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Leaving No One Behind: Analysing the Inclusiveness of the Disability Grant Scheme in Thailand

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5.1. INTRODUCTION

This article summarizes the findings of the ‘Policy Implementation Analysis on Disability Grant of Thailand’, a research study supported by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF). The article discusses the prominent gaps in policy implementation that cause difficulties for people with disabilities, including children with disabilities, in accessing Thailand’s Disability Grant Scheme.

Thailand has made significant progress towards universal social protection by introducing major schemes to expand coverage, such as the Universal Health Coverage Scheme for those not covered by other health care schemes, the tiered Old-Age Elderly Allowance, Disability Grant and the Child Support Grant. There is a need to improve the social protection system, however, in particular by focusing more strongly on addressing inequities and inclusiveness.

People with disabilities, including children, face significant social and economic vulnerabilities. Thailand’s National Disability Survey 2017 (National Statistical Office of Thailand, 2017) reveals that people with disabilities reported insufficient and limited access to economic opportunities, social services and social protection programmes provided by the Government of Thailand. These findings are consistent with those of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific midpoint review of the Asian and Pacific Decade of Persons with Disabilities. According to the review, people with disabilities in the region

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continue to face extreme poverty: “differences in poverty rates between persons with disabilities and the overall population range from 3.9 per cent to 20.6 per cent” (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2018, p. iv).

The Disability Grant is one of Thailand’s social welfare schemes for registered people with disabilities, among other social services offered to people with disabilities. The Government of Thailand first introduced the Disability Grant in 2010, providing THB 500 per month (approximately USD17) to all Thai citizens who are registered for the disability identification (ID) card.

This article is organized as follows: Section 2 presents an analysis of relevant statistics, as well as legal and policy frameworks and regulations for social protection (both cash and in-kind) for people with disabilities in Thailand. Section 3 presents the analysis of the implementation of the Disability Grant Scheme in Thailand in terms of organizational structure, processes and programme performance, with a specific focus on children with disabilities. Section 4 presents key recommendations to ensure inclusiveness of the Disability Grant in Thailand. The recommendations were prioritized in consultation with the Government, taking into account the urgency of the needs and wider impacts on the lives of people with disabilities, including children with disabilities. Section 5, the final section before the conclusion, presents how UNICEF-supported research has been used in policy discussions and decision-making in Thailand to address challenges faced by people with disabilities, including children with disabilities. It focuses in particular on the processes through which the research findings and recommendations were introduced to national discussions and on subsequent follow-up actions to improve the effectiveness of social protection schemes for people with disabilities, including children. It also sets out the way forward, outlining plans to address the remaining priority recommendations to come out of the study.

5.2. BACKGROUND: SITUATION OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES AND LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON SOCIAL PROTECTION

People with disabilities have faced persistent discrimination and exclusion in Thailand. The latest statistics from the National Statistical Office of Thailand (2017) – from the National Disability Survey 2017 – reveal that despite the universal nature of the Disability Grant, only 44.4 per cent of people with disabilities applied for the disability ID card and just 43.8 per cent of people with disabilities received the grant. Although the definition of disability employed by the National Statistical Office is broader than the disability criteria prescribed by the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security (MSDHS) for receipt of the grant, this gap in coverage called for further attention to explore the reasons for this limited reach and improve the implementation of the policy.

Exploring the issue further, through a child lens, families raising children with disabilities are more vulnerable to poverty or run a greater risk of falling into poverty or near-poverty owing to disability-associated costs and the lost earning opportunities resulting from having to care for their children. In Thailand, a significant proportion of children with disabilities reside in households in the lowest quintiles of the Wealth Index (National Statistical Office, 2017).

