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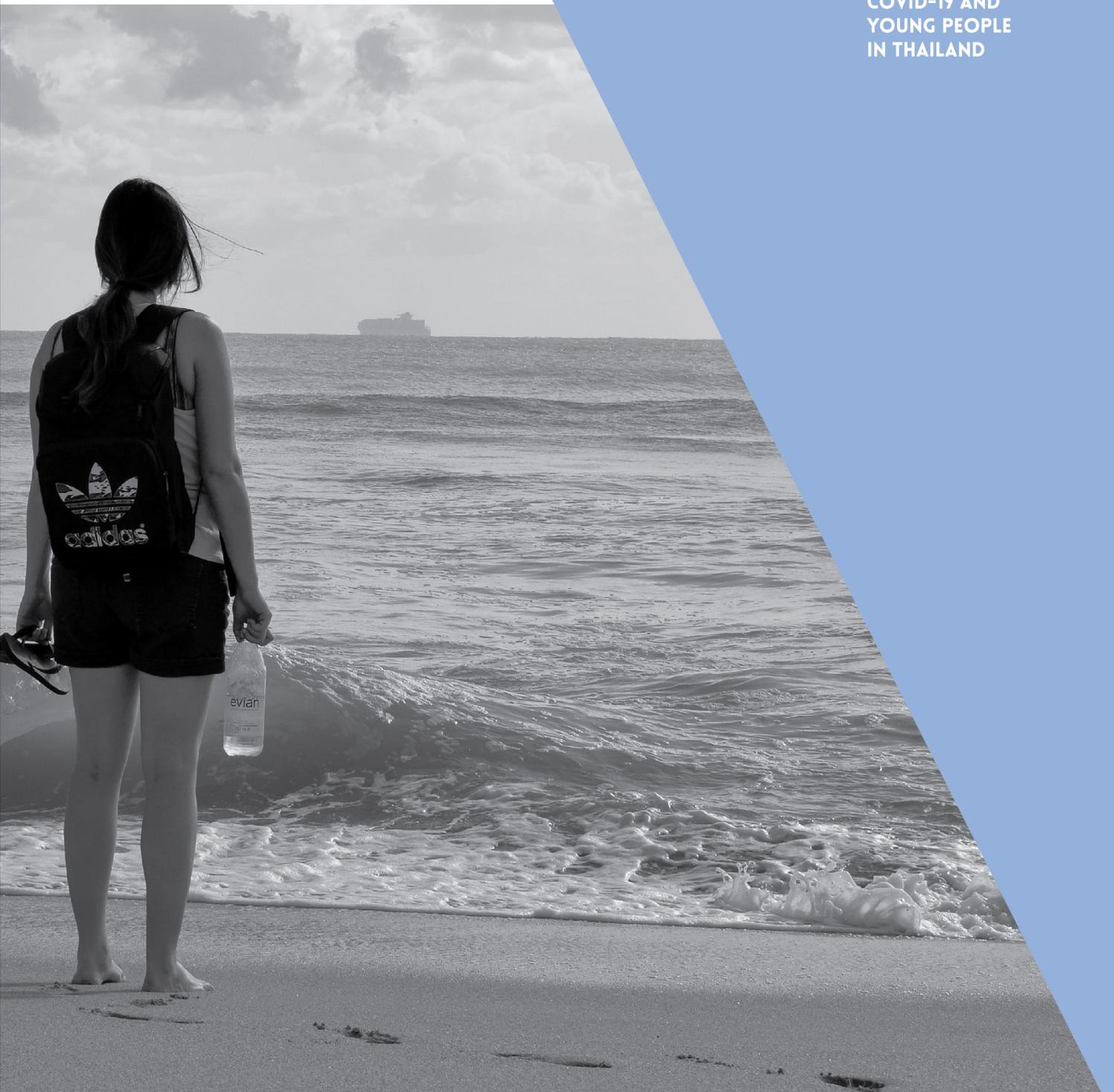
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BLUE ECONOMY FOR
THE NEW NORMAL

COVID-19 AND
YOUNG PEOPLE
IN THAILAND



TDRI

Executive Editor

Jirakorn Yingpaiboonwong

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Wattana Kanchananit

Art Director

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The Thailand Development Research Institute Foundation was established in 1984 to conduct policy research and disseminate results to the public and private sectors. TDRI was conceived, created and registered as a non-profit, non-governmental foundation, and is recognized as such by the Royal Thai Government. The Institute does technical and policy analyses to support the formulation of policies with long-term implications for sustaining social and economic development.

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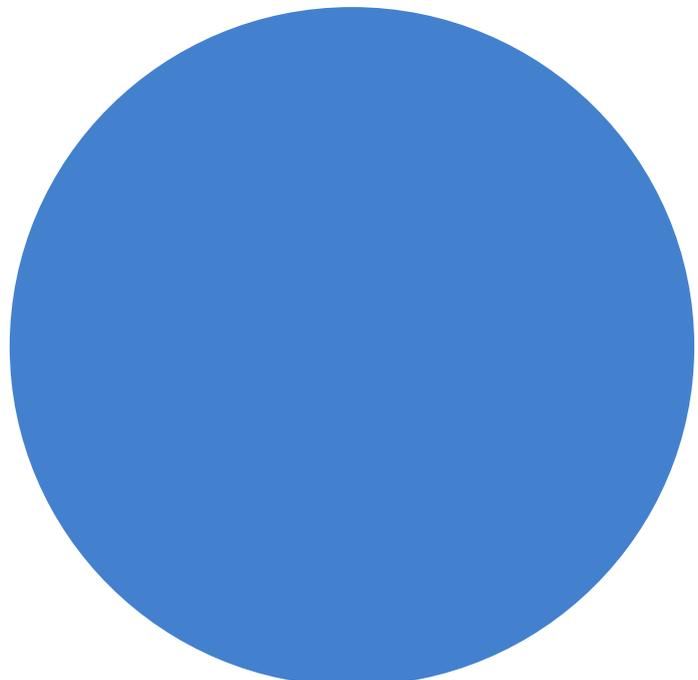
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BLUE ECONOMY FOR THE NEW NORMAL*

Adis Israngkura

Kanjana Yasen

*Chayanid Kovavisarach***

INTRODUCTION

It is only too obvious that the COVID-19 pandemic has had global implications. While its economic impact on countries around the world has been nothing short of disastrous, the pandemic has also been a key driver of changes in human behavior, leading the world toward “new normals,” previously atypical situations that have now become standard, usual, or expected. Some of these changes have been

very apparent. For example, in the technological sphere, working remotely and conducting meetings online through various communication channels have transformed the way people work. At the individual level, these adjustments have paved the way for better work-life balance and for reduced transportation expenses. At the societal level, the shift of consumers toward using online mechanisms will enable technological advancement and expansion of domestic technology companies in terms of both efficiency and prevalence. Perhaps the most obvious impact that the pandemic has had in Thailand is in transitioning the country toward becoming a more digitally advanced society.

