailand's accountability for promoting decent employment using financial instruments.

Apart from this financial framework, Thailand has linked national labor market policies with goals of green growth through the collaboration with the ILO and PAGE (Partnership for Action on Green Economy). The Green Jobs Policy Readiness Assessment in Thailand (2023) indicated that the green sector offers considerable job creation potential, particularly in renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, energy efficiency, and waste management. Those jobs are provided based on the policy, including the Twelfth National Economic and Social Development Plan (2017–2021) and the Climate Change Master Plan (2015–2050). In the green sector, the specific initiatives, such as the Alternative Energy Development Plan (AEDP 2015-2036), forecast that the solar PV sector alone will generate 30,000,000 new jobs (PAGE, 2023, p. 14). Thailand has also developed Green TVET (Technical and Vocational Education and Training) programs and included green competencies in occupational criteria in the building and agriculture sectors to prepare the workforce for future labor demands (PAGE, 2023, pp. 17-18).

Thailand emphasizes skill development and transition support. In this case, Partnership for Action on Green Economy (2023) reported the Ministry of Labour and Department of Skill Development (DSD) have launched retraining programs for workers in industries affected by environmental policies. Chiang Mai province, for example, has implemented upskilling programs for biomass energy and organic farming as local examples. However, the

assessment highlights issues such as fragmented governance, insufficient cross-ministerial cooperation, and low awareness of green jobs among local officials, which restrict policy scalability and effectiveness (PAGE, 2023, pp. 21-22).

Another essential component of Thailand's SDG 8 implementation is providing decent working conditions for vulnerable populations, particularly migrant workers, who account for up to 10% of Thailand's labor force. The Thematic Assessment on Migrant Workers (Manushya Foundation, 2019) reveals recurring human rights violations such as exploitative salaries, passport confiscation, job dangers, and limited access to grievance processes. Migrants in the marine, agriculture, and construction industries sometimes work without contracts, legal protection, or health insurance. In response, Thailand developed the Health Insurance for Migrants program, which covered over 1.5 million documented migrants as of 2017. Although advantageous, the initiative remains inaccessible to many undocumented workers, who are nevertheless extremely vulnerable (Manushya Foundation, 2019, p. 51). Moreover, the Assessment mentioned two legal frameworks in the report (2019), the National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights (NAP-BHR) and Thai Labour Standard TLS 8001-2010, which encourages responsible business practices.

The first NAP (2019–2022) was the first of its kind in Asia and outlined four priority areas: labor rights, land and natural resources, human rights defenders, and cross-border investments. It led to the partial or full implementation of 130 out of 142 planned actions by relevant government agencies (Ministry of Justice, 2023). Based on the foundation of the first NAP, Thailand started the second NAP in September 2023, the Second National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights (2023–2027). The goal of the 2nd NAP is to improve institutional commitments and corporate accountability and expand legal mechanisms.

While adding more strong operational procedures, the second NAP still emphasizes the four theme areas from the first. Particularly in high-risk industries like agriculture, manufacturing, and construction, it requires companies to adopt Human Rights Due

Diligence (HRDD), by which they identify, prevent, mitigate, and report on human rights risks inside their operations and supply chains (Ministry of Justice, 2023). Moreover, the proposal calls for more robust labor safeguards for migrant workers—including more workplace inspections, tighter employment contract monitoring, and better access to remedies for rights violations, particularly in special economic zones like the Eastern Economic Corridor (Ministry of Justice, 2023).

The second NAP also stressed the appropriate compensation and remedial action for communities impacted by infrastructure development and improved defenses of human rights activists. In addition, it involves legal reform attempts to bring local laws in line with international standards, which includes updating legislation on land tenure, pollution management, environmental justice, and community engagement to ensure alignment with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (Rights and Liberties Protection Department & National Institute of Development Administration, 2022). To enhance its implementation of effectiveness, the second NAP defined performance metrics and encouraged civil society and commercial sector involvement in monitoring and assessment processes, considering it an improvement over the previous NAP, which was criticized for its lack of enforceable measures and low SME awareness (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, 2023).