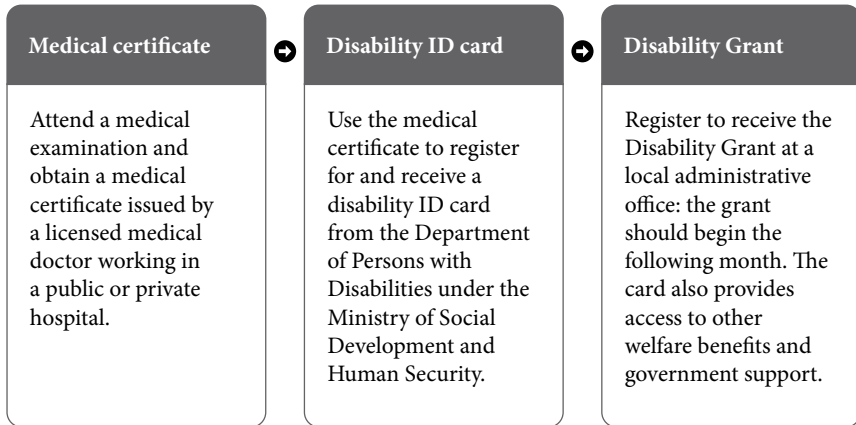
People with disabilities, including children with disabilities, are entitled to social protection and wider social welfare services, as specified in the Persons with Disabilities Empowerment Act B.E. 2550 (2007). To qualify for the benefits, however, individuals must register for a disability ID card. The benefits provided under section 20 of the Act include the Disability Grant, modification of housing and access to rehabilitation services, education, vocational rehabilitation and sign language interpreters. People with disabilities, including children with disabilities and their caregivers, are also entitled to a tax deduction or exemption as prescribed by law.

The Disability Grant was first introduced in 2010, providing THB 500 per month to all Thai citizens who are registered for the disability ID card. The Government of Thailand has progressively increased the value of the grant over time to reflect changes in the cost of living. The first increase was in 2015, when the grant was raised to THB 800 per month, and the grant has been increased again recently as a result of the UNICEF-supported research and advocacy efforts, which will be discussed in section 5.¹⁸

To access the Disability Grant, people with disabilities, including children, must go through a three-stage process: obtain a medical certificate, register for the disability ID card and register for the Disability Grant (*see Figure 5.1*). These three steps involve three line ministries: the Ministry of Public Health, MSDHS and Ministry of Interior. According to the Management Information System of the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities, as at May 2020, over 1.96 million people with disabilities, including 111,586 children with disabilities, benefited from the Disability Grant. The government budget allocated to the Disability Grant in 2020/21 was THB 18,852 million (USD565 million) (National Economic and Social Development Council).

¹⁸ The Disability Grant was first introduced in 2010 (B.E. 2553), providing THB 500 per month to all Thai citizens registered for a disability ID card. In 2015, the Government of Thailand increased the allowance for people with disabilities to THB 800 per month. In January 2020, the Cabinet approved to increase the value to THB 1,000 per month from October 2020 onwards for all people with disabilities who hold a State Welfare Card. In April 2020, the Cabinet extended its decision to increase the value to THB 1,000 per month to include all children (under 18 years of age) in receipt of the Disability Grant.

Figure 5.1 Three-stage process to apply for the Disability Grant



Source: Simplified from the Persons with Disabilities Empowerment Act 2007 and its Amendment 2013 (Vol. 2).

5.3. ANALYSIS OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DISABILITY GRANT

5.3.1. Objectives and methodology

This article focuses on the Disability Grant and attempts to address some of the key questions around the inclusiveness and adequacy of social protection programmes/measures in Thailand for people with disabilities, including children with disabilities. It explores key findings of the UNICEF-supported research study ‘Policy Implementation Analysis on Disability Grant of Thailand’ and uncovers prominent gaps in Disability Grant policy implementation that cause difficulties for children with disabilities and people with disabilities in accessing the Disability Grant Scheme. As part of the discussion around the Disability Grant’s adequacy, this article considers the grant’s part in a holistic response to the multidimensional needs of children with disabilities and their families.

By way of background to the research study, given the significant lack of coverage of the Disability Grant highlighted by the National Disability Survey 2017, UNICEF and the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (DEP) under the MSDHS decided to prioritize efforts and resources on further exploring the design and implementation of the grant, with a special focus on its accessibility for children with disabilities. The Faculty of Social Administration at Thammasat University conducted the research from November 2018 to December 2019, with technical and financial support from UNICEF. Two

international consultants contributed their international experiences and technical support to this research.