**The article is based on the research project entitled Thailand Blue Economy Zoning Project, 2018.*

***Dr. Adis Israngkura is Advisor for Resource Sustainability and Mitigation Policy, TDRI. Ms. Kanjana Yasen and Ms. Chayanid Kovavisarach are researchers for Resource Sustainability and Mitigation Policy, TDRI.*

Table 1 Marine and Coastal Resource Regeneration during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Province	Marine and Coastal Resource Regeneration	Source
Phuket (Patong Beach)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Beach restoration - Clearer oceans 	Matichon Online, https://www.matichon.co.th/news-monitor/news_2130463
Phangnga (Mu Ko Similan National Park)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - New sightings of more than 50 bottlenose dolphins at National Park, 100 bottlenose dolphins at Ko Bon, and 20 blacktip reef sharks at Ko Tachai 	Mu Ko Similan National Park, https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=542064569791539/ , https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=543507669632694 , https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=657805218122583
Krabi (Koh Hong)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - New sightings of more than 10 blacktip reef sharks and a myriad species of fish 	Thairath Online, https://www.thairath.co.th/news/local/south/1824898
Krabi (Maya Bay)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - New sightings of about 50 blacktip reef sharks 	Hat Noppharat Thara National Park, https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=656135518501702
Krabi (Mu Ko Lanta National Park)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - First ever sighting of 10-15 false killer whales around Mu Ko Lanta National Park 	Department of National Parks, Wildlife and Plant Conservation, https://www.facebook.com/prhotnews02/posts/2156957641116377
Trang (Koh Libong)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - New sightings of 31 dugongs and 2 sea turtles at Ju Hoi cape, 1 dugong and 2 sea turtles at Mot Tanoi Beach, 2 dolphins at Yao Beach 	Marine National Park Operation Center 3, https://www.facebook.com/mnpoc.trang3/posts/2289222141382921
Surat Thani (Koh Tao)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - New sightings of whale sharks, 20-30 blacktip reef shark - Return of healthy corals 	Thaipbs, https://news.thaipbs.or.th/content/292334 Posttoday, https://www.posttoday.com/social/local/622052
Surat Thani (Koh Samui)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Female green turtles were spotted resting for the first time in 6 years, in which 202 hatchings safely reached the sea 	Nation TV, https://www.nationtv.tv/main/content/378773735/

Another development resulting from government containment measures – lockdowns and the closure of tourist sites, marine attractions, and national parks – is that natural resources, especially marine and coastal resources, have been allowed to recover and flourish. Between April and May 2020, media outlets reported on cleaner beaches, clearer oceans, and the reemergence of rarer aquatic

animals in previously tourist-heavy areas, such as Phuket, Phang Nga, Krabi, Trang, and Surat Thani (see Table 1). The regenerative ability of Thailand’s coasts and marine ecosystems demonstrates not only their resilience but also the opportunity they offer to nurture a mutually beneficial relationship between coastal/marine resources and human activity.

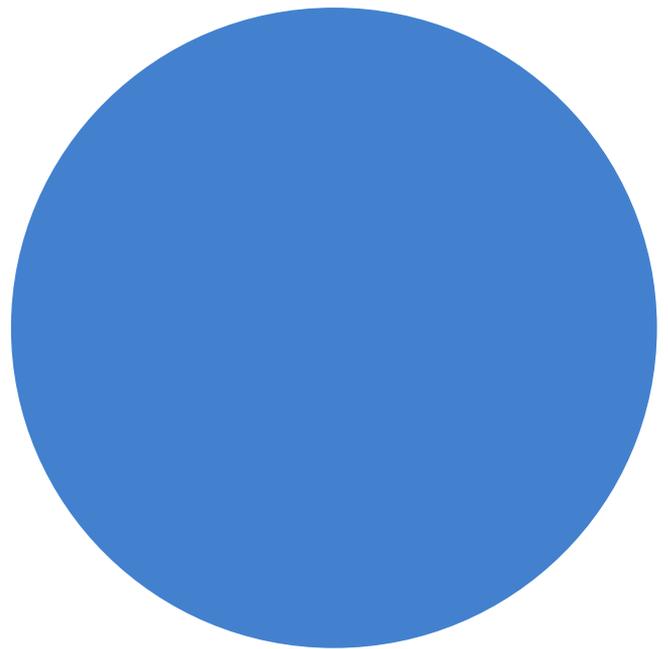
A key determinant in ensuring that such a

relationship exists is through controlled tourism activities, the impacts of which are limited to below the environment's carrying capacity. In other words, this relationship can be sustainable if the region can support the number and activities of living organisms, including people, and the cultivation of crops without environmental degradation. With the natural opportunity that containment measures have provided, when restrictions ease, Thailand must safeguard against tourism activities returning to pre-pandemic levels of overcapacity and environmental ruin. Specifically, the "new normal" transition on which Thailand must embark should emphasize the sustainable use of marine and coastal resources. Here, the concept of "Blue Economy" provides an avenue for Thailand to pursue sustainable marine and coastal tourism activities.

BLUE ECONOMY

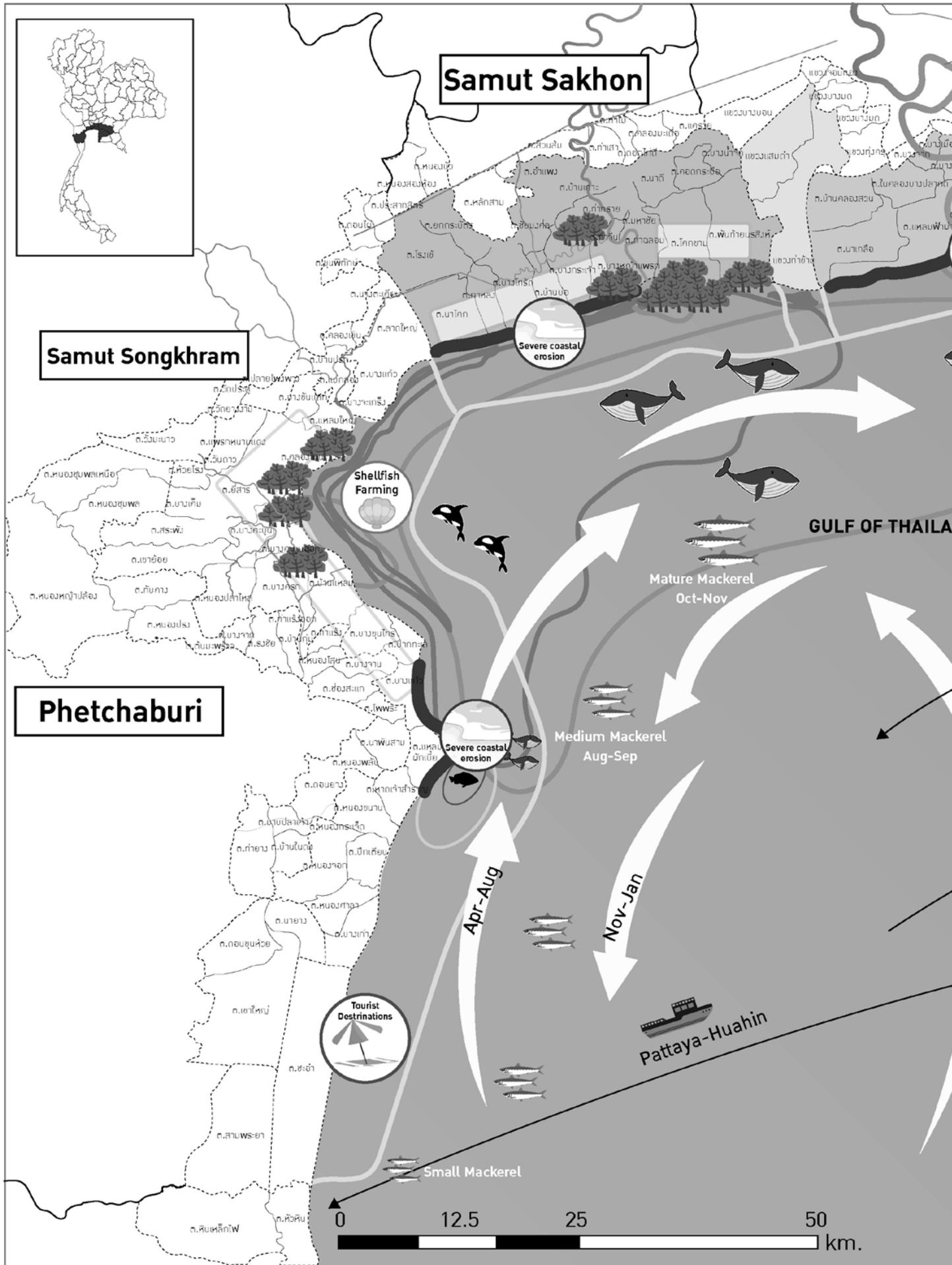
Incorporating considerations of blue economy into new tourism practices entails understanding what the blue economy consists of. The term describes the sustainable development of marine and coastal resources and encompasses both direct and indirect utilization of such resources, which include, but are not limited to, fisheries, aquaculture, fuel, renewable energy, minerals, commercial maritime, and tourism and recreation. The duality of activities under the blue economy can be visualized in how they complement or conflict with each other. Where such activities are complementary, their interaction can create higher and more sustained value added for the economy. Yet, without proper management, these activities can become conflicting and pose a significant threat to ecosystems.