The Thai Labour Standard TLS 8001-2010, serving as the supplement of the NAP, is a voluntary certification system that establishes standards for decent work, including workplace safety, fair remuneration, freedom of association, and the prohibition of child and forced labor. As of 2018, over 113 enterprises had implemented TLS certification, employing over 80,000 people in industries such as manufacturing, food processing, and agriculture (Manushya Foundation, 2019).

## **GOAL11 — SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES**

SDG 11 aims to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. Thailand, which is advancing urban sustainability through comprehensive air quality and

resilience policies, has drafted the Clean Air Act to achieve its development goal. In recent response, the Thai government is currently consolidating seven different legislative drafts—submitted by the Cabinet, political parties, and civil society — into a single unified version. This draft is undergoing review by a parliamentary AD Hoc committee, with public consultations and further parliamentary voting to get approval. The Draft Act is expected to be submitted for royal assent and officially enacted into law by next year once it has been approved (Plangtrakul, Ariyapattanapanich, & Willan, 2025).

The Draft Clean Air Act (the “Draft Act”) includes a number of significant legal changes. It defines "clean air" in accordance with national, international, or scientific norms and recognizes various fundamental rights of the public, including the right to (1) breathe clean air, (2) access and receive information, (3) participate in policy and planning, (4) seek environmental justice through the court, and (5) obtain health screenings and medical treatment. These laws are consistent with international human rights standards and prioritize procedural environmental rights. The Draft Act also establishes individual and corporate duties, requiring cooperation with state pollution control efforts and forbidding behaviors that do harm to public health. Formally, the Draft Act proposes the creation of a Clean Air and Health Fund to help pollution victims, facilitate public health responses, promote clean technology, and develop regional cooperation. In addition, the legislation includes a variety of economic mechanisms, such as pollution taxes, emissions fees, trading schemes, and insurance requirements, all of which try to internalize pollution costs and encourage cleaner industrial practices.

Thailand has also implemented local and sectoral programs to address air pollution, urban resilience, and disaster risk reduction. For instance, In April, 2024, Bangkok’s Metropolitan Administration launched the “Breathe Bangkok” strategy, which integrates air quality monitoring with transportation and zoning policy. The Breathe Bangkok program, running from 2024 to 2026, aims to achieve two policy objectives: (1) implementing a long-term clean air management plan and inclusive air quality governance, and (2) developing

innovative and sustainable transportation measures to reduce air pollution (Clean Air Fund, 2025).

### **GOAL13 — CLIMATE ACTION**

SDG 13 requires each nation to take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts. Except for policies and initiatives that directly address SDGs, Thailand's climate agenda also includes laws and programs that span transport, carbon pricing, and institutional capacity.

In 2020, National Electric Vehicle (EV) Policy Committee launched the Thailand Smart Mobility 30@30 roadmap (Automotive and Manufacturing Group, 2020), which aims for zero-emission vehicles (ZEVs) to comprise at least 30% of total domestic automobile production by 2030, with further provisions for a full transition of government fleets to electric vehicles (EVs), and a ban on internal combustion engine vehicle registrations after 2035. This program reduces greenhouse gas emissions produced by fuel vehicles and decreases the transition towards sustainable transportation.

To achieve its goal and develop the program, considerable international investment was attracted. BYD, China's biggest EV manufacturer, announced the establishment of a production factory in Rayong, Thailand. Then, in September 2022, BYD announced its participation and beginning of operations in 2024, with an estimated annual capacity of 150,000 electric vehicles (Setboonsarng, C, 2022). Furthermore, according to Automobile Manufacturing Group (2022), Thailand offers financial benefits to EV makers and users to increase market demand, for example, lower import customs and excise taxes in order to fully facilitate the Thailand Smart Mobility 30@30. At the same time, the government is expanding its EV ecosystem via infrastructure development, including charging networks and battery value chains. These strategies work together to decrease greenhouse gas emissions and conform with Thailand's Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) under the Paris Agreement.

