



Accommodating an Aging Society: Thailand Establishes the ASEAN Center for Active Aging and Innovation

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Thailand hosts the ASEAN Center for Active Aging and Innovation (ACAI) By 2020, Thailand will have a population age 60 years or over as much as 18% of the total population. Furthermore, in less than 15 years, it is expected that Thailand will become a “complete aged society” when the proportion of the population age 60 years or older reaches 28% of the total population. Thailand, therefore, is promoting active aging in the ASEAN region, which is manifested by the establishment of the ASEAN Center for Active Aging and Innovation (ACAI).

The aging of the population is a phenomenon that is occurring in many countries around the world. It represents a transition from high fertility/high mortality societies, to low birth/low death societies. At the same time, longevity of the population is increasing. Nowadays, the world population has become an aged society, whereby the proportion of the population age 60 years or over is estimated to be one billion people or 14% of the world’s total population.¹ In addition, most developed countries have become complete aged societies while, in others, aging is accelerating rapidly. In Thailand, the rate at which the population is aging is one of the fastest in the world.

Thailand became an aged society in 2005 and, in 2020, Thailand will have a population age 60 years or over that comprises 18% of the total population. Furthermore, in less than 15 years, it is expected that Thailand will

become a “complete aged society” when the proportion of the population age 60 years or older reaches 28% of the total population.² Thailand, therefore, is promoting active aging in the ASEAN region, which is manifested by the establishment of the ASEAN Center for Active Aging and Innovation (ACAI).

This article is a discussion of ASEAN’s aging society, strategies for accommodating the Thai elderly, ASEAN cooperation in establishing the ACAI, and reflections on the guidelines for cooperation of the ACAI.

ASEAN and the aging society

It is not only Thailand that has an aging population. The elderly population of the ten ASEAN member countries comprises 74 million people, or 11% of the total ASEAN population.³ Thus, it can be said that ASEAN has the status

of an aged society. Singapore has reached that distinction the fastest in ASEAN, with up to 21% of the population who are elderly. Singapore is the only ASEAN member country that has become a complete aged society. At the same time when compared with neighboring countries, Thailand is rapidly aging, and is second “oldest” after Singapore.

The impact of being an aged society not only affects the country at the individual level or at the family level, but also has broad effects at the national level as well. While countries in ASEAN are experiencing a rapid increase in the number of elderly, the number of births is decreasing at an even faster rate due to decline of marriage, and reduced fertility norms. In addition, populations of ASEAN countries are living longer than ever before due to advances in public health and medicine. These demographic shifts are already apparent in the shortages of indigenous labor in the working-age years. The increasing number of senior citizens today and in the near future means that governments have to plan now for how to accommodate this demographic “Tsunami.” It is undeniable that there will be a massive increase in the demand for eldercare across the physical, psycho-emotional, economic, social, environmental, and housing dimensions.

Thailand is increasingly aware of what is looming on the horizon and is starting to increase measures to support the aging society. There are various security measures to improve the quality of life of the elderly, both in health, livelihoods, and encouraging society to help empower its senior citizens.⁴

Thailand and the elderly policy and strategy

Thailand is alert to the rapidly changing population structure and the implications of being an aged society. Thailand participates at both the global and regional level in joining treaties, declarations, and action plans for the elderly. The 1st UN World Assembly on Ageing was held in Vienna, Austria in 1982, and produced an international plan of action which provided guidelines on accommodating the elderly. Then followed the 1991 UN Principles for Older Persons which provide guidelines for self-reliance, participation in society, taking care of older persons, helping them achieve self-satisfaction, and living with honor and dignity. Member countries used this framework to develop



their own set of guidelines, tailored to their socio-demographic situation. Thailand produced its 1st National Plan on the Elderly for the period up to 2001.

Later, the 2nd World Assembly on Ageing was organized by the UN in Madrid, Spain between April 8-12, 2002, and this forum produced the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA). That seemed to represent a turning point for Thailand when it realized the urgency of the situation and the need to redouble efforts in implementation of the action plan and adopting a clear vision of the road ahead. The MIPAA articulated three areas of focus for the action plans: 1) Elderly and development; 2) Elderly with good health and well-being, and 3) Elderly who have confidence that there will be a supportive and suitable environment for senior citizens.