The main objectives of this research were to:

- review international experiences with policy design and delivery and the implementation of social protection policy and programmes for people with disabilities, with a focus on disability grants and children with disabilities
- review statistics and legal and policy frameworks relevant to social protection for people with disabilities
- analyse policy implementation of the Disability Grant in Thailand
- provide recommendations for improvement or revisions in policy design and delivery and the implementation of the Disability Grant, with a focus on equity for children with disabilities.

To meet the above objectives, a mixed methods approach was employed for data collection. Quantitative data collection was carried out in eight selected provinces of Thailand: Ayutthaya, Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Khon Kaen, Krabi, Nakhon Phanom, Nonthaburi and Phang Nga. Using a survey questionnaire, quantitative data were collected from 422 parents of children with disabilities. The survey gathered information on the demographic characteristics of children with disabilities and their families as well as experiences of the disability registration process as well as use of the Disability Grant.

Qualitative information was gathered through 24 focus group discussions and 13 in-depth interviews conducted in the eight provinces. Focus group discussions were done with key stakeholders, including parents of registered children with disabilities, parents of unregistered children with disabilities, representatives of organizations of people with disabilities, officials from the local One-Stop Service for Persons with Disabilities or Provincial Office of Social Development and Human Security, and officials from the local General Disability Service Centre or local government. In-depth information was gathered from high-level administrators and policy-makers at the MSDHS and from medical doctors and community volunteers.

5.3.2. Key findings

5.3.2.1. Legal and policy frameworks

Thailand has made good progress and firm commitments to mainstreaming the rights of people with disabilities. Thailand's national laws and policies align with the disability-related international and regional frameworks to which the country is a signatory. The major disability-specific law, the Persons with Disabilities Empowerment Act B.E. 2550 (2007) and its revision in 2013, sets out the rights of people with disabilities, including their access to social welfare services.

Thailand's commitment to 'disability mainstreaming' is reflected in national legal and policy frameworks, particularly the 5th National Plan on Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities 2017–2021. This particular policy framework, still valid until the new plan is finalized, coordinates the support and services for people with disabilities, including access to employment promotion services, public transportation, environmental access, information access and access to social, cultural and recreational activities. Implementation of the National Plan is monitored by the National Committee on Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (NCEPD), which is chaired by the Prime Minister. The DEP under the MSDHS acts as the main focal point to implement all of the country's legal and policy frameworks on disabilities.

The current legal and policy frameworks reflect a paradigm shift from a medical to a social and rights-based approach. The 2007 Persons with Disabilities Empowerment Act and its revision in 2013 are based on the social and rights-based approach, aiming for anti-discrimination and disability inclusiveness. The provision of social protection for people with disabilities in Thailand has been influenced by the international disability movement, especially the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which the country ratified in 2008. Other regional and subregional frameworks have also played important roles in the development of Thailand's disability policy. The Convention is significant because it recognizes the attitudinal and environmental barriers that can hinder people with disabilities from achieving full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.

The recent inclusion of modules on child functioning in the National Disability Survey conducted by the National Statistical Office represents an important effort to ensure the visibility of all people living with functional limitations and in need of support. The module's adoption is in line with the country's shift from a medical to a more social approach to measuring functionality.

5.3.2.2. Coherence and coordination at all levels

Because Ministry of Public Health, MSDHS and Ministry of Interior are three distinct entities, each with its own supervisory line and protocol, structural factors contribute to bottlenecks in the joint implementation of the disability registration at the local level. Front-line staff of each line ministry reported an unclear understanding of the roles and protocol of the other ministries. Incongruences often result from discrepancies in the understanding, for instance, between doctors and front-line staff at the Provincial Office of Social Development and Human Security registration desks regarding their designated roles and responsibilities and the use and interpretation of the Disability registration manual. Of special concern are the findings that front-line officers regularly overruled doctors' decisions on medical certification or asked the person with a disability to return to the hospital for re-evaluation as well as

questioning the validity of the disability certificate. Proper implementation of the policy is aggravated by the lack of sufficient specialised staff to conduct disability registration, often requiring unqualified staff to help with the process.

