

# For further collaboration on strengthening Universal Health Coverage (UHC): Partnership project between Japan and Thailand

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**Abstract:** Thailand achieved Universal Health Coverage (UHC) in 2002 ahead of other low-middle income countries. Through its experiences, Thailand has actively assisted other developing countries in working towards UHC. However, Thailand is now facing new challenges such as increasing healthcare costs, differing service coverage and purchasing mechanisms among its three health care schemes, and the impact of a rapidly aging population on its health systems. Thailand requested technical support from the Japanese government. Japan achieved UHC in 1961 and its extensive experience of introducing and implementing UHC is a fitting example for Thailand and other countries struggling toward a stable health care system. Thus, the partnership project for Global Health and Universal Health Coverage was launched in July 2016 as a four-year flagship project for "North-South-South Cooperation". Japan and Thailand will further focus to support other countries to achieve UHC, which will be conducive to promoting leading roles of the two countries in the global health arena.

**Keywords:** Universal Coverage Scheme, North-South-South Cooperation, JICA

## Introduction

Thailand, an upper middle-income country with a population of 69.6 million people, has been known worldwide for achieving and sustaining Universal Health Coverage (UHC) ahead of other low-middle income countries. Thailand government started to provide free healthcare services for the poor in 1975, and gradually increased the population coverage (1). In 2002, when the country's GDP per capita was still relatively low at \$1,900 (2), Thailand launched the new health insurance system, "Universal Coverage Scheme (UCS)", targeting the population that had not been insured by other health insurance schemes (the Civil Servant Medical Benefit Scheme (CSMBS) for government officials and dependents and the Social Security Scheme (SSS) for corporate employees). This significant health reform enabled the entire population of Thailand to be covered by one of these three health schemes for comprehensive essential healthcare including preventive, curative, palliative and long-term care (1,3). UCS empirically reduced the level of Out-Of-Pocket payment (OOPs), the incidence of catastrophic health spending, and contributed to reductions in the regional gaps in child mortality (4).

Through its rich experiences in designing and implementing UHC, Thailand has actively assisted other

developing countries in recent years in working towards UHC. A notable example is that Thailand played a key role as chairperson and secretariat for ASEAN Plus Three UHC network, established in 2014 to promote UHC in the region. More recently, Thailand serves as an advisory and technical partner to Kenya under a memorandum of understanding (MoU) signed in 2019. Promoting Thailand's leading role in global health areas, including UHC, is now a national strategy. The Ministry of Public Health and Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a directive for the national Global Health Strategic Framework (2016-2020) to ensure health security for Thai people as well as providing technical assistance for health development in other countries (5).

Conversely, the Thailand UHC system has been facing new challenges such as increasing healthcare costs, differing service coverage and purchasing mechanisms among the three health schemes, and the impact of the rapidly aging population on the health systems. Financial sustainability and quality services are of critical importance for the three health insurance schemes (3,4,6). Thailand needed learning from the experience of other countries.

As is well known, Japan achieved UHC in 1961, almost 40 years after social health insurance was first legislated in 1922 (7). This process of introducing UHC is an apt example for Thailand and other countries

struggling to establish a stable health care system. The Japanese government, as part of its strategy for global health diplomacy, declared its willingness to contribute to resolving the challenge that countries have in common for introducing UHC (8).

Under these circumstances, Thailand requested technical support from the Japanese government, thereby facilitating groups of Thai officials and personnel to participate in trainings organized by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) in Japan in 2013 and 2014. They gained insight into Japan's experiences in managing social health insurance and health systems through the medical fee schedule and the roles of both central and local governments in the financial management of health insurance. Consequently, the Government of Thailand concluded that it was imperative to *i*) improve its UHC operation, *ii*) cooperate with Japan in helping other developing countries to promote achievement of UHC, *iii*) promote the strong implementation of UHC at the international level. Thus, Thailand and the Government of Japan jointly agreed to work together for a technical cooperation project based on the concept of "Partnership".

