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The Continuing Struggle Against Alcohol and Tobacco

Campaigns and legislative measures to reduce consumption of alcohol and tobacco remain important. Their success depends on the determination of civil society and the sincerity of the government. The aim is to reduce the economic and social costs of alcohol and tobacco and to improve social and individual health.

Thailand is a world leader in the control of alcohol and tobacco. In the last five years, the combined efforts of civil society and the Thai Health Promotion Foundation (ThaiHealth) have led to many new measures to restrict alcohol and tobacco use. For instance, retailers may now only sell alcohol between 11:00 AM and 2:00 PM and between 5:00 PM and midnight, children under 18 are prohibited from buying alcohol and tobacco, and cigarette packets must now carry vivid pictorial warnings. The public has become particularly concerned about alcohol and tobacco use among the young, so youth have been a major target of new policies.



Campaigns to Reduce Smoking, 2005-2006

A 2004 Statistical Office survey on smoking habits found that 11.3 million Thais aged 15 and older smoke. Of these, 9.6 million smoke every day. Over 90% of smokers started smoking when they were young. Tobacco companies therefore focus their advertising campaigns on young people.

In 2005, the government, together with civil society, attempted to strengthen measures to prevent smoking among youth. Sale of alcohol and tobacco to children aged less than 18 was prohibited, and Thailand became one of the first countries in the world to use pictorial warnings on cigarette packets. After the Ministry of Public Health mandated the display of pictorial warnings, 21% of smokers who saw the warnings quit smoking, 57% percent reduced their consumption, and 22% continued as before.

However, the number of smokers still needs to be reduced further. Many young people are still able to buy tobacco because the regulations against sales to minors are not rigorously enforced. Advertisements at point of sale and in the media are still effective in persuading young people to smoke. Accordingly, in 2005 and 2006, a number of new, proactive measures were introduced:

1. Prohibiting shop displays. Tobacco companies put a great deal of emphasis on the display of cigarettes at the point of sale because it is the best opportunity to persuade customers to buy their product. Displaying cigarettes alongside sweets, snacks, and chewing gum increases their appeal to young people. Across the world, tobacco companies spend 100 billion dollars, or 4 trillion baht, per year on advertisements, giveaways, and promotions at point of sale, out of a total advertising budget of 4.56 trillion baht.

To help control advertisements at point of sale, the government has been using Article 8 of the 1993 Tobacco Control Act, which prohibits the advertising of tobacco products, including the inclusion of symbols or brand names in print, radio, or television. The Ministry of Public Health announced that by February 24, 2005, all retailers had to remove tobacco products from displays and

counters. Shops that advertised products in violation of the ruling would receive fines up to 200,000 baht.

Faced with dramatic losses of sales, the company Seven-Eleven, together with international and domestic tobacco producers, exploited loopholes in the legislation. Eventually, the case went to the Supreme Court. Meanwhile the companies came under heavy pressure from the public, forcing Seven-Eleven to back down and give up its fight in the courts.

2. Increasing cigarette taxes. As of 2005, Thailand had not increased cigarette taxes for four years, despite that fact that economic growth had improved and incomes had increased by 10%. Sales of cigarettes increased from 1,727 million packets in 2001 to 2,110 packets in 2004. Accordingly, in September 2005, the government increased the stamp duty on cigarette packets from 75% to 79%. This was just under the maximum level of 80% defined by the Tobacco Act of 1966. The tax rise was expected to reduce consumption by about 10%.

In addition, the government intends to amend legislation in order to raise the ceiling for tobacco taxes above 80%. If the ceiling is raised to 200% or 300%, the government will be able increase tobacco taxes immediately, without having to issue new legislation. Tobacco producers predict that consumption will fall by 7% in 2006. The Customs Department predicts that it will fall by 10-12%. Meanwhile, the increased taxes are expected to raise an extra 3 billion baht in tax revenues.

3. Increasing smoke-free zones. Thailand has two kinds of smoke-free zone. In the first, smoking bans are rigorously enforced, to protect the health of non-smokers. In the second, there are exceptions to protect the health of smokers. On December 30, 2005, the Ministry of Public Health made two announcements. It displayed a new smoke-free zone symbol, and it announced three new types of smoke-free zone, increasing the total from 31 to 34. The new zones include lobbies of air-conditioned hotels, clinics for traditional Thai medicine, and all healthcare businesses.

Healthcare businesses are defined to include health spas, massage parlors, and “beauty and health” clinics. The original legislation referred to train carriages, but only ones with air-conditioning. This was amended to cover all train carriages. The new rules came into force in January 2006. The reduction in exposure to second-hand smoke should help reduce cancer rates among nonsmokers.

In 2005, Alcohol Continued to Ensnare Increasing Numbers of Young People

Alcohol consumption has clear effects on the economy. Costs include productivity losses, health care expenditures, and crime and violence. Alcohol is the third biggest disease risk factor in Thailand, behind unsafe sex and tobacco. The cost of alcohol-related traffic accidents alone is around 2-3% of national income, or about 100 billion baht per year. If all the costs of alcohol were included, the total losses from alcohol would likely be more than 500 billion baht per year.