There is a lack of mechanisms to monitor the performance of the Disability Grant and to follow up with the children with disabilities and their families. There is currently no shared disability database that allows for follow-up on progress in regard to receiving the Disability Grant or other social welfare benefit for people with disabilities. In addition, there is no way to comprehensively assess the performance of the Disability Grant. This is vital to make the grant more adaptive and responsive to the needs of people with disabilities, especially children with disabilities, whose age-specific needs may be overlooked.

5.3.2.3. Exclusions

The current eligibility criteria are a key barrier to successful disability registration and access to the Disability Grant. Children with some types of disability/functional limitations experienced difficulties in gaining the required medical certification. The qualitative analysis indicates that the medical diagnosis approach is still used (rather than the functional approach). In some instances, doctors have immediately ruled out the eligibility of some types of conditions not considered severe enough, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

Some children may not have access to medical examination from the outset owing to limited specialists in the local area. This part of the process can lead to the screening out of children who may require support, whereas a more comprehensive examination (using a functional approach) would not only identify the child's disability but also inform the family of further services available – or indeed help to identify what services are not currently available to support the needs of the population.

If a child does not receive medical certification at this stage, parents cannot go further and apply for any disability benefits, including the Disability Grant. This is a critical gap in the assessment phase that can lead to children with disabilities dropping out of the process, preventing both a child's necessary health and social welfare needs from being identified and the child from being connected to the appropriate support services, including financial support. This gap suggests that there is no formal referral service in effect at the disability certification stage.

Stigma remains attached to a disability diagnosis, which impedes children with disabilities from accessing the support to which they are entitled. Results from the focus group discussions involving parents of children with disabilities suggest that the issuance of a disability certificate was sometimes accompanied by a negative attitude from medical staff, who would try to convince the parents not to register the child as having a disability. This reflects the prevailing negative societal attitudes and stigma around disability, which leads to many parents worrying about the implications of their child having a confirmed disability status.

5.3.2.4. Adequacy of the disability grant

The value of the Disability Grant does not vary according to the needs of children with disabilities and their families. The findings of the research study highlight that children with disabilities in Thailand have a range of diverse needs and that these may vary over time. This throws into question the adequacy of a uniform grant amount for all children with disabilities and its ability to effectively cover the varying costs of caring for children with disabilities. To be responsive and child-sensitive, the Disability Grant must consider additional childcare expenses such as assistive devices, medical care and transport (to and from school or hospital), which most survey respondents reported as being the greatest expenses incurred by families of children with disabilities.

In addition, the study findings indicate that the Disability Grant, while welcome, is insufficient to cover the various costs associated with caring for a child with a disability. Families spent an average of THB 1,722 per month to respond to the needs of children with disabilities such as transport costs to and from school or hospital, medicines/medical treatment, expenses related to education (uniform, books), food/milk, and nappies. This incongruence between income and expenses reflects the financial challenges of caring for children with disabilities. The current Disability Grant amount was reported to represent approximately 9 per cent of household income and 5 per cent of household expenses and cover 46 per cent of expenses for children with disabilities. Therefore, in most cases, the Disability Grant is insufficient to meet the needs of children with disabilities, and it is certainly inadequate for those with severe needs.

5.3.2.5. Access to other social welfare services

Insufficient social workers make it difficult to follow up on children with disabilities and ensure that they access the services they need. Once registered, people with disabilities are entitled to access and use public facilities and services including medical treatment and health care, education, employment, disability allowance, sign language interpreters, personal assistants, home modification, information accessibility, and assistive technology. Yet the ability of children with disabilities to access education and health services remains limited in Thailand. Significant gaps remain in the coverage of services for children with disabilities, putting them at risk of being left behind or excluded from mainstream development. These challenges include a lack of access to education and rehabilitation services, as well as other social welfare services, often due to lack of information and referrals, services being centralized and a lack of available or affordable transport.

