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Policy Brief

Public Health Policy Development in Thailand: Success and Challenges

A concept on social determinants of health and the Ottawa Charter's action areas for health promotion have drawn, in many countries, awareness to the health impacts resulting from a public policy. In Thailand, the issue was taken under consideration in the process of the National Health Systems Reform, leading to the development of "the National Health Act". As instructed by the National Health Act, A.D. 2007, "healthy public policy" is developed through the mechanisms of the National Health Statute, Health Assemblies, Health Impact Assessment, and the National committee, under the National Health Commission, with the National Health Commission Office of Thailand (NHCO) as the secretariat. According to a study conducted by the Health Intervention and Technology Assessment Program (HITAP) and Mahidol University during 2011-2, it is found that such mechanisms have allowed the country to successfully achieve certain objectives, but still facing a number of challenges.

Desirable healthy public policy process

Healthy public policy is defined as a policy that has a concern for health impact and aims to create a supportive environment for the good health of all citizens equally; posting no direct negative health consequences, nor impeding access to basic healthcare services. According to the NHCO's framework for development of healthy public policy, the process should be a "participatory democracy" characterized by extensive involvement of all stakeholders, and use of intellectual deliberation in order to reach a consensus. This, in fact, corresponds to the "Triangle that Moves a Mountain" concept.

> ***"The development of public policy requires an evidence-based intellectual approach. When an issue is clearly identified, an academic process then gets underway to provide recommendations or policy options to be considered for consensus and practical implementation that benefit the society as a whole rather than certain individuals or groups."***
> ***(Amphon Jindawatana, 2011)***

"Indicators" for evaluating development of healthy public policy

Assessment of performance and effectiveness of any public policy requires not only examination of policy content, but also consideration of involving key actors in the process, as well as the policy development process. Therefore, in the research entitled "Evaluation of the healthy public policy development under the National Health Commission during 2007-2011," the researchers select a set of 17 indicators that cover policy content, desirable policy development process, policy achievement, and policy impact on implementation.

These indicators reflect on the principle that a 'real'

'participatory' approach in developing healthy public policy can take place when the representatives can convey to others their interests and needs, and when all groups are equally well-informed on issues to be discussed, and are prepared to openly exchange views and accept different opinions in order to be able to reach a 'unanimous' stance on a policy. A genuine participatory healthy public policy development brings about a sense of belonging in all sectors, expressed as making use of the policy. This can also minimize polarization of the decisions and contradictory movement, thus reducing obstacles in policy implementation. In the case of healthy public policy, such approach means equal good health for all the citizens.

> ***Deliberative process refers to "a process allowing a group of actors to receive and exchange information, to critically examine an issue, and to come to an agreement which will inform decision making". (Fearon, 1998)***

Development of "participation"

An explicit success when introducing the healthy public policy concept in Thailand in the first 5 year period is that an overwhelming number of individuals and representatives from civic sectors have attended the National Health Assembly, Health Assembly at province, district, and sub-district levels, and other activities in relation to the National Health Statute and regional Health Impact Assessment. Operation through such mechanisms was executed systematically and brought about successful development of many beneficial healthy public policies. Moreover, in organizing the annual National Health Assembly, the NHCO employed various tactics to increase participation from different sectors such as the government, politicians, professionals, and private sectors.

Meanwhile, there has been an attempt to build capacity for those engaged in the policy process. For example, the NHCO organized capacity building activities on Health Impact Assessment for Provincial Health Assembly participants, academic, and representatives from non-governmental organizations in many regional areas, enabling the locals to develop systems thinking and information retrieval skills. Moreover, the NHCO compiled academic papers to be distributed along with the draft resolution of the National Health Assembly to participants prior to the Assembly meeting. This allows participants time to digest on information and adopt an appropriate stance for their group, as well as to collaborate with other groups, which relatively enhanced the quality of discussion among them, especially on straightforward or non-academic issues. However, deliberation at the National Health Assembly must be delivered within 3 days, while there are tremendous amount of participants, limiting their time for discussion. Limitation on academic knowledge of some representatives and limitation on deliberation time also prevail in the Issue-based Health Assembly.

