Preparing to Meet the Challenges

Looking at the coming demographic changes and the trends in the care of the elderly it is clear that Thailand is facing a number of challenges. This final section looks at some of the short-term and long-term challenges, and discusses some of the policy changes needed.

O Policies for short-term challenges

The years before the arrival of the aging society are a "golden" period for economic development. During this period, the ratio between dependents (children and older people) and workers is very low. The low ratio assists saving and national development. If the "quality" of the workers is high during this period, then Thailand will reap many benefits. However, the golden period will last only another 10 years.

The challenge is to maximize the economic benefits from the golden period.

Clearly, the only way to do this is to ensure that Thailand's 37 million workers have the highest possible quality. The higher their productivity, the higher the surpluses, because of large number of people in the working ages compared with those in the dependent ages (children and old people.) The economy should flourish under these conditions. This will allow Thailand to better prepare for the arrival of the aging.

Thailand faces the difficult task of quickly improving the skills of the workforce before the golden period is over. This is compounded by the fact that average levels of education the workers'are still low, and the quality of education is not as high as it should be. Moreover, the types of graduates produced by the education do not match the needs of the market. Workers with middle-level qualifications are in particularly short supply.

The government and private sector must cooperate in forming policies to lift the skill levels of Thai workers. This includes ensuring that people's skills match the needs of the new competitive environment. The changes need to be made quickly, in the short term rather than the long term.

Policies for long-term challenges

The long-term challenges involve preparing Thai people and systems to support people in making the transition to an aging society. The preparation involves the following issues:

- Preparing people of all ages (young, working-age, and old) for the aging process with includes having high quality and secure lives.
- Constructing social systems and mechanisms that facilitate a secure helping Thais to attain security in an aging society.
- Strengthening families and communities so that they are able to support older people themselves.
- Establish a social, cultural, and physical environment that is appropriate for older people.
- Allow the elderly to participate in development to the best of their abilities.

The issues need to be considered by the public, by government agencies, and by all other stakeholders, to make sure that the policies are put into practice.

Measures to address the challenge of population aging must include the following.

1. Ensuring that people have optimal health. The key to this policy is the health promotion system. Health promotion has to begin in childhood and continue until old age. Families and communities must be encouraged to participate and to improve the health of their members. The elderly should receive particular attention. The health care system needs to be designed in a way that it does not overextend government resources. The public should have a choice of health care systems, though every system must perform to an acceptable standard.

2. Improving the productivity of workers of all ages, so that the workforce can respond to the needs of a rapidly growing productive sector. The education system needs to be reformed to make it more effective. Numbers of places in each subject need to be controlled to be consistent with labor demand. The government must encourage life-long learning, especially through private study, through public educational institutions such as libraries and the Internet, and through information technology.

3. Establish systems and mechanisms to promote long-term financial and economic security. A successful aging society must have a labor rules and practices that are appropriate for old people, and must have an attractive mechanism for saving for old age. Older people need work that is less physically demanding, for instance, or has shorter hours. Savings mechanisms must be established that covers the entire workforce, including people in the informal sector such as farmers and casual laborers.

The challenge of preparing for the aging society: The views of the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security

What problems do the elderly face now and in the future? What policies does the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security have to respond to these problems?

The biggest problem is provision of care. Due to changes in relationship between the family, and to migration to the cities in search of work, many elderly lack anyone to look after them, and have to rely more on themselves. Most live in the countryside and lack good access to social services. The Ministry of Social Development and Human Security therefore emphasizes communities, and mutual assistance within communities. The Ministry has developed a strategy for dealing with present and future problems of the elderly by strengthening the community. Institutions such as local organizations, networks, government agencies, private organizations, and volunteers can provide welfare services to the elderly. The strategy includes the extending the system of village elderly-care volunteers to include every community, so that elderly people are not neglected by society.

What will the government do about differences in the quality of life of the elderly?

The government no longer views the elderly as passive recipients, but instead sees them as active providers or as people who have made great contributions to society who should enjoy a good quality of life for as long as possible. Elderly people's rights are protected by the 2003 Elderly Act, which increases their economic and social opportunities through means such as the health insurance system, living allowances, and village elderly-care volunteers. Elderly people who are still in good health can participate

in Elderly Associations and carry out activities for the elderly or for society, which benefits from their accumulated experience.