For children with disabilities, transport is a barrier – both in terms of cost and availability – that hinders access to the essential services to which they are entitled. The average amount spent on transport related to the application for

medical certification was THB 1,585 per person. Findings suggest that significant barriers – including transport issues and other financial costs – are limiting the ability of children with disabilities to access social welfare services and engage in the education system. Although the Disability Grant links to other services, there is currently no support for travel expenses to access social services such as education and rehabilitation services. Consequently, families face a further financial burden if they want to access the services to which their children are entitled. This issue of prohibitive transport costs is raised in the quantitative data: survey respondents were adamant about the need for rehabilitation centres in the community – and, where possible, home-based services – so that parents would not have to pay for transport (the cost of which is much higher than the cost of the rehabilitation service itself).

5.4. PRIORITIZATION OF KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

A validation workshop was organized on 6 December 2019 to discuss the findings and prioritize the key recommendations from the research study. DEP representatives, disability experts, international experts, and researchers reviewed the study's preliminary results and prioritized the key issues and recommendations. This section presents the priority recommendations, which take into account the urgency of the needs and wider impacts on the lives of people with disabilities, including children with disabilities.

5.4.1. Inclusive: address the barriers that hinder access to the disability grant and other social welfare services

Move towards a more systematic assessment of the needs of children with disabilities. All children who apply for disability certification should be assessed, using functional approach, to ensure that their needs are appropriately detected. This will require appropriate capacity building on the approach for medical and other front-line staff in contact with people with disabilities, particularly children with disabilities. Implementation of a more holistic and integrated system will prevent children with disabilities from going undetected and highlight the importance of referral services to support children's long-term functioning.

Combat stigma and provide information on disability. Many children with disabilities and their families continue to face disability stigma and discrimination within their communities and when accessing key social welfare services. The Government of Thailand and organizations of people with disabilities should work on a national public outreach campaign to address stigma and societal attitudes towards disability. Research findings show a need to increase knowledge of disability issues, not only to counter societal stigma but also to ensure that families are accessing all of the resources available in Thailand to support children with disabilities. As well as working with on-the-ground community

groups to disseminate information, the Government could use other information channels, including social media, to reach communities with guidelines on how to access services.

Simplify the system with clear communication on roles and responsibilities. Doctors, including general practitioners, should have the final word on who meets the eligibility standards for disability status using the social functionality model. Doctors need not be specialists in order to determine disability status but they should be encouraged to seek help if it is needed. This would ensure that children with disabilities are not rejected unjustly from the disability registration process by front-line staff questioning the validity of a doctor's diagnosis.

5.4.2. Adequate: ensure that the disability grant reflects the variety of financial costs of caring for children with disabilities

Move towards a more tailored disability allowance to meet the specific needs of each child with a disability. A more responsive grant that is adjusted through a tiered system would be more child-sensitive than the current flat-rate grant, as it could be tailored to meet the specific needs of each family. More comprehensive assessments could be linked to a fairer benefit system, more adequately linking the individual needs of children with disabilities to the level of support granted. This, however, will require communication and advocacy efforts with organizations of people with disabilities, as well as with individuals themselves, to address the varying levels of grant given. Setting the Disability Grant to an adequate, individualized level would reflect the diverse needs of people with disabilities, especially children. The study estimated the extra costs associated with caring for children with disabilities, and these estimates could be further disaggregated by age and by classification of severity (mild, moderate, severe or multiple).

Establish a monitoring and evaluation mechanism to assess the performance of the Disability Grant and the adjustments needed. This is vital to make the grant more adaptive and responsive to the needs of people with disabilities, especially children, whose age-specific needs may be overlooked. Furthermore, the Disability Grant value should be linked to an indexing mechanism to adjust the amount of the benefit to changes in the cost of living.