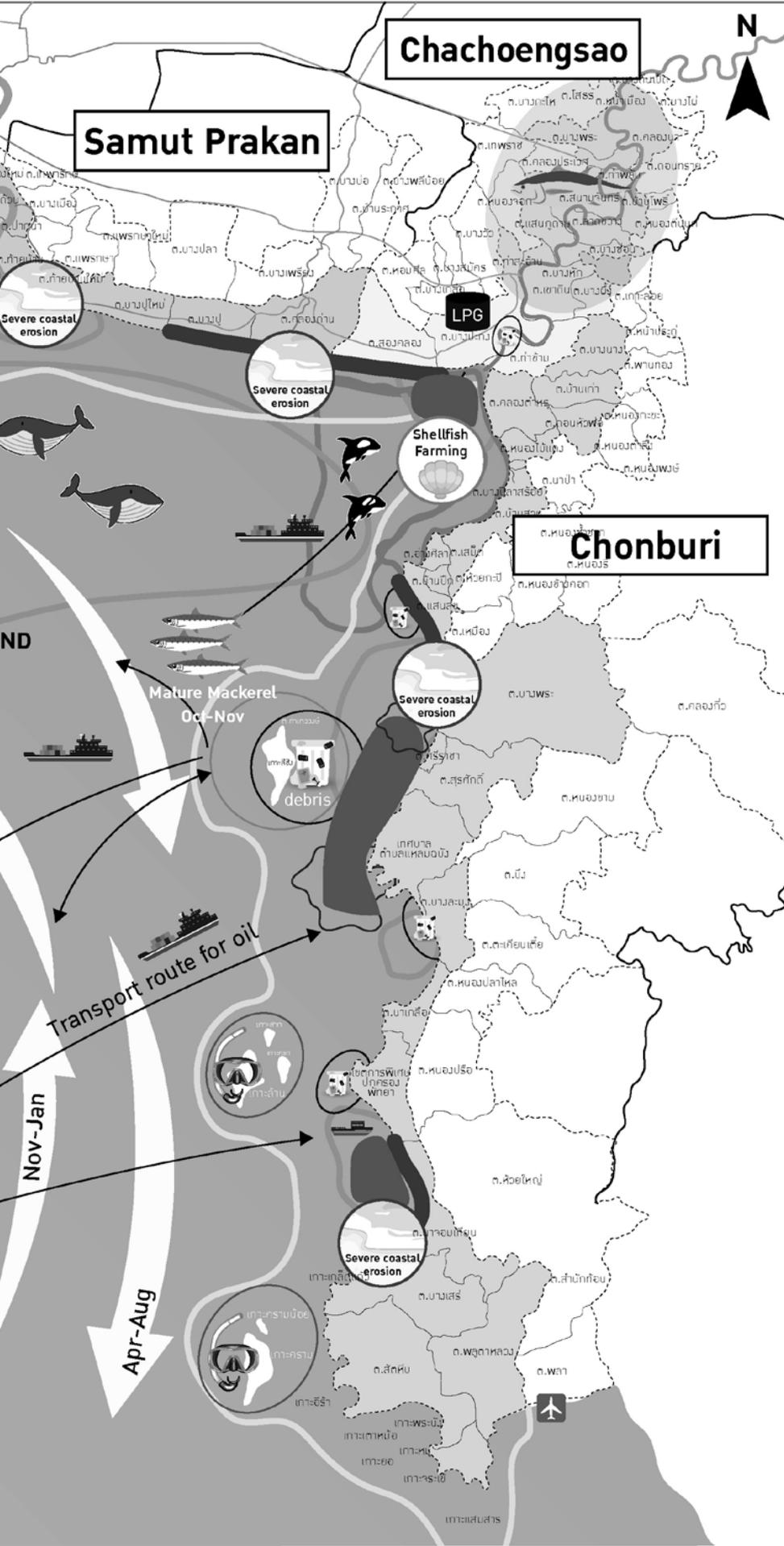
Figure 1 illustrates the ecosystem of the Gulf of Thailand demonstrating the region's myriad of resources and activities. Along coastal shores, local communities have established fisheries and



aquaculture of various types of shellfish, such as oysters, cockles, and mussels, as well as salt farms. Furthermore, seas and oceans have played a crucial role in Thailand's economy, such as providing maritime transport routes for both cargo and oil, while also being home to a wide range of marine animals. Tourism activities are abundant; they include excursion routes from one coast to another as well as snorkeling and diving zones. Beaches and islands along the coast of Phetchaburi are often frequented by tourists, both domestic and international. While at the same time, pollution generated from these activities remains within the ecosystem of the Gulf of Thailand, ranging from ocean debris and wastewater to oil deposits from maritime transport. The construction of physical infrastructure, such as ports and roads, alongside increasing economic activity has led to coastal erosion over time and immense amounts of litter and wastewater. Although the marine and coastal resources offered by this ecosystem are abundant, their longevity has been continuously challenged by resource overutilization and the negative externalities of such activities.

Figure 1 Local economic activities and related complications





Symbols

- Provincial line
- - - District line
- Sub-district line
- River, Canals
- Severe coastal erosion
- Shellfish farming
- Wastewater
- Beluga whales
- Dolphins
- Diving/Snorkeling area
- Sea bass farming
- Salt farms
- Direction of ocean currents
- Commercial ports
- Tourist ports
- Mangrove forests



A study conducted by TDRI indicates that, within the inner Gulf of Thailand, certain areas have markedly utilized the abundant marine and coastal resources available. These areas feature many economic activities that complement each other (see Figure 2). Although Figure 1 identifies the connectivity of coastal and marine activities, tourism-related activities along the coast, such as excursions on cruises and yachts, snorkeling, and diving (H), can be linked to improved socio-economic development of local regions (I, J) while visiting salt farms boosts the local economy and social interconnectedness (K, L, M).

Without proper management, conflicting economic activities cause coastal and marine degradation to become detrimental to the viability of a sustainable source of income for local communities. In Figure 3, conflicting activities for the ecosystem at large can be found, which includes conflict over land use rights and fisheries that exceed the region's carrying capacity, for instance. In particular,

waste generated from tourism activities, such as litter or wastewater from hotels, resorts, tourist boats, is detrimental to the conservation of coastal areas and marine resources (R, U). Consequently, the opportunities opened up by the COVID-19 pandemic allows harmful practices to be reset and for Thailand's new normal of tourism where it is possible to identify new, complementary practices that involve efficient and fair management of coastal and marine resources, enabling long-term benefits for all stakeholders.

BLUE ECONOMY: CASE STUDIES

Although the practices under the blue economy framework may indicate a new normal for Thailand, particularly for tourism, placing the blue economy at the center of coastal strategies is not something entirely new. A popular strategy employed by other countries is to designate a special economic area that generates income from marine and coastal

Figure 2 Complementary activities in the Inner Gulf of Thailand

Coastal	Commercial Fisheries	Local Fisheries	Aquaculture	Salt Farm	Energy	Maritime	Tourism	Economy	Social	Sectors
A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	Coastal
										Commercial Fisheries
										Local Fisheries
										Aquaculture
							K	L	M	Salt Farm
						N				Energy
								O		Maritime
								P	Q	Tourism
										Economy
										Social

- A: Dependence on or import of marine products and fresh seafood from nearby coastal provinces
- B: Professions within commercial fishing sector that involve the capturing and selling of marine animals
- C: Professions within local fisheries that provide income to support families and local consumption
- D: Coastal regions used for aquaculture (oysters, cockles, mussels)
- E: Coastal regions as a source of sea salt production (Samut Sakhon, Samut Songkhram, Phetchaburi Province)
- F: The coast as a location for liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) storage terminals and oil refineries
- G: Seaports for shipping (Bangpakong Port, Sriracha Port, Laem Chabang Port, Koh Sichang Port)
- H: Tourism activities, such as excursions on cruises and yachts, snorkeling and diving, or other wildlife tourism
- I: Professions that generate income from fishing activities, including generating value-added processed products, tourism, and maritime transport
- J: Social activities by coastal communities that include conservation and restoration of coastal ecosystems, such as mangrove restoration