Other long-term strategies included in the roadmap such as a proposed ban on new Internal Combustion Engine (ICE) vehicle registrations after 2035, signalized a decisive policy shift toward sustainable mobility. This shift can be achieved by increasing collaboration with global EV manufacturers, particularly through foreign direct investment in local EV production facilities. The Group believes these developments will not only advance Thailand's domestic climate agenda but also enhance its role in promoting regional and global decarbonization through EV exports and technology sharing.

**RQ5: What wider critiques have been made of the policy response to these SDGs in each context?**

### **Methodology**

To explore this research question, a focused literature review was conducted using Google Scholar, Thai policy institutes, and news sources. The review covered materials published between September 2015, when the SDG indicators were formally adopted, and June 2025, aligning with the period of this research.

### **Results**

#### *Urban-centric Development Model in Thailand*

Thailand's progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) shows notable improvements in many indicators. However, a further critique reveals that such progress masks the persistent urban-rural divide within the country, raising concerns about inclusiveness and sustainability of Thailand's development model. The national policy response, as reflected in the 20-year National Strategy and its Voluntary National Review 2021, often emphasize centralized metrics of success, which disproportionately represent urban realities, especially those of Bangkok, while sidelining rural and marginalized communities.

A recurring critique in the literature is the urban-centric nature of Thailand's SDG implementation. While national averages may indicate progress, these figures often obscure deep regional inequalities. This is reflected in the education sector. For instance, despite near-universal access to education, PISA (2022) data reveals that only 16% of rural students achieved minimum reading proficiency compared to 38% of their urban peers. Gender disparities also persist: 40% of female students achieved the minimum benchmark versus just 28% of male students (UNESCO, 2025). These figures suggest that while access to education may be widespread, equitable learning outcomes are still far from realized.

Moreover, SDG indicators on urban transport further reinforce critiques of Thailand's unequal infrastructure development. Despite transport being a government priority, with major investments channeled into mega-projects in Bangkok - including four rail lines (Green, Blue, Airport Rail Link, and Purple) totaling 153.8 kilometers - access remains uneven. According to the Mass Rapid Transit Master Plan in the Bangkok Metropolitan Region (M-MAP), the government aims to complete 103 metro stations by 2029, further entrenching infrastructure concentration in the capital. National strategy documents frequently cite these projects as successes, yet SDG 11 indicators reveal that only 26.49% of Thailand's urban population had convenient access to public transport as of 2020, and the UN has designated this area as facing "major challenges." Even within urban settings, transport access is far from inclusive.

Although the government has launched several provincial transportation projects - such as the Phuket Smart Bus, Khon Kaen City Bus, and Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) transit plans in Chachoengsao, Chonburi, and Rayong - these remain limited in scope, fragmented in execution, and often aligned with tourism or economic zones rather than addressing everyday accessibility for rural residents. The Voluntary National Review (VNR) 2021 acknowledges that Thailand is not on track to meet SDG targets related to safe, affordable, and accessible public transport for all. The country's current approach continues to reflect a development model that privileges economic hubs, elite interests, and urban-centric infrastructure, while rural connectivity and equitable mobility remain secondary. As such, transport policy mirrors the broader patterns of centralized governance and uneven development, exacerbating the spatial inequalities the SDGs seek to eliminate.

This structural bias is also evident in Thailand's push to develop a creative economy under the "Thailand 4.0" policy agenda. While the creative economy is credited with contributing to 10 out of the 17 SDGs - including decent work (SDG 8) and innovation (SDG 9) - its implementation remains highly centralized and top-down. Initiatives such as Bangkok Design Week and its provincial spinoffs (e.g., Chiang Mai Design Week) are primarily

urban-centric, providing limited opportunities for communities outside of major cities to participate or benefit meaningfully.