Provide additional financial support to address financial barriers to accessing the Disability Grant and services. Transport costs, for example, were identified as one of the key barriers preventing children with disabilities from accessing the Disability Grant, medical treatment, education, and other social welfare services. To counter prohibitive travel expenses or lack of accessible transport for families of children with disabilities, the Government of Thailand should consider rolling out a programme to establish more community-based services to improve accessibility and decentralize programmes that benefit children with disabilities and their families (including respite care, parent training, exercise

programmes for children, and physical therapy sessions). Whether community-based services are limited or fully established, local governments in all regions should provide transport for children with disabilities to access all health and education services available to them. Transport costs could also be reimbursed for all stages of the Disability Grant application process (medical certification, registration for disability ID card and registration for grant) to ensure that all potential applicants apply.

5.4.3. Holistic: comprehensively address the multidimensional needs of children with disabilities and their families

Increase the connections between the Disability Grant and wider social welfare services. Current linkages between the Disability Grant and other services remain limited. Financial support alone, while useful, is insufficient to make a real difference. Linking cash grants to wider social welfare services provides a holistic approach to disability. To address the needs of people with disabilities, including children with disabilities and their families, the Government should develop a system to connect all of the relevant services. Linkages to other services should address the specific needs of children with disabilities by gender and age group given the varying (and changing) needs of individual children.

Strengthen the social work workforce and implement case management to more effectively and efficiently support households to access the benefits and services they need. The number of social workers at Disability One-Stop Service Centres working on disability registration is generally inadequate to meet the needs and demands of children with disabilities and their families. Social workers are an important link for children and families in identifying appropriate support and services. It is necessary to increase staff capacity in terms of professional social workers – especially at the provincial and local government level.

Integrate data and information management to enable the improved flow and management of information for children with disabilities, both on cash grants and wider social welfare services. This can increase both the efficiency and effectiveness of their delivery and, in so doing, social protection will more comprehensively serve citizens. An integrated/synchronized data management system and database linked to the national disability ID card programme would help to ensure ease of information sharing among government entities, improve case management and support long-term social protection planning.

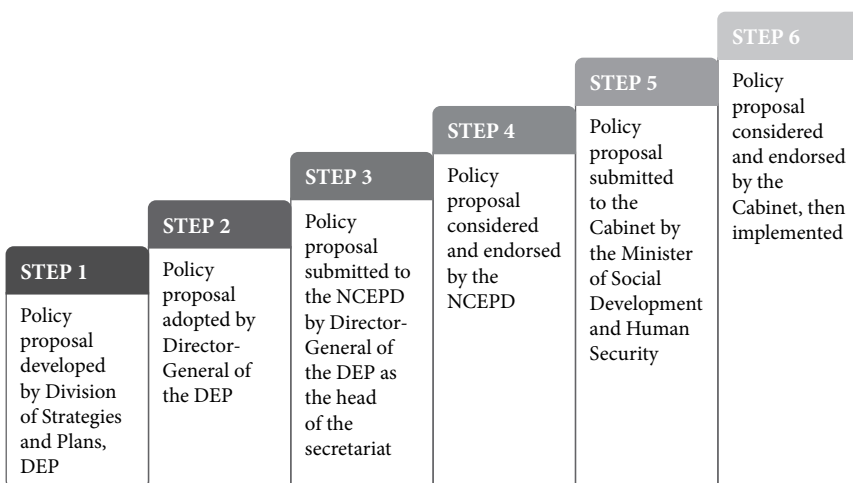
5.5 USE OF UNICEF-SUPPORTED RESEARCH IN POLICY DISCUSSIONS, AND THE WAY FORWARD

The research study in focus was part of the Joint UNICEF-MSDHS Work Plan on Social Protection (2018 and 2019). The challenges faced by children with

disabilities were discussed and the two entities agreed to work together to address those challenges in the coming years. UNICEF engaged DEP technical officials in the research from the outset, starting with the development of terms of reference, selection of research team, field trips to conduct quantitative and qualitative data collection, analyses, and prioritization of the key recommendations. As a result, the DEP officials were aware of the details and progress of the research study and shared with UNICEF key opportunities to which this research could contribute on a regular basis.