O What can be done to encourage families and communities to provide the same level of old-age support that they did in the past?

The government has a policy of encouraging communities to participate more in the provision of old-age support. Local networks have an important role in providing services inside communities. Village Elderly-Care Volunteers work with members of the old person's family. This raises awareness of the problems of the elderly, in the family and the community. People are then able to address these problems using resources, creating a sustainable system of old-age support.

O What tangible measures can be taken to improve the security of the elderly?

At present many government agencies are implementing the idea of "Secure Elderly." Taking a general view, security means preparing Thai society adequately, including children, working-age adults, and the elderly themselves. Every aspect of development has to contribute to improving human capacities. Social insurance, mutual assistance, and social welfare all rely on cooperation between the government, the private sector, and other stakeholders. The Second National Plan for the Elderly (2002-2021) clearly sets specified responsible agencies, goals, and timeframes. There are three sets of objectives. 1) Strengthen elderly persons' organizations at the national and local level. 2) Encourage communities to play appropriate roles in the provision of care. 3) The National Committee for the Elderly, which includes officials and members of the public, has to set out policy directions and strategies and make sure that they are implemented.

Source: Wanlop Ploytabtim, Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, November 2006.

4. Strengthen families and communities. The social and economic development of the country need to take account of effects on the family and community. It has to support the creation of employment in local communities, to allow families to continue to live together. This will increase the likelihood that older people receive care from people within their families. Communities need to be strengthened through supporting the establishment of community groups and organizations to carry out social and economic activities. Emphasis needs to be given to the health of the population, based on mutual assistance.

5. Strengthen society, culture, and the environment in ways that promote the security of the aging society. Community institutions such as temples, schools, and village groups need to be revived. This will lead to greater cooperation, and to the strengthening of valued cultural traditions such as gratitude towards parents, observance of religious precepts, and respect for the aged. Public services need to be designed that they can be used safely by older people. The legal rights of older people need to be protected.

6. Increase elderly people's participation in development, at the community and national levels. Mechanisms need to be established so that society can benefit from the accumulated wisdom of the elderly. Educational institutions and community organizations can make an important contribution towards this goal. Policymakers should consider increasing the retirement age to make it consistent with demographic trends, with elderly people's need for work, and with the requirements of the market.All these policies are consistent with the strategies set out in the Second National Plan for the Elderly.

O Mechanisms to achieve success

To prepare successfully for the aging society, many social sectors must cooperate and work effectively. The three most important are the researchers, the political system, and the general public.

Researchers need to study the problems faced by the elderly, to suggest possible solutions to these problems, and to evaluate the success of these solutions. Researchers appear to be giving adequate attention to aging, and many studies have already been completed. Most of these studies do not aim to make specific policy recommendations, but many nevertheless delineate the nature of current problems and needs. There is already a body of research that policymakers can use to guide policy.

The political system has responded very slowly to the issue of population aging. For instance, the process of developing the Elderly Act began in 1994, but the Act was not passed until 2003, almost 10 years later. More recently, policy development may have become faster, but a long-term savings scheme covering all types of workers has still not been developed.

Another problem is that work on the elderly is still divided across many government agencies. There are 16 government departments across 11 ministries who are responsibility for issues related to the elderly. Moreover, most government activity concerns the provision of social welfare. More attention needs to be paid to strengthening families and communities so that they can take responsibility for the elderly, or at least for their basic needs.

Building up appropriate mechanisms is still a slow process because of a lack of awareness and resources.

Addressing the issues of population aging depends on more than the strength of the individual institutions. It requires unity and cooperation. This requires further attention. Policymakers need to work more closely with researchers and civil society, so that policy is based on evidence produced by research and society.

Thailand needs to prepare itself for the arrival of the flowering of the lamduan flower. We must make sure that the flower is bright and healthy.

Grandma Tussana Jongpipien: Still going strong at 83

At 83, Grandma Tussana Jongpipien is still in fresh and vigorous, with no concerns and anxiety. It is immediately clear that she is an elderly person with excellent physical and mental health.