- K: Tourism activities, such as visiting salt farms and birdwatching in the winter months
- L: Salt farming, which generates revenue for salt farmers and stimulates business in the beauty industry, such as soaps, scrubs, and spas
- M: Educational activities concerning salt farming methods at local school facilities
- N: Maritime activities concerning energy, such as transportation routes for oil and LPG vessels
- O: Economic maritime activities that include domestic and international shipping routes for cargo
- P: Tourism promotion activities, such as Cha-Am Feast-Fish-Flock Shellfish Festival, Crab-Pulling Festival Cha-Am, Mackerel Festival at Tha Chalom, Jet Ski World Cup Pattaya
- Q: Tourism activities that engage with culture, lifestyle, history, and archaeological sites

Source: Authors (2018)

Figure 3 Conflicting activities in the Inner Gulf of Thailand

Coastal	Commercial Fisheries	Local Fisheries	Aquaculture	Salt Farm	Waste	Wastewater	Air	Maritime	Tourism	Economy	Social	Sectors
A	B	C	D		E	F		G		H		Coastal
		I		J	K	L					M	Commercial Fisheries
			N									Local Fisheries
										O		Aquaculture
				P								Salt Farm
								Q	R		S	Waste
								T	U	V	W	Wastewater
								X				Air
												Maritime
												Tourism
												Economy
												Social

- A: Conflict over land use rights and structures preventing coastal erosion that affect surrounding communities
- B: Fishing activities exceeding carrying capacity, causing a depletion in aquatic animal resources
- C: Catching clams and turban shells below standard sizing, depleting shellfish supply
- D: Shellfish farming areas that encroach on mangrove forests
- E: Accumulation of waste in coastal regions, such as plastic bags, straws, and cigarette butts along the beach
- F: Release of wastewater into the ocean reduces the quality of seawater, causing quantities of marine animals to decline and adversely impacting mangrove forests
- G: Disorganized mooring as a result of unclear mooring points and insufficient buoys
- H: Construction of coastal roads, bridges, and restaurants is detrimental to mangrove area and causes coastal erosion
- I: Conflicts over land use and fishing gear
- J: As a result of illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, reduced fishing activities further limit the amount of salt that can be used in production processes
- K: Solid waste from commercial fishing boats and docks
- L: Ballast water, sewage, wastewater from onboard activities, docks, and fishing bridges
- M: Labor shortage due to high financial and regulatory costs associated with legal employment, such as long waiting times in obtaining legal right to work

- N: Expansion of mussel aquaculture areas that overlap with local fishing areas
- O: Aquaculture has high production costs, but market prices of aquatic products are relatively low
- P: Falling price of salt as a result of increased supply in the market from increased coastal production of salt will lead to a decrease in salt farming
- Q: Waste from cargo and commercial ships
- R: Solid waste from tourism activities, especially in tourism hotspots (Koh Larn)
- S: Solid waste from households or riverside and coastal communities
- T: Wastewater and oil deposits from maritime ports, maritime transport, and offshore loading of goods
- U: Wastewater from hotels, resorts, commercial buildings, restaurants, tourist boats, and passenger ships
- V: Wastewater effects on aquaculture, reducing farmers' and fishermen's revenue
- W: Wastewater from riverside communities, industrial plants, and flood diversion mechanisms flowing into the sea
- X: Air pollution resulting from offshore loading and unloading (Koh Sichang)

Source: Authors (2018)

related activities, a “Blue Economy Zoning” of sorts that allows for efficient and sustainable conduct around coastal regions. As illustrated in a UNEP report,¹ strategies of the blue economy are widely employed by island countries and countries with large marine and coastal areas, notably Barbados, The Gambia, Madagascar, Norway, and Seychelles. Learning from these countries’ sustainable practices will enable the Gulf of Thailand to transition into a viable blue economy.

BARBADOS

Overview

Barbados is an island country in the Caribbean region. Marine and coastal regions of the country have been placed under increasing pressure from a variety of sectors: fisheries, agriculture, and tourism. As such, the late Prime Minister envisioned Barbados becoming “the most environmentally-advanced, green country in Latin America and the Caribbean.”

Implementation and lessons learned

Barbados, in partnership with UNEP, and the University of the West Indies carried out the “Barbados Green Economy Scoping Study” (GESS), the report on which established that the opportunity to establish stronger linkages with tourism and processing sectors could strengthen the economy, and provide new employment and skills for workers. There could also be key opportunities in the tourism sector by ensuring coastal ecosystem protection through green technology and legislative reform. The approach proposed in Barbados integrates governance, policy, and programming.

¹ UNEP. (2015). *Blue Economy: Sharing Success Stories to Inspire Change* (No. 195). *UNEP Regional Seas Report and Studies*.

THE GAMBIA

Overview

The Gambia is Africa’s smallest country; coastal areas located in the Tanbi Wetlands National Park are dominated by cockle and oyster farming communities. Sustainable oyster farming activities are managed by the TRY Oyster Women’s Association established in 2013. Its objectives involve protecting and restoring the environment as well as reskilling local populations and expanding their local market.

Implementation and lessons learned

The TRY Oyster Women’s Association is a collaborative effort by women to promote sustainable oyster farming with the support and protection of the state. The Association employs an ecological approach called “Ecosystem-Based Fisheries Management” (EBMF) in building capacity in fishery resource management. Joint fisheries management measures in the region include a shell collection season to allow for rejuvenation and natural recovery, restrictions on fishing equipment that creates significant environmental harm. The Association also conducts restoration activities, such as mangrove planting and conservation of habitats for young aquatic animals.

MADAGASCAR

Overview

Madagascar is the fourth largest island in the world; it has adopted sustainable management measures for small-scale fisheries in local communities. Being highly dependent on seafood exports, especially octopus, the government and conservation organizations work closely with these communities to establish sustainable and economically viable practices.

Implementation and lessons learned

Madagascar's community-based marine area management involves allocation and seasonal openings of fishing areas. Short-term closures of fishing areas allow for improved catches and greater incomes. These communities are supported by research institutes and NGOs, such as WWF and Blue Ventures, which provide technical and material support throughout the implementation process by helping fishers establish and manage closures of fishing areas, exchanging know-how and skills, and liaising between the private sector and fishing communities.

NORWAY

Overview

Marine and coastal productivity in Norway is relatively high. Most of marine output in 2014 came from the \$121 billion gas and oil drilling industry while the maritime transport sector contributed \$19 billion and the fisheries and aquaculture sectors added \$11 billion, all of which significantly boosted the national economy.

Implementation and lessons learned

Norway established integrated management plans for marine areas at the national level to provide a framework for marine and coastal resource exploitation with ecological considerations. These plans encompassed socio-economic aspects, technical skills and know-how, and impact assessments of different fields (e.g. transport, petroleum and energy, and fisheries). Norway also prioritized assessing cumulative societal impacts, such as conflicts of interests and other socio-economic considerations, such as promoting stakeholder participation processes through coordination between ministries and related agencies. The plan is expected to be reviewed and adjusted every five years.

SEYCHELLES

Overview

The Republic of Seychelles encompasses a total of 115 islands spread over an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Given its geographical characteristics, Seychelles' economy is highly dependent on fisheries and tourism. For Seychelles, a blue economy that is well managed will enable sustained economic prosperity alongside social and environmental welfare.