As Kosintharanon (2023) argues, while the creative economy aligns with SDG targets in principle, it falls short in practice. This disconnect stems not only from the intrinsic limitations of the model but also from a governance structure that concentrates planning and resources in urban centers, neglecting grassroots innovation and peripheral participation. Such centralization undermines the creative economy's potential to contribute to truly inclusive and sustainable development.

These criticisms are further supported by Thailand's disaster response and resilience policies, which reveal patterns of preferential treatment. The 2011 floods serve as a striking example: although the disaster affected many regions, responses disproportionately prioritized industrial estates and elite urban zones, often at the expense of politically and economically marginalized communities (Simpson & Smits 2022). This elite capture of disaster governance is replicated in Bangkok's flood resilience policies, which emphasize structural protections for economic assets while offering little in terms of social adaptation measures for vulnerable populations (Simpson and Smits 2022).

This pattern of exclusion highlights a broader issue of representation and accountability in Thailand's SDG implementation. Many national policies are designed for urban audiences, with minimal mechanisms for rural participation or oversight. This concern is echoed in the comparative data discussed under Research Question 2: for instance, rural students consistently underperform across multiple educational indicators, yet rural realities are underrepresented in national-level reporting.

In sum, while Thailand's policy responses toward the SDGs appear progressive on the surface, deeper analysis reveals significant urban biases, centralized planning, and elite prioritization that undermine the goals of equity, inclusiveness, and sustainability. These

critiques underscore the need for a more decentralized, participatory, and context-sensitive approach to sustainable development in Thailand.

### *SDGs and Politics*

Critics also argue that the SDG framework lacks a clear mechanism for equitable responsibility-sharing (Tribune, 2023). Ms. Wanu Permpibul, Executive Director of Climate Watch Thailand, contends that the SDGs “have somehow blurred the responsibility to accomplish the goals that concern climate change,” pointing out that industrialized nations should bear greater share of the burden due to their historical emissions (Tribune, 2023). In another word, the SDGs don’t clearly define who, or which nation is responsible for what parts of climate action (SDG 13). Therefore, this ambiguity unfairly shifts the responsibility to developing countries like Thailand, despite their comparatively lower contributions and more limited resources. As such, critics call for frameworks that uphold the principle of differentiated responsibilities and ensure climate justice through more equitable support structures.

The country’s environmental progress is often constrained by entrenched political power structures. As Simpson and Smits (2022) argue, environmental movements in Thailand rarely lead to transformative policy change unless they align with the interests of existing elites. These elites - often linked to the monarchy and embedded in structures of inequality - shape not only the political discourse but also the country’s developmental priorities. Thailand’s climate politics are deeply intertwined with its history of state-led modernization, where large-scale infrastructure projects such as hydropower dams are not only environmental interventions but also symbols of elite-driven progress, often bearing the names of royal family members (Simpson & Smits, 2022). This reflects a broader trend in which the energy sector, responsible for 77% of the country’s greenhouse gas emissions in 2016 (Misila et al., 2020), is tightly linked to centralized political and economic control. As a result, while Thailand may appear to advance climate goals on the surface, meaningful and inclusive environmental reform remains limited by the enduring influence of hierarchical political traditions and top-down development strategies.

These political dynamics were explored in the SDG Watch Talk 2023 seminar, titled “Broken Governance | The Collapse of Good Governance = The Root Cause of Thailand’s Unsustainability”, where panelists from Chiang Mai University, the private sector, and local development institutions argued that weak governance directly undermines SDG achievement. Incidents like the “truck sticker bribes” and mismanagement of forest fire prevention budgets underscore a broader erosion of good governance and transparency - both of which are foundational to sustainable development (SDG Move Team, 2023).