In 2005, ABAC Poll, Assumption University, surveyed Thais about their alcohol use and their attitudes to alcohol. The survey was conducted in Bangkok and surrounding provinces and covered 1,672 people. Of those aged 15 and older, 55% said that they consumed beer. Average consumption was 3.8 glasses per day. Forty-five percent drink occasionally and 10% drink every day. Thai beer was the most popular alcoholic drink, followed by Thai spirits and imported spirits. Average income was 8,825 baht per month, and average expenditure on alcohol was 3,588 baht per month. Most drinkers had received one or more injuries while drunk. Fifteen percent of drinkers said that it affected their mood, 14% said it caused them to lose employment, and 13% said it reduced their productivity. Fifty-two percent had no plans to give up drinking, and of those who planned to give up, 78% had not yet succeeded.

In addition to its economic effects, alcohol also imposes social costs. Alcohol contributes to violence within the family and in the larger society. A survey of newspapers and websites between January 2002 and June 2005 identified 3,427 court cases involving alcohol-related violence. There were 1,198 such cases in 2003, 944 cases in 2004, and 422 cases in the first six months of 2005. Altogether, there were 1,146 cases of assault, 963 murders, 440 rapes, 321 accidents, and 229 suicides.



Measures Implemented in 2005-2006 to Combat Abuse of Alcohol

1. Increases in Alcohol Tax. At present, the Excise Department has two rules for setting the tax on alcohol. Alcoholic beverages can be taxed according to their price or according to the amount of alcohol they contain. Whichever rule yields the higher tax is the one that is used. For spirits the maximum possible rates are 50% of the price or 400 baht per liter. However, until recently the actual rate used was 240 baht per liter. On September 6, 2005, the same day that it raised tobacco taxes, the cabinet announced that the tax on spirits would be increased to maximum levels. Mixed spirits such as Mekong Whisky and brandy would be taxed at a rate of 400 baht per liter. Brandy, which had been taxed at a rate of 35% of its selling price, would be taxed at 40%.

The new measures did not include rice whisky or medicinal spirits, which are defined as traditional beverages. The reason for excluding traditional beverages was to assist community industries. The National Institute of Health has recommended that the same tax rate be applied to all types of alcohol, and that the tax be increased slowly, so as to avoid encouraging black market production. Similarly, the Center for Research on Alcohol argued that the government should not grant an exemption for rice whisky because rice whisky is the cheapest and most popular form of alcohol. It is also the form of alcohol most preferred by people with low incomes, particularly youth.

In Chiang Mai Province, for example, the number of shops selling the cheap types of whisky preferred by young people increased from 389 in 2003 to 482 in 2005, a rise of 21%. These shops are most common where there are concentrations of people, such as in crowded communities, or near student accommodation and massage parlors.



ภาพ: ศูนย์ข้อมูลหนังสือพิมพ์ฐานเศรษฐกิจ

2. Restricting times and places where alcohol is sold and restricting advertising. From January 1, 2006, the Ministry of Finance issued new rules on the registration of shops selling alcohol. Gas stations and shops at schools and religious institutions were no longer permitted to sell any sort of alcoholic beverage, including beer. The Excise Department would not extend the alcohol licenses of around 10,000 gas stations. Altogether, 580,000 shops throughout the country are licensed to sell alcohol. Licenses are normally renewed in December.

New rules have also been introduced limiting the times during which alcohol can be sold. The two legal periods are 11:00 AM - 2:00 PM and 5:00 PM to midnight. The government also has plans to ban the sale of alcohol on Sundays, which is supposed to be the day for families. A ban on alcohol sale on Sundays would help bring families closer together and reduce social problems.

Most importantly, in 2006 the Ministry of Health announced a ban on all forms of alcohol advertising, in all media.

3. Increased penalties for drunk drivers. In 2005, the government amended the 1979 Transport Act, to increase penalties for the use of motor vehicles while under the influence of alcohol or drugs. In cases where the driver caused an accident, the penalties vary according to the severity of the physical and mental injuries caused. Maximum prison terms range from 3 to 10 years, and maximum fines range from 60,000 to 200,000 baht. The court can revoke a driver's license without having to wait for the final verdict.

The Most Important Step: Changing Behavior

The aim of the all these policies is to reduce consumption of alcohol and tobacco. If this aim is achieved, then the damage that tobacco and alcohol do to the economy, society, and people's health will be reduced. Effective implementation of the policies will require cooperation from all concerned and determination from the government.

The efforts of people campaigning against alcohol and tobacco over the last 10 years bore fruit in 2005-2006. Thailand now has a set of proactive policies deterring people from consuming tobacco and alcohol. It is now necessary to change public perceptions, so that people become less tolerant of tobacco and alcohol use. New attitudes would make it easy for users of tobacco and alcohol to give up.

Success in changing attitudes depends on networks formed by groups involved in the struggle against tobacco and alcohol. Governmental and non-governmental organizations can together educate the public to change smoking and drinking habits. This is not just a task for health workers. Effective measures will require knowledge from many fields and systematic implementation. It will require sufficient budget, and support from all levels of the government.

Special attention needs to be paid to young people, to prevent them from taking up smoking and drinking in the first place. To deal with people who already abuse tobacco and alcohol, effective measures will be needed to help them quit. There must be policies to protect non-smokers from second-hand smoke and to protect non-drinkers from injuries and property damage caused by drinkers.

Changing behavior and attitudes requires participation from trendsetters in the media and entertainment sectors. It requires participation from all parts of society, and social marketing. It requires the use of government policies and the legal system. Schools will need to teach children not to smoke and drink, and anti-smoking and anti-drinking messages will need to be broadcast in the popular media.