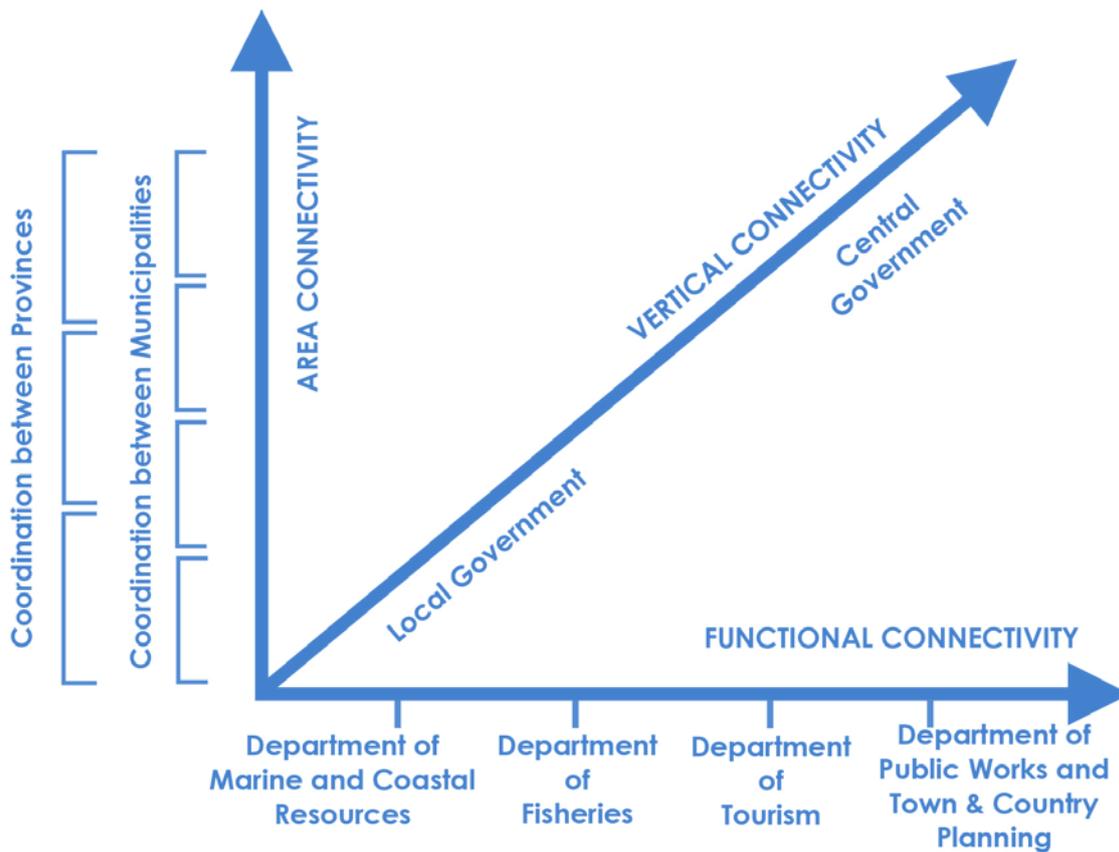
Implementation and lessons Learned

Seychelles has established the "Seychelles National Blue Economy Roadmap" in order to guide and support national operations toward a blue economy. In tandem, the government of Seychelles also developed the "Seychelles Sustainable Development Strategy" (SSDS), which is focused primarily on operations in marine resources, such as fisheries, that are integral to future development of the country. Marine Spatial Planning (MSP) tools have been cultivated to support sustainable development in the usage of marine resources. This entails 13 representatives from various stakeholder groups, the government, the private sector, state enterprises, and NGOs, providing oversight and contributing to the direction of coastal governance. The primary goal is to balance economic activities, such as fisheries and tourism, alongside biodiversity efforts.

Determinants of a successful transition to a sustainable blue economy

Success in balancing the use of coastal and marine resources and their conservation in a variety of countries enables a clearer visualization of how to implement the blue economy. Although the above-illustrated examples vary from the community to national levels, it is possible from a managerial and governance perspective to identify several key

Figure 4: Dimensions of connectivity of the blue economy in the Thai context



Source: Authors (2018).

factors that have led to successful transitions into a blue economy:

1. Raising awareness among relevant stakeholders of sustainable development approaches;
2. Creating communication and feedback channels that enable community participation from members of society: technical experts, decision-makers, and all stakeholders, such as members from the public and private sectors and civil society;
3. Establishing a database that allows access to information on marine and coastal resources, socio-economic activities and

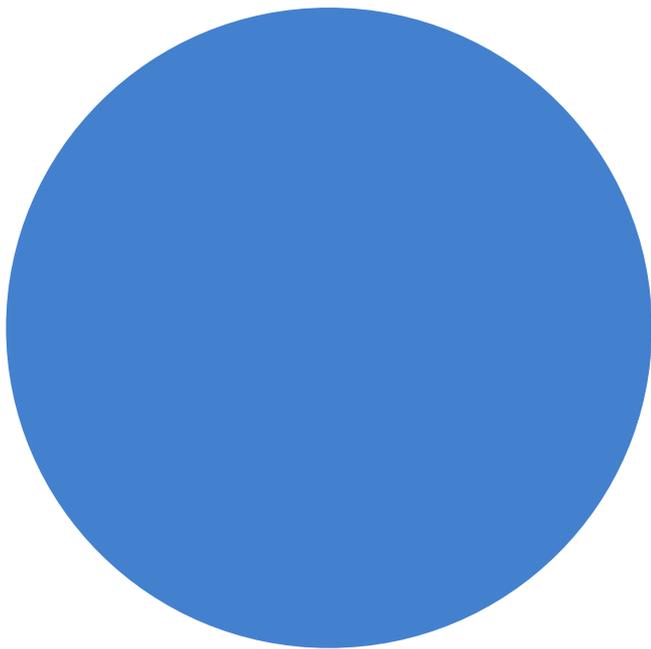
their impacts, and technical knowledge of marine navigation and activities;

4. Creating and implementing policies, plans, regulations, and guidelines that have legal binding.

The management approaches outlined above have led to an equilibrium between economic growth, marine and coastal resource sustainability and public inclusion.

TOURISM IN THE CONTEXT OF THE BLUE ECONOMY

Owing to the close connectivity between activities of the blue economy, as indicated in Figure



1, it is vital that complementarities (Figure 2) be enhanced while conflicts (Figure 3) are minimized. The blue economy also needs to address the importance of marine ecosystems along coastal areas and in the Gulf of Thailand, as they are fundamental to the shape and sizes of economic activities. Last but not least, the implementation of the blue economy must also be integrated into the overall sustainable development framework of Thailand, which is governed by the National Economic and Social Development Plan.

Figure 4 demonstrates the three-dimensional connectivity that needs to be established in order to fully realize tourism within the framework of the blue economy. The first axis shows functional connectivities, where tourism must be integrated with other activities, such as coastal management, fisheries or existing infrastructure. The second axis shows the need of adjacent areas, namely adjacent municipalities or adjacent provinces that belong to the same marine ecosystem, to coordinate their tourism activities. The third axis shows how local tourism activities need to adhere to overall

sustainable development planning of Thailand and the Sustainable Development Goals.

The study conducted by TDRI found that implementation of spatial management enables integration of three dimensions of the blue economy: (a) functional connectivity, (b) area connectivity, and (c) vertical connectivity (see Figure 4).

POLICY IMPLICATIONS: TOURISM AFTER COVID-19

With the gradual recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of both Thailand's economy and its public health, it is evident that nature is undergoing its own healing process. This natural recovery is perhaps most visible in the marine and coastal regions of Thailand that had previously been overexploited due to heavy activity from tourism. While its recovery can be the basis of greater attraction for tourists, to kickstart the economy once again, it is also imperative that the new normal in the aftermath of the pandemic be rooted in a tourism model that is long-lasting and emphasizes sustainable use of marine and coastal resources, creating new strengths that support the local economy, and enhances the quality and safety of tourism. Pushing forward with these goals will set a solid foundation for a sustainable future for Thailand's tourism sector in accordance with post-COVID-19 development guidelines produced by the Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council.¹

In discussions concerning rebooting the tourism industry, the concept of a "travel bubble"²

¹ ชีวิตวิถีใหม่ ประเทศไทยหลังโควิด, สำนักงานสภาพัฒนาการเศรษฐกิจและสังคมแห่งชาติ (สศช.)