Thailand’s contradictory environmental record further illustrates these systemic weaknesses. While the country has ratified international climate agreements and set emissions targets through its Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) - committing to a 20% reduction below business-as-usual levels by 2030 - its domestic policies often send mixed signals. For example, Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha, who rose to power after a military coup and later transitioned into civilian leadership through a heavily criticized 2019 election (Human Rights Watch, 2019), has publicly expressed resistance to renewable energy on the grounds that it raises electricity prices. These statements stand in contrast to the government’s international climate pledges, reflecting inconsistencies that undermine both public trust and implementation efficacy (Simpson & Smits, 2022).

Additionally, persistent environmental challenges such as the worsening PM2.5 air pollution crisis - exacerbated annually by agricultural burning - further demonstrate the limitations of Thailand’s sustainability efforts. Despite recent initiatives aimed at reducing open burning and controlling emissions, enforcement remains weak, and the underlying incentives for harmful practices persist. The state’s reliance on industrial agriculture and biomass energy reflects broader structural contradictions: economic models that prioritize short-term growth at the expense of environmental and public health sustainability.

Lastly, critiques have also emerged around the role of business in achieving the SDGs. While the private sector is increasingly seen as a development partner, there is limited accountability in how business activities contribute to - or undermine - sustainability targets.

Without more robust regulatory frameworks and transparency mechanisms, corporate participation risks becoming performative rather than transformational.

### *COVID-19*

While the SDG framework calls for cross-sectoral and multilevel integration, many Thai ministries continue to operate independently, making cohesive policy implementation difficult. Achieving meaningful progress requires strong collaboration between ministries and clear vertical coordination between national and local levels. Local governments play a critical role in frontline implementation, but without top-down accountability - i.e., knowing which national agency owns which SDG indicator - efforts remain disjointed.

This challenge was especially visible during the COVID-19 pandemic, which severely disrupted national data collection systems and exposed institutional weaknesses. Between 2020 and 2022, field surveys, censuses, and monitoring activities were suspended or scaled back due to health restrictions, leading to gaps in data for key SDG indicators, particularly in education (SDG 4), gender equality (SDG 5), and climate action (SDG 13). Although ministries and partners adapted with digital and mobile surveys, these efforts were often inconsistent and lacked integration across agencies.

The SDG framework stresses the importance of investing in data collection and analysis to support more meaningful progress and ensure policy direction reflects ground realities. However, during COVID-19, Thailand's inability to maintain updated, accurate datasets revealed a deep structural issue. Even when official indicators appeared to show progress or status as "on track," the absence of reliable data - especially from marginalized or rural populations - calls the validity of such reporting into question.

This concern is particularly acute in education. While online learning became the norm during the pandemic, it exposed digital divides: students with limited or no access to the internet were left behind, raising concerns about how their educational outcomes were reflected in SDG reporting. Although admission rates at the primary and lower-secondary

levels - Thailand's compulsory schooling stages - have improved, completion rates at the upper-secondary level dropped between 2016 and 2019 (VNR, 2021), suggesting that quantitative increases in enrollment may not reflect actual learning outcomes or retention, especially during crisis periods.

These challenges further reinforce A2's observation that the core issue lies not just in aligning with the SDGs but in monitoring and reporting actual results, which would bring systemic development flaws to light. As Simpson and Smits (2022) emphasize, Thailand's environmental governance continues to be shaped by elite-driven politics. Even when ministries do align on SDG goals - such as those involving climate or energy - their implementation is filtered through a centralized, hierarchical system. For instance, large-scale energy projects are often linked to royal-endorsed initiatives, with little room for decentralized or community-led innovation.

In sum, Thailand's SDG progress is not only a matter of political commitment but also requires a structural overhaul: clearer ministerial coordination, resilient and inclusive data systems, and shared accountability across all levels of governance. Without these reforms, efforts to "recover better" post-pandemic may remain superficial, masking deeper inequalities and policy gaps.

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