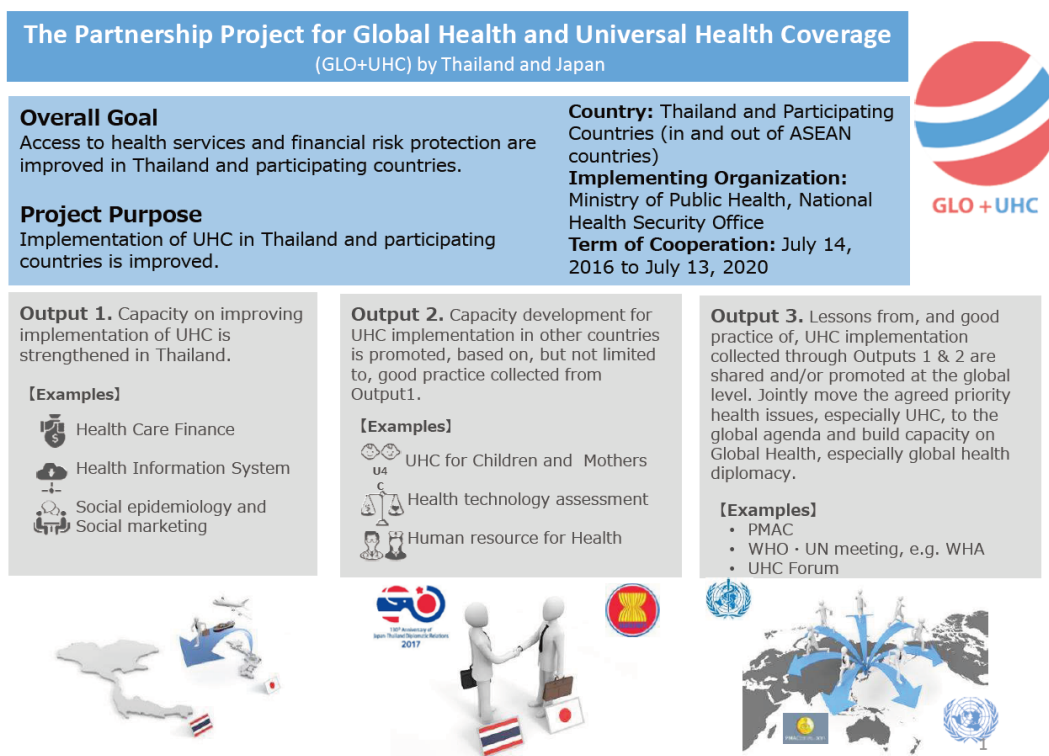
**Activities and achievements**

In July 2016, the partnership project for Global Health and Universal Health Coverage (GLO+UHC) was launched as a four-year flagship project for "North-

South-South Cooperation", meaning in this context that the Japan-Thai collaboration team support third countries (Figure 1). The facilitating organizations in Thailand were the Ministry of Public Health (MOPH) and the National Health Security Office (NHSO), the responsible agency for managing UCS. The project identified main focus areas including health care finance (fee schedule), health information systems (data platform and data utilization), health workforce, and UHC for children. Through the project period, various wide range activities were planned and carried out based on continuous discussions between Thailand and Japan through the Joint Project Management Team, which monitored and evaluated the activities of the project in detail. The following activities were implemented.

*Output1: Capacity on improving implementation of UHC is strengthened in Thailand*

Through a wide range of activities including 21 study visits to Japan and 19 workshops in Thailand focused on fee schedule system, integrated community care, patient safety, health information system, data utilization, maternal and child health (MCH), etc., the capacity of Thailand's relevant parties for improving the implementation of UHC was strengthened. Study visits created great opportunities of knowledge and experience sharing between both sides. Upgrading UHC practice in Thailand resulted in the establishment and strengthening