² รู้จัก Travel Bubble เปิดประเทศเพื่อการท่องเที่ยวอย่างจำกัด, ไทยคู่ฟ้า

has been floated. The idea requires a matching of two countries that have implemented similar measures and have had success in handling the COVID-19 pandemic in order to reopen borders and allow international tourism as a measure to drive economic recovery. Protection measures involve the tourist showing proof of having had a negative test for the coronavirus prior to leaving the home country and after landing in Thailand. Because 14-day quarantine measures have proven to be not only impractical but also a deterrent, short-stay tourists within travel bubbles are allowed to bypass the quarantine process by consenting instead to tracking and tracing through their DHP (Digital Health Passport application) at all times during their stay in Thailand. Using successful containment measures and highlighting the impressive recovery of natural resources may be advantageous avenues used for marketing Thailand abroad as an attractive tourist destination. Once an international tourist base has been established, the key task for Thailand is to determine the target tourist group that would be conducive to meeting blue economy goals.

When the country opens its borders to promote tourism, the introduction of the blue economy concept thus becomes a crucial economic opportunity. It has already been established that the natural capital generated by marine and coastal resources can be used to generate income for local communities and the country at large through economic activities, such as aquaculture and fisheries as well as tourism. The deployment of the blue economy will ensure that the new economic practices and the green tourism model provide sustainable sources of income such that current utilization of coastal and marine resources do not adversely affect future utilization opportunities.

The application of the blue economy toward Thailand's new sustainable tourism model may include some of the following measures:

(1) Determining the number of tourists

allowed in tourist attraction spaces, particularly in ecologically fragile areas, to ensure that the pressure placed upon the environment does not exceed its carrying capacity;

- (2) Organizing coastal spatial planning for activities, such as aquaculture, fisheries, recreation, sports, food sales, hotels, and accommodations;
- (3) Implementing seasonal opening and closing dates for marine tourism seasons so that natural ecosystems can regenerate;
- (4) Determining entrance fees or licensing schemes for both Thai and foreign tourists for maintenance and conservation efforts.

As a starting point, these measures will set boundaries for marine and coastal tourism activities that allow the simultaneous pursuit of income generation and ecological preservation. As indicated in the above case studies, small but practical actions can catalyze the emergence of a sustainable blue economy. With the unprecedented opportunity that has enabled Thailand's natural resources to regenerate, Thailand is in a prime position to implement the blue economy framework in economic conduct and livelihoods, with the greatest impact and potential being in the tourism sector. This is because Thailand will be able to introduce the blue economy framework at a time when nature has already recovered instead of juggling between natural resource rejuvenation and economic growth. This unique opportunity should not be left unseized.

COVID-19 AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN THAILAND

*Nawathas Thasanabanchong
Sirawitch Rattanaprteptong**

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the world in every socio-economic dimension. It also affects all segments of populations, particularly young people (aged 15-24 years). Studies have revealed that young people are vulnerable to the pandemic. Prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, young people were already encountering severe challenges obstructing a smooth transition to attain decent work and fulfill their aspirations. Globally, they were three times more likely to be unemployed compared with adults; now they are at risk of being left behind, especially in education and employment opportunities, during a crucial stage in their life development (UNDESA 2020).

As of August 2020, there were 3,410 reported cases of COVID-19 in Thailand, of which 3,237 cases subsequently recovered (Department of Disease Control 2020). In the second quarter, the increased youth unemployment rate (8.57%) as a consequence of measures taken to contain the national outbreak of COVID-19 is expected to surpass the rate that had been recorded in the aftermath of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. Between the second quarter of 2019 and the same quarter in 2020, the number of unemployed youths as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic has been estimated to be 52.42 percent higher for male youth and 33.87 percent for their female counterparts, while female youth faced an unemployment rate at 9.78 percent, higher than that of their male counterparts (7.79%) in the second quarter of 2020. The data also reveal that young women have been facing severe challenges in employability during the crisis. Therefore, strategic decisions are crucial to surmount these imminent challenges and fulfill youth's potential equally.

The primary objective of this paper is to develop an understanding of the situation of youth employment in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and to identify challenges facing young people's

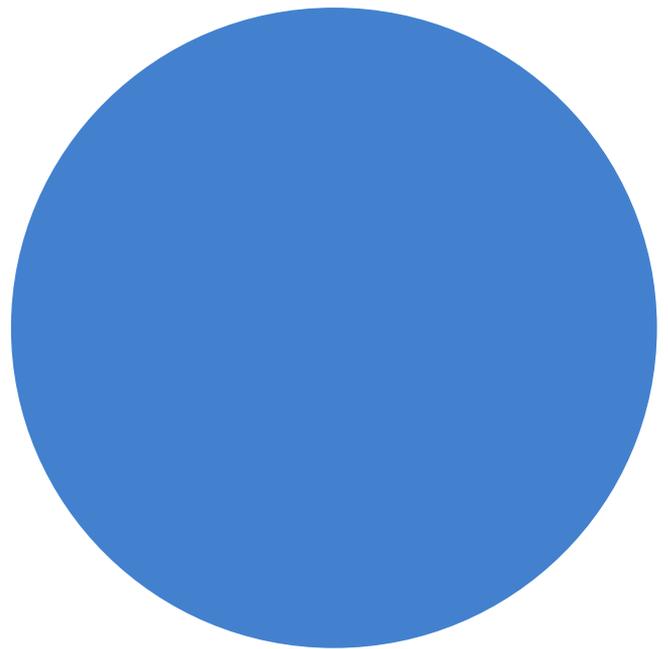
* *Nawathas Thasanabanchong and Sirawitch Rattanaprteptong are Researchers, Human Resource Policy, at TDRI. They would like to express their gratitude to Assoc. Prof. Dr. Yongyuth Chalamwong for his support and guidance. This article is developed from the "Youth Employability Scoping Study" of Thailand Development Research Institute (TDRI) commissioned by the United Nation Children's Fund (UNICEF) Thailand. The authors are solely responsible for the results and opinions expressed in this article.*

employability in Thailand. This paper presents an overview of Thai youth and the landscape of employability in Thailand in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper is divided into five sections. The first provides an overview of youth employment in Thailand. The second section portrays the impact of COVID-19 on Thai youth, particularly the disadvantaged, regarding unemployment and statistical data. The third section presents the definition of NEET (youth Not in Education, Employment, and Training) and their needs. The fourth section describes the current measures and approaches from related entities trying to mitigate the impacts on young people as well as to promote youth employment. The last section concludes the research and contains policy recommendations to fill in the gap and enhance the youth pathway to employability in the current and post-COVID-19 era.

OVERVIEW OF THAI YOUTH

Young people are the future and will be valuable human resources to help sustain the economy in the future. With a rapid graying population, the total fertility rate (TFR) has dropped from 1.62 percent in 2010 to 1.55 percent in 2020. In 2019, the Thai youth population was 9.35 million persons; more than half of whom were not in the labor force. Moreover, the labor force participation rate of young workers decreased from 48.91 to 43.14 percent between 2008 and 2018 (TDRI 2020). This demonstrates that, even with a decreasing population, Thai youth have been participating less in the labor market prior to the pandemic.

On the other hand, the situation reveals that young people are tending to stay longer in school, which is a positive development. Data support the fact that young people are attending fee-free basic education more now than previously was the case. For instance, the share of young people