Examples of healthy public policies developed through the National Health Assembly during 2008-2012

- Universal access to medicines for Thai people (2008)
- National policy to improve health system in the multi-cultural deep south (2008)
- Emerging infectious diseases (2009)
- Management of overweight and obesity (2009)
- Measures toward asbestos-free Thai society (2010)
- Teenage pregnancy problem and solutions (2010)
- Food safety: managing overused cooking oil (2012)
- Management of suicide problem (Happy mind...No suicide) (2012)
- Health impact prevention and mitigation from Biomass Power Plant (2012)
- Environmental Health Impact Assessment System Reform (EIA/EHIA) (2012)

"Healthy public policy" and its impact on health status of Thai people

The review on the content of healthy public policies developed during the past 5 years reveals that they should improve health of Thai people. However, monitoring and evaluation system to indicate policy impact on "health status" and "health equity" needs to be improved. At present, evaluating development of healthy public policy emphasizes on summarizing the activities across different implementing agencies, and the strength lies on the attempt to indicate lessons learned and obstacles in the implementation of those activities.

Using these indicators in evaluating the policy development process during 2011-2 reveals a set of problems, including lack of knowledge exchanged among representatives, difficult to minimize polarization of the decision, absent sense of belonging to drive a policy forward. Such limitation takes place at all steps and levels, resulting in inefficient implementation of the policies. Consequently, this can trigger conflicts among implementing agencies both in the government and industrial sectors.

The challenges in developing participatory healthy public policy in foreign countries

Although the political culture in developed countries may facilitate participatory approach in developing healthy public policy, using deliberation in participatory healthy public policy remains a challenge. According to Abelson , et al.(2003), the challenges include:

- Mitigating strong vested interest that may try to use the deliberative process to sway the discussion or, ultimately, the outcome of the exercise
- Mitigating potential biases introduced in witness and information selection and presentations due to the lack of citizen ownership of the deliberative process
- Properly encouraging "representativeness" in some groups, especially when citizens do not want to participate
- Ensuring accountability to the participants for the outcome of the deliberation when the deliberative process is only one input into the decision-making process or if the final decision is several years into the future or may not be taken at all
- Building an infrastructure of civic deliberation within communities and public institutions

The way forward

The first 5 years of healthy public policy development in Thailand through the mechanisms specified in the National Health Act might be too short to clearly determine the success or failure of the operation. Although the participatory approach in healthy public policy process to manage social determinants of health should be encouraged, there remains a major obstacle to overcome – i.e., the social context that hinders participatory democracy in Thailand. As the political culture only gradually evolves, the expectation is concentrated on changes that can be initiated by the NHCO, as reflected in the recommendations of the study on evaluating the development of healthy public policy conducted during 2011-2, as follows:

(1) Strengthen knowledge management among the NHCO staff, as well as those partnerships and policy developing and policy implementing agencies.

(2) Improve the performance standard and communication to promote understanding and good relationship among sectors

(3) Develop a monitoring and evaluating system to evaluate the development of healthy public policy in terms of resources use, process, output, and impact on "health status" and "health equity"

(4) Adopt instruments to improve healthy public policy development, including stakeholder analysis, knowledge management model and tools, and economic appraisal to show the social cost and cost-effectiveness of a policy.

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Useful information

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For more infomation, visit: http://www.hitap.net/research/10667

This paper is a part of *Evaluation report of the Healthy Public Policy implemented by the National Health Commission Office of Thailand during 2007-2011* by Sitaporn Youngkong, Paiboon Suriyawongpaisarn, Luechai Sri-Ngernyuang, Sripen Tantivess, Yot Teerawattananon, Pitsaphan Weerayingyong, Inthira Yamabhai, Jomkwan Yothasamut, Songyot Pilasant

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