**Figure 1. Outline of the GLO+UHC project.** This partnership project is aimed to implement 3 Outputs for achieving Overall Goal. Universal health coverage (UHC) means that all people and communities can use the promotive, preventive, curative, rehabilitative and palliative health services they need, of sufficient quality to be effective, while also ensuring that the use of these services does not expose the user to financial hardship. ([https://www.who.int/health\\_financing/universal\\_coverage\\_definition/en/](https://www.who.int/health_financing/universal_coverage_definition/en/))

of some mechanisms or infrastructure during this four-year project period. Some examples are a fee schedule committee in Bangkok modelled on Japan's Central Social Insurance Medical Council, called "Chuikyo", hardware and software for Big Data architecture, *etc.*. Collaborating work was also conducted between researchers of both countries in the community health and data science fields. One example of accomplishment is the acceptance of a manuscript on UHC and primary care by a world-level journal (6).

*Output 2: Capacity development for UHC implementation in participating countries is promoted*

Through more than 20 educational activities, mostly requested by Asian and African countries (participating countries), The experience of Thailand and Japan on putting UHC into the policy agenda and its successful implementation were shared with other low- and middle-income countries now striving for UHC. By utilizing the existing network of JICA office, the project prioritized Output 2 activities in the latter half. GLO+UHC contributed to MCH workshop in Myanmar and the "Thai UHC in action" inviting countries which aimed to introduce universal insurance system by learning from the Thailand and Japanese experience. Due to COVID-19 travel restrictions, other planned activities and workshops in health finance and MCH were postponed. Thai experts contributed to the Inter-professional Education (IPE) workshop held in Japan to share their educational and practical-type experience as Thailand is the leading country to disseminate the concept of IPE in Southeast Asia.

*Output 3: Lessons from, and good practice of, UHC implementation collected through Outputs 1 & 2 are shared and/or promoted at the International level*

Experience on UHC implementation was shared through various international platforms. Panel discussions at the Prince Mahidol Award Conference, PMAC, in Thailand were successful for sharing UHC experience in Thailand and Japan with partner countries. This conference attracts health concerned parties all around the world and hosts more than 1,000 participants in January every year.

By not only direct contribution by the Project activities, but indirect or spill-over effects (*e.g.* Thailand-Japan collaboration at a high-level meeting on UHC and on drafting a political declaration and south-south technical collaboration in essential areas of UHC), the presence of Thailand and Japan in the global health arena was enhanced.

### Lessons learned

The GLO+UHC Project has tried to cover wide areas of implementing UHC in Thailand, Japan and participating

countries, especially in health care finance, health workforce, health information, UHC for children, and knowledge sharing/transfer/management. Among the three project outputs, Output 1 (Capacity development for improving the implementation of UHC in Thailand) and Output 3 (Sharing lessons learned and good practice of UHC implementation at the global level) are performing well with tangible outcomes based on the cooperation of Japan and Thailand. Some of the outcomes were successfully linked with policy implementation and better management of UHC in Thailand. The project provided many occasions to highlight the importance of UHC on a global stage. Regarding Output 2 (Capacity development of UHC implementation in other countries), the project had attempted to build a network with other participating countries through each activity. This network will serve as a basis for further collaboration. For further implementing Output 2, it would be desirable for Japan to take the initiative of the discussion on prospective collaboration among Japan, Thailand and participating countries through use of the existing technical cooperation and collaboration network that Japan has been constructing for more than half a century. Proactive support for third countries jointly by Japan and a partner country, like Thailand, will lead to the enhancement of skills of international technical support by the partner country itself. This effect will add to the value of Japan's international cooperation.

### Way forward

It is expected that the next project phase of GLO+UHC, to be launched in later 2020, will focus on supporting the participating countries, related to Output 2, in accelerating UHC by sharing the experiences of Japan and Thailand. This partnership project is expected to have the synergistic effect of strengthening, on a global level, UHC not only in Japan and Thailand but also in other countries striving toward UHC. Through promoting joint support for participating countries by Japan and a partner country, bilateral exchanges of UHC will be beneficial for Japan's maintenance of its social security system by learning from the pioneering efforts of the partner country.

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