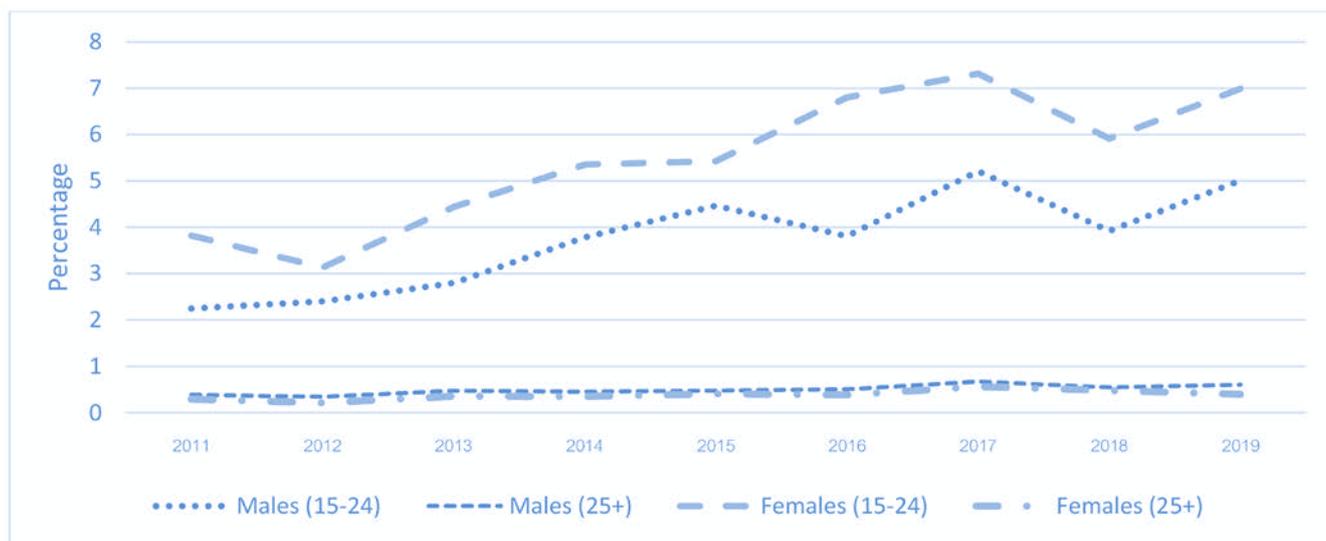


who attained only primary and lower education has decreased from 25.60 percent to 20.83 percent between 2008 and 2018, and more than half of young workers attained the compulsory educational level, which ends at Grade 9 (Secondary 3). However, higher educational levels do not always guarantee employment. According to the statistics, young people with a bachelor's degree face the highest unemployment rate at 20.65, which is four to five times higher compared with secondary and lower levels of education in 2019.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, young people had an unemployment rate of 5.80 percent, which was almost 11 times higher than that of adults¹ (0.51%) in 2019. Female youth also had a higher unemployment rate (6.99%) compared with their male counterparts (5.01%), and tended to be paid at a lower level than males, although the adult unemployment rate does not differ much by sex (0.61% and 0.40% for male and female adults respectively) (Figure 1). Hence, gender disparity remains as an obstacle within the Thai labor market, especially among youth. While the world, including

¹ Persons aged above 25 years.

Figure 1: Unemployment Rate by Age Cohorts and sex between 2011 and 2019



Source: Authors' calculations from the Labour Force Survey (various years), National Statistical Office.

Thailand, is experiencing unprecedented challenges as a result of COVID-19 which is creating gargantuan tasks to overcome as young people are among the most vulnerable groups. Strategic decisions therefore are crucial to surmount these imminent challenges and transition successfully to fostering decent jobs for youth.

COVID-19 IMPACTS ON THAI YOUTH IN THE LABOR MARKET

Although the Royal Thai Government has been successful in containing COVID-19 infections domestically, the economic impact has been severe. According to the World Bank (2020), Thailand's economy is expected to experience substantial impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic, taking more than two years to recover to pre-COVID-19 GDP output levels (World Bank Group 2020). The Fiscal Policy Office under the Ministry of Finance predicted that GDP growth will shrink by 8.5 percent in the remaining quarters of 2020 (InfoQuest 2020). More than 178 million youths globally were

employed in the sectors most severely affected by the pandemic, such as accommodation and food services, wholesale and retail trade, manufacturing, real estate, and other business activities (ILO 2020).

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the problems of unemployed and out-of-school youth are critical, as data show that youth are more vulnerable compared with other age groups. Millions of youth are at risk of being left behind without education, jobs, and opportunities to fulfill their potential. More than 500,000 graduates have yet to find work since they finished their education and up to 300,000 new graduates will enter the job market in 2020 (Boonlert 2020).

In Thailand, an estimated 8.3 million workers will lose employment or income because of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has put many jobs at risk, in particular those related to tourism and services, sectors that had employed approximately 44 percent of the young work force. The number of unemployed young men and women increased by 52.42 percent and 33.87 percent respectively following the COVID-19 outbreak in Thailand in

Table 1: Year-over-year growth of youth population in Thailand, by status between 2019 and 2020

Youth (15-24 years)	Year-over-year growth between 2019 and 2020 (percentage)			
	Males		Females	
	Q1	Q2	Q1	Q2
Labor force	-3.25	-1.55	-2.31	-4.23
Employed persons	-3.88	-4.91	-2.30	-7.66
Unemployed persons	9.25	52.42	-1.66	33.87
Seasonal workers	1.71	66.67	-10.44	133.18
Not in labor force	0.95	-0.67	-0.64	0.26
Household workers	2.26	-5.38	-0.94	0.55
Studying	1.35	-1.66	-0.24	-1.34
Too young and unable to work	-0.33	-5.77	2.47	-15.70
Resting	-1.43	0.19	3.37	36.40
Others	-3.39	42.45	-20.18	23.30
Total	-1.06	-1.10	-1.22	-1.26

Source: Authors' calculations from the Labour Force Survey (various years), National Statistical Office.

Table 2: Percentage share of youth in labor force, by status and sex, between 2Q2019 and 2Q2020

Youth (15-24 years)	Share of labour force 2019-2020 (percentage)			
	Males		Females	
	2Q2019	2Q2020	2Q2019	2Q2020
Labor Force	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00
Employed persons	93.75	85.48	92.49	82.64
Had a regular job but was not at work	0.55	5.59	0.14	6.67
Looking for a job	0.95	0.54	1.24	1.50
Not looking for a job	4.08	7.25	5.76	8.28
Seasonal workers	0.67	1.14	0.37	0.91

Source: Authors' calculations from the Labour Force Survey (various years), National Statistical Office.

the second quarter of 2020. The pandemic also shifted the structure of the young labor force. According to Table 1, the share of employed youths decreased in both the male and female populations. Approximately 6-7 percent of youth in the labor force were not working but had a regular job during the survey week, which demonstrates that they were adversely affected by the government lockdown measures or the temporary closure of business operations (Table 2).

COVID-19 IMPACTS ON THAI YOUTH IN EDUCATION

During the early phase of containing the

COVID-19 outbreak, school closures were part of the measures which left nearly 13 million students stranded at home (Lao 2020). Nevertheless, the closing of schools has had considerable consequences on the learning process as students' learning and development have been impeded or halted. Data show that the number of youths in education decreased by 1.66 percent and 1.34 percent among young men and women respectively (Table 1). It may be implied that young people may have dropped out or remained idle during the survey week. Of those youths resting or voluntarily idle, most were young women (Table 2). Owing to the economic slowdown and business closures, millions of youth are expected to be at risk of becoming dropouts due

to financial issues faced by households.

Furthermore, the digital divide remains a major challenge, as schools were urged to shift their educational services to a virtual space or online classes. However, not every household has computer access. According to the International Telecommunication Union, the absence of a computer at home is another impediment to online learning. Thailand's share of households with a computer is only 21 percent, which is lower than the average of worldwide and developing countries at 49 percent and 38 percent respectively. However, of those Thai households with a computer, the share of those with Internet access in 2018 was 68 percent, which is higher than the worldwide average of 55 percent. Statistics show that only 3 percent of households with an average income of less than 200,000 baht per annum have a computer with Internet access, while households with higher income have a higher share of computer and Internet access at 19 percent (Rattanakhamfu 2020). The quality and inclusiveness of online education are also issues that remain to be answered.

Fortunately, as of August 2020, more than 4,500 schools nationwide returned to "normal" but had to comply with measures imposed by the Ministry of Public Health, such as using face coverings, hand sanitizers, and checking the body temperature of pupils (Bangkok Post 2020). Nevertheless, diminishing the digital divide in Thailand is a crucial task that the government and related entities must take into account to further promote digital opportunities and inclusiveness for all and to prepare for unprecedented future challenges, a young people are the future of the nation and education is a crucial pathway to enhance their employability for decent works.

WHO ARE THE NEETS AND WHAT ARE THEIR NEEDS?