As a member of the UN, Thailand is playing its part in implementing its vision of what needs to be done. There is the 1st National Plan on the Elderly as cited above, the 2nd National Elderly Development Plan (2002-2021; Revised in 2009); and the 2003 Elderly Persons Act (revised in 2010), as a roadmap for the way forward.^{5,6}

Although Thailand has been an aged society for a period of time (i.e., since 2005), the programs for the elderly in the past have been considered less successful than they should be. Less than half of the indicator targets for strategies under the 2nd National Plan on the Elderly (2002-2021) have been achieved. In addition, there are stubborn problems and obstacles which are impeding progress, just as the number and needs of Thai senior citizens is increasing.⁷

The Ministry of Social Development and Human Security (MSDHS) has successfully persuaded the Cabinet to place the “Aging Society” as a national agenda item (as approved on December 4, 2018). The Cabinet set the immediate objective of the agenda as the integration of work between various agencies in the public, private, and civil society sectors with the common goal of promoting good quality of life in older age.⁸ However, the level of collaboration has not been optimal, especially in the integration of databases. Thus, there is a lack of consolidated information that would give the overall picture of what is happening with Thailand’s senior citizens and the trends going forward. The most important need at the moment is to create a sufficient number and type of personnel to help accommodate the growing population of elderly, and these personnel need to have an understanding of the government’s elderly development plan and vision.

Thailand’s 10th National Economic and Social Development Plan (2007-2011) includes a special focus on the aging society. The plan calls for measures to help older working-age citizens to save more for retirement, and introduce plans for long-term care. There will need to be support for social activities of the elderly, ensuring that communities monitor and support the elderly in their neighborhood, and protect the social rights of senior citizens.⁹ Such policies and plans will have to be adjusted to align with demographic trends and keep pace with the socio-economic changes in Thailand. The 10th development plan can be considered a watershed moment when the Thai government started to seriously embrace the challenges of caring for the elderly over the long-term.

Thailand and its cooperation with ASEAN on the elderly program

Thailand’s action in the past can be considered as preparation for when the Thai population will become a complete aged society, and to ensure quality of life and good health of its senior citizens. In 2019, Thailand has cooperated with ASEAN on the active aging agenda, whereby by General Prayut Chan-ocha, as Prime Minister and annual chairperson of ASEAN, suggested that Thailand establish an ASEAN Center for Active Aging and Innovation or (ACAI). This suggestion was announced at the annual ASEAN summit, and the Prime Minister proposed that Thailand start as host of ACAI given its readiness and vision for the task.

In proceeding to establish ACAI, Thailand held a meeting to prepare for the opening of the Center, first in July 2019. Participants included representatives from organizations related to elderly programs and issues across the social, economic and education dimensions. The objective was to discuss the current situation, and what new policies were needed at the ASEAN level, using the mechanism of the ACAI to help brainstorm and work out the details. A second preparatory meeting was held with representatives of the ten member countries. This event was called the “Partnership Meeting of ASEAN’s ACAI, during August 7-9, 2019. Participants presented the situation and policies of each ASEAN country, and discussed issues that needed joint advocacy at the regional level. There were experts from the health, social, and economic fields to share information and ideas. There were also representatives from partner nations of the ASEAN Community, including China, Japan, South Korea





and the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM). The participants summarized the deliberations into the following issues which the ACAI Center could spearhead: (1) Savings and the insurance systems; (2) Long-term care; (3) Primary care by focusing on community-based services; and (4) Development of a database or resource center to inform policy and innovations in the systems of services for older persons.¹⁰

Thailand launches the ACAI

ACAI was officially launched on November 3, 2019, in conjunction with the opening ceremony of the 35th ASEAN Summit, with General Prayut Chan-ocha (Prime Minister) presiding over the ceremony. General Prayut gave a statement asserting the position of Thailand in supporting sustainability for the ten ASEAN member countries: The Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, Vietnam, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Thailand. These ten countries have a combined population of 650 million people, and are supported by China, Japan and South Korea as “ASEAN + 3” based on the following principle:

“ASEAN needs a new paradigm for economic growth that is dynamic, sustainable, and inclusive of all parts of the region so that no one is left behind. This paradigm must give importance to the development of human capital in tandem with environmental protection.”¹¹

The holistic approach to sustainability in this paradigm covers the following: (1) Caring for the elderly in the social and public health dimensions; (2) Enhancing economic potential; and (3) Promoting a favorable

environment, including development of architecture and applying science technology and innovation to promote sustainable and sufficient quality life, culminating in an ASEAN community that is caring and sharing.¹²

The ACAI has the following five missions that promote cooperation in support of the elderly between ASEAN member countries and various partners, regionally and globally:

1. Serving as a focal point for knowledge sharing for improved elderly care;
2. Being a center for joint training among ASEAN members to build capacity of personnel to return to take care of the elderly in their home countries (capacity training)
3. Being a forum for presentation of the policy on the elderly to governments of different countries using the empirical database (evidence-based policy advocacy)
4. Being the data center that will monitor the situation of the elderly, including various activities conducted through the center;
5. Supporting knowledge that is generated from research and innovations that are mobilized to support policy and services of ASEAN member states.

The Thai government has assigned the Department of Medical Services (DMS) of the MOPH to take the lead on behalf of the ACAI agenda. Accordingly, the DMS planned the “International Conference on ASEAN+3 Geriatric Medicine and Gerontology 2020” to be held during March 25-26, 2020 with the theme of “Welcoming the Aging Society of ASEAN.” The agenda for the conference included a presentation of a summary of operations from the ACAI

PREP Meeting: ASEAN situation, policy for older persons, and advocacy issues for ACAI, including a forum for discussion of health, social and economic issues, and innovation in preparation for the aging society in ASEAN countries. *However, due to the sudden outbreak of Covid-19, the conference was postponed indefinitely.*

Guidelines for the operation of the ACAI

The creation of the ACAI is a concrete way to spur countries to plan for human security. The role of the Center is to help the population of older persons in the ASEAN region to be as self-reliant as long as possible while enjoying quality of life. This should be a solid investment in the human resources of the ASEAN community which is a people-centered approach that leaves no one left behind as it looks toward the future.¹³

Thailand has been chosen as the location of the ACAI, and that presents a formidable challenge. The Thai MOPH has been designated to take the lead in operating the Center, and the first order of business should promote the continued collaboration of member states to exchange and discuss common issues, and identify the most pressing needs of senior citizens that are common among multiple member countries. It will be important to have a mentor country for societies that are just starting to become an aged society. That way, they can build on the experience of the countries which have already had to confront the needs of a growing population of senior citizens. A second order of business is the creation of a database on the elderly which can be country-specific as well as aggregated to the regional or sub-regional level.

Having the ACAI in Thailand, it is expected that people and organizations that work with senior citizens will have

first-hand access to the latest knowledge, news and technology on caring for the elderly directly from the Center. That will help these organizations provide standard care, both physical and psycho-emotional, and ensure as a stable lifestyle as possible in various aspects of retirement. Senior citizens need to be proud and dignified to have reached advanced age, and they should feel like they are still valued members of society and not a burden on their children or the community. In addition, the ACAI will help Thailand to get a first-hand look at the situation in other countries in the region, and that will help them anticipate the changes and challenges that they may face in the near future. By working together to formulate policy and plans, ASEAN member countries can enjoy economies of scale instead of each country having to develop their own guidelines and work plans from scratch.

Summary

Countries in the ASEAN community are currently facing the prospect of becoming complete aged societies in the near future. The establishment of the ACAI is a way to spur ASEAN member countries to start preparing now, if they have not already done so, to lay the foundation for security of their senior citizens. A key challenge for the ACAI is to encourage countries to share and collaborate so that all can apply lessons learned and avoid repeating mistakes that partner countries have made in trying to accommodate a booming population of elderly. This will require establishing a database and resource center which compiles these lessons learned, as well as being a source of the latest information and data about the elderly situation in the region. The overarching guideline of ACAI is that programs for the elderly in ASEAN need to be people-centered, and ensure that no one is left behind.