Even before the research was finalized, UNICEF sought out opportunities to implement the key recommendations. Considering the policymaking process for policies related to people with disabilities, including children with disabilities, UNICEF strategically requested a meeting with the Director-General (DG) of the DEP, who is also the head of the Secretariat to the National Committee for Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (NCEPD). Moreover, the DG was approaching retirement and keen to contribute a legacy to benefit people with disabilities. The meeting was arranged for 8 November 2019 and the research team presented the preliminary findings and recommendations. The DG showed particular interest in the issue of the adequacy of the Disability Grant and indicated that it was possible to submit a proposal to remedy this issue to the NCEPD and subsequently the Cabinet for approval (*see Figure 5.2*).

Figure 5.2 Policymaking process for policies related to disabilities in Thailand



Source: Authors.

After the meeting with the DG, the validation workshop was arranged for 6 December 2019 to discuss the findings, prioritize key recommendations – taking into account the urgency and the impacts on people with disabilities, including children with disabilities – and discuss next steps in terms of implementing the recommendations. Another implicit objective of this workshop was to equip the DEP officials with technical knowledge of the research so that they could use it to its full effect when drafting policy proposals for the DG.

As a result of the close engagement with the DEP and continued advocacy efforts, the key recommendations were adopted by the DG and reflected in a high-level policy document showing a strong commitment from the Government of Thailand to address challenges faced by children and other people with disabilities. The recommendation to address the adequacy of the Disability Grant has been partially implemented and other priority recommendations have the full commitment of the Government. Further in-depth studies have since been conducted to complement the UNICEF-supported research, as summarized below.

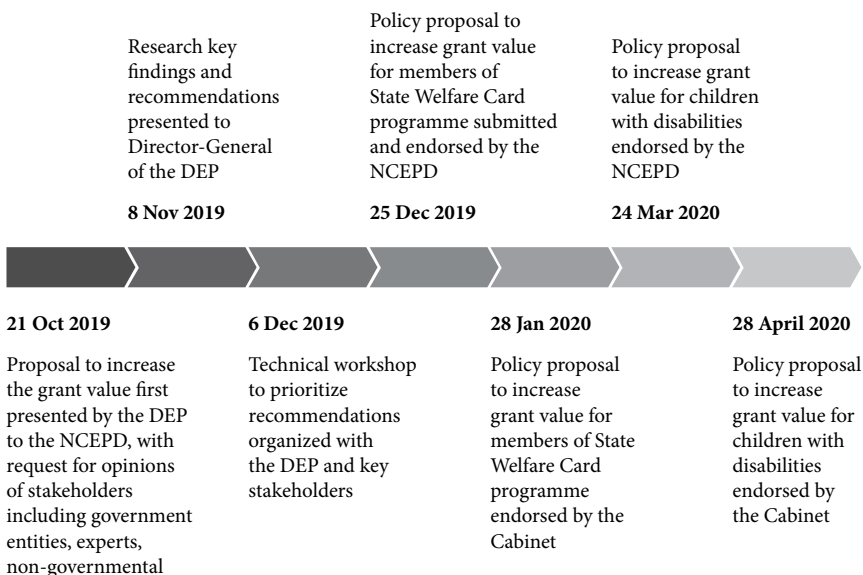
5.5.1. Adequacy

The adequacy of the Disability Grant was seen as an urgent matter given the fact that the grant value had remained unchanged since 2015. Backed by sufficient evidence and political support, the DEP, led by the Division of Strategies and Plans, developed a proposal on behalf of the DG, who promptly submitted this to the NCEPD. This proposed that the grant value should be raised from THB 800 (USD27) to THB 1,000 (USD33) per month for all people with disabilities.¹⁹ The NCEPD endorsed the proposal but, owing to budget constraints, approved the increase in grant value only for members of the State Welfare Card programme – considered most in need. This proposal was subsequently endorsed by the Cabinet on 28 January 2020, benefiting 1,103,065 people with disabilities.

Given the special needs of children with disabilities highlighted by the research and by continued advocacy efforts by UNICEF, the DEP decided to push further for children with disabilities to also benefit from the increase in the grant value. Therefore, the DEP developed another proposal – informed by the research findings showing the average expenditure by families of THB 1,722 per month to care for children with disabilities – to increase the grant value from THB 800 to THB 1,000 for children with disabilities. This proposal was endorsed by the NCEPD on 24 March 2020, and subsequently by the Cabinet on 28 April 2020, benefiting 126,032 children with disabilities (Secretariat of the Cabinet, 2020b).