Many people who meet Grandma Tussana cannot resist asking her what the secret is to good health and long life.

"Genetics might play a part, since my mother lived to 102," answers Grandma Tussana, "But what is really important is exercising regularly since childhood."

When she was a high school student she was an athlete, specializing in 100 meter sprints. When young she went jogging from 3 - 5 am every day. After marrying, she continued playing sports, including golf, badminton. When she reached 50, she took up gentler forms of exercise and activities, such as, aerobics, dancing, and singing.

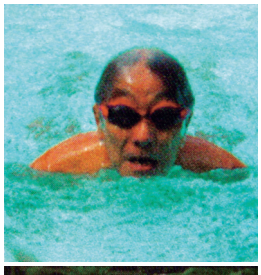
Another piece of advice is to maintain a positive attitude, to avoid stress, and to keep contact with friends. A very important factor for Mrs. Tussana is that she has a close family, including children and grandchildren who are grateful towards her. These things are a form of life-extending medicine.

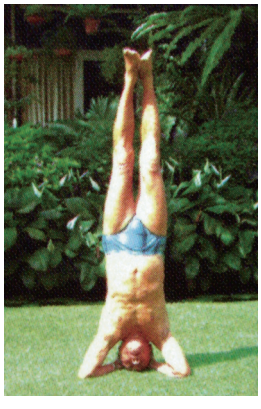
Work also contributes to her self-confidence. Most of the work she does is in the area of social services. Every day she works as a volunteer for diverse organizations, as she has done for 50 years. Through work she makes friends, gains experience and knowledge, and obtains happiness and satisfaction.

Mrs. Tussana appears to do every sort of volunteer work. She is a member committee member of the Brain Bank, a member of the National Women's Council, and has served on committees dealing with many issues, including floods, the tsunami, and conflict in Southern Thailand. She is dedicated to this sort of work, because it brings her happiness.

Even at age 83, Grandma Tussana continues working. In her free time, aside from looking after the house, reading, and following the news, she writes poetry. But what she enjoys the most is dancing and singing.

Exerted from interview, 25 February 2007.





Dr. Chek Dhanasiri: I want to get old and die at age 120

Dr. Chek Dhanasiri's name is well known, but not many people know the secret of having excellent health past age 80-of still seeming like a young man in body and mind.

In the past 40 years, Dr. Chek has never taken medicine and has had colds only twice. The most recent time was 10 years ago. He cannot remember any ailments more serious than a cold.

His method for maintaining such good health is not, in fact, a secret. Everyone can do it, if they pay sufficient attention to food, exercise, and attitudes.

"Eat like an elephant, a horse, a cow, a buffalo, a rhinoceros, or a giraffe." Dr. Chek appears to be joking, but in fact he means you should eat high fiber food, including lots of fruit and vegetables, and to avoid eating meat, especially in old age. You can then avoid illnesses. Dr. Chek says that rural people actually eat better than Bangkok people.

Dr. Chek emphasizes that exercise does not need to be expensive. Many types of work done by farmers, or by housekeepers, are good exercise. If bending over at work leads to a sore back, then passive exercise such as massage can help. Running, swimming, yoga, tai chi, and aerobics are all suitable for older people. What is important is to exercise regularly.

Dr. Chek certainly exercises regularly. Over the past 40 years, he has swum 7,900 kilometers. This statistic is displayed at the local swimming club. He also has countless trophies, especially for old people's competitions.

However, mental peace is also extremely important. Among older people, this can be found in religious practice. For Buddhists, this means observing the Five Precepts, and, ideally, practicing meditation. People can meditate anywhere, at home, at the temple, or at work. Exercising is also a form of meditation.

"When I swim for 30-40 minutes, it is like walking meditation-left, right, still. It gives me enormous energy."

"I am to live to 120." Fifteen years ago, I decided to get old and die at age 120.

Eat lots of fruit, vegetables, and fiber. Reduce consumption of fat and meat. Exercise regularly, and avoid stress. These are the keys to health and long life, according to Dr. Chek, who, even at age past 80, still does not recognize old age.

Exerted from interview, 7 November 2006