¹⁹ According to the research, families would spend THB 1,722 per month on average to care for children with disabilities.

Figure 5.3 Timeline for approval of the increase in the value of the Disability Grant



Source: Authors.

Even with this increase, however, the current benefit level of THB 1,000 per month still falls far short of the average monthly expenditure for families to care for children with disabilities. UNICEF and the DEP agreed to conduct a review of the benefit level of the Disability Grant. This ongoing review is also looking into the possibility of adjusting the value of the grant based on the severity of disability (tiered system) as is done in Japan. The review is expected to be finalized in 2022.

5.5.2. Inclusivity

It was agreed that the main bottleneck preventing access to the Disability Grant and wider social welfare services is happening at the disability ID card registration phase, when children and other people are assessed for their disability status. Even the law promotes the use of functional approach in the disability assessment, but this remains challenging in practice. The DEP and UNICEF agreed that more evidence is needed to explore how Thailand can implement the functional approach. UNICEF has commissioned the Thailand Development Research Institute to conduct this study and key findings will be available for discussion in 2022. In the meantime, the Government of Thailand, led by the DEP, has committed efforts and resources to improve the disability assessment

criteria and process. This commitment is clearly demonstrated in the National Reform Implementation Plan (i.e., the Big Rock) 2021–2022.²⁰

Another priority recommendation to be taken forward is the strengthening of linkages between cash grants and wider social welfare services. The DEP recognized, however, that there was not yet any concrete evidence on social welfare services for people with disabilities, including children with disabilities. Thus, it was agreed with UNICEF that UNICEF would commission the Thailand Development Research Institute to conduct a review of social welfare services for people with disabilities, with a focus on children, to identify gaps and challenges as well as to propose solutions.

Low coverage of the Disability Grant was also attributed to inadequate communication. To address this challenge, UNICEF and the DEP agreed to work together to better understand how the existing communication flow worked and what could be improved, via a thorough review of the implementation of communication plans and the development of a communication strategy. This work took place in 2020, and the strategy has served as key evidence for the DEP to consider and use to prioritize its efforts and resources to develop improved communication materials to address this challenge in future.

5.6. CONCLUSION

Although social protection in Thailand for people with disabilities, including children with disabilities, is quite comprehensive and anchored in legislation that is aligned with international standards, there are some gaps when it comes to policy implementation. In particular, there are issues around the adequacy of the Disability Grant and around the exclusion of eligible individuals, including children, from receiving the grant.

The Government of Thailand recognizes these challenges and is in the process of addressing them gradually since changes to improve the cash grant imply the need for additional budget. Current efforts are focused on the revision of the disability eligibility criteria, with the aim of moving away from a medical approach to assessment to a functional approach, to ensure that no children or other people with disabilities are left out. So far, this has been seen as the country's top priority when it comes to disability issues.

Once the revised eligibility criteria are approved by the Cabinet, the next step would be to consider using a tiered system to adjust the benefit level to the individual. Implementing such a tiered system requires aggregated data on disability and these data are expected to be available once the new eligibility criteria have been revised.

²⁰ 'Big Rock' refers to prioritized government initiatives under the National Reform Plan aiming to bring significant changes to improve people's lives. More details can be found at the National Economic and Social Development Council's website, <http://nscr.nesdc.go.th/cr/>

The next priority is to ensure that all people with disabilities, including children with disabilities, have access to inclusive and integrated social welfare services at the community level. A situation analysis of social welfare services for children with disabilities has been conducted, providing an evidence base for discussion with the Government.

UNICEF and the DEP have committed to continue working together on the above priorities, as clearly stated in the UNICEF-MSDHS (DEP) Biennium Work Plan (2022–2023). The shared aim is to ensure that children and other people with disabilities in Thailand have access to inclusive and integrated social protection and social services that meet their needs.

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