The existence of the COVID-19 pandemic

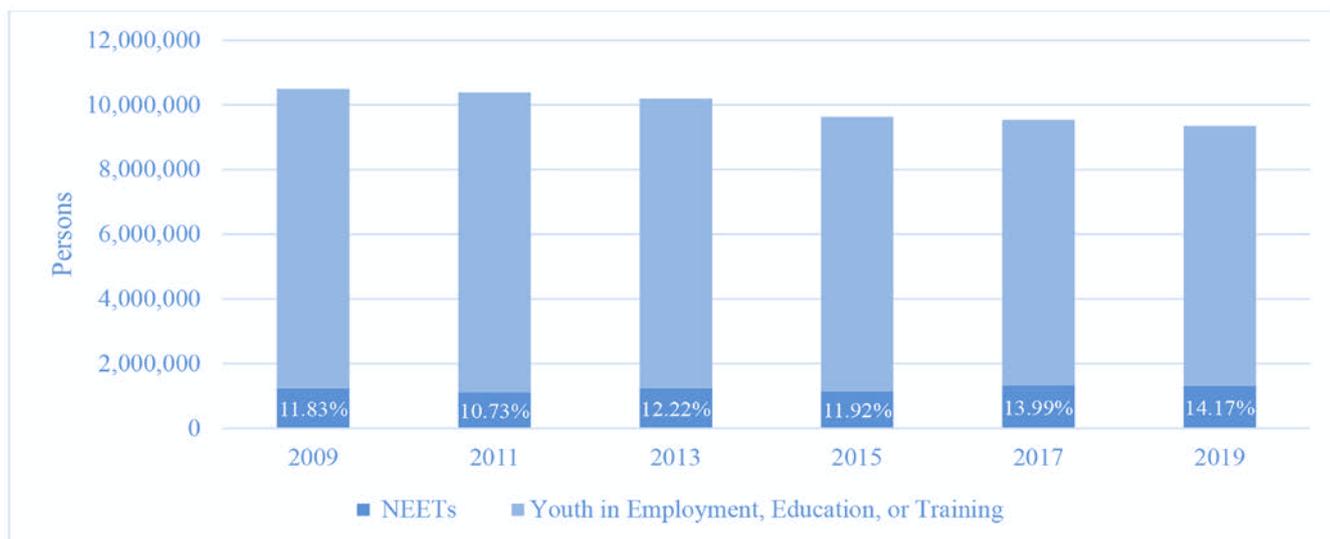
has raised concerns about youth unemployment. Nevertheless, the current situation is merely the tip of the iceberg. Awareness regarding the NEET population has not yet been in the spotlight very much. The NEET rate has increased gradually in past decades by about 0.65 percent annually whereas the total youth population has been decreasing by 1.15 percent between 2009 and 2019.

According to ILO (2015), there is no international standard for the definition of NEETs unlike the standards for unemployment or employment. Therefore, Eurostat, ILO, and certain other organizations have adopted the following definition of the NEET rate: the percentage of the population of a given age group and sex who are not employed and not involved in further education or training.

Currently, 14.17 percent of the total youth population in Thailand are NEETs (Figure 2). According to the Labour Force Survey, NEETs may be categorized into four groups: (a) household workers, (b) those too young/unable to work, (c) those who are resting, and (d) unemployed youth. Household workers account for the largest share (55.08%) followed by the resting group (19.90%), unemployed youth (16.59%), and lastly the too young/unable to work group (13.13%) (Table 3). Nearly 64.58 percent of NEETs are female, of whom 69.59 percent are household workers. Owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, the total NEET population increased by 8.64 percent to 1,409,785 persons due to the higher number of unemployed young people between the second quarter of 2019 and the same quarter of 2020. Another consideration is the rising number of the resting group or young people who voluntarily remain idle, which are composed of 36.40 percent and 0.19 percent of young women and men respectively (Table 4).

The increased share of unemployed youths who are not looking for a job indicates that demand has diminished in the Thai labor market. An analysis of 12 Thai job-search websites shows that job

Figure 2: The share of NEETs in the youth population between 2009 and 2019



Source: Authors' calculations from the Labour Force Survey (various years), National Statistical Office.

Table 3: Number of youths not in employment, education, or training (NEETs) between 2009 and 2019

Unit: Person

Youth (15-24 years)	2009	2011	2013	2015	2017	2019
Unemployed persons	219,517	143,610	159,725	201,380	239,833	219,731
Household workers	791,024	742,560	711,562	627,476	683,725	671,467
Too young and unable to work	155,705	144,017	172,907	138,685	193,645	191,073
Resting	75,428	83,562	201,741	180,418	216,751	242,574
NEET population	1,241,674	1,113,749	1,245,936	1,147,959	1,333,955	1,324,845
Total youth population	10,494,615	10,382,141	10,199,013	9,630,805	9,532,715	9,346,944
NEET rate (%)	11.83	10.73	12.22	11.92	13.99	14.17

Source: Authors' calculations from the Labour Force Survey (various years), National Statistical Office.

Table 4: Percentage Year-over-year growth of NEETs between 2019 and 2020

Youth population aged 15-24 years	Year-over-year growth between 2019 and 2020 (percentage)			
	Males		Females	
	Q1	Q2	Q1	Q2
Unemployed persons	9.25	52.42	-1.66	33.87
Household workers	2.26	-5.38	-0.94	0.55
Too young and unable to work	-0.33	-5.77	2.47	-15.70
Resting	-1.43	0.19	3.37	36.40
NEET Population	1.68	10.48	-0.41	7.53
Total Youth Population	-1.06	-1.10	-1.22	-1.26

Source: Authors' calculations from the Labour Force Survey (various years), National Statistical Office.

vacancies have decreased by approximately 69 percent between January and June 2020 compared with the previous year (Theanvanichpant 2020). The situation calls for an immediate solution. The higher number of unemployed youths who are not looking for a job reflects the likelihood of their transition to the non-labor force group. At a time when the society is graying, young people are valuable resources and their potential should be fulfilled in order to support national sustainable development goals. Hence, the government and related entities must take this issue into account.

CURRENT REMEDIAL AND PREVENTIVE MEASURES

NEET issues may be divided into (a) remedies to current existing NEETs and (b) young people who have the potential to become NEETs. Policies to encourage employment would most commonly be implemented during the economic recession resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. On August 24, 2020, the Centre for Covid-19 Situation Administration under the Ministry of Interior announced a remedial policy for unemployment, which involves subsidizing 50 percent of new graduates' salary for new employment (Prachachart 2020). Under the government's 400,000-million-baht budget, the government expects to subsidize for at least 12 months 400,000 employment positions for new graduates and another 400,000 positions for the unemployed. However, the budget and the employment subsidizing ratio have not yet been finalized as the situation may improve, which would result in more efficient allocation of funding to alleviate unemployment. The subsidizing ratio may be reduced to a smaller share (one-third of salary) to maximize job positions while utilizing the same amount of budget. Because the human resources of large-scale businesses have been reduced by layoffs and salary reductions during the lock-down, the response of employers to the announcement was

shown to be positive as the subsidies would alleviate their cost structure and keep firms financially healthy for at least a year.

Moreover, the government has also allocated approximately 883 million baht in collaboration with Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation and related entities to promote employment and create more than 32,000 jobs countrywide (PPTV Online 2020). Accordingly, the government has allocated 4 billion baht to the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment to create more than 39,000 local jobs with a duration of one year. The participants will receive training and basic knowledge to perform tasks in caring for the elderly who cannot help themselves in the community (Posttoday 2020). In the private sectors, Tesco Lotus announced that it would employ 10,000 people in temporary jobs.

The short-term remedies might instantly reduce the number of NEETs by employing newly graduated youths, but the program is not sustainable. The real cause of young people becoming NEETs has not yet been solved. This would require that active labor market policies must be implemented through youth educational and employment development support with the ability to reach each young individual. Currently, there are on-going projects being implemented by organizations and departments that help to alleviate NEET problems, such as the Education Equality Fund, which has developed the Information System for Equitable Education (iSEE), a large database covering more than 4 million children and young people who face financial obstacle and those who are otherwise disadvantaged. The iSEE platform is intended to identify young people who risk dropping out of the educational system because of poverty. Conditionally allocating subsidies to the targeted group is the core strategy to solve educational inequality under the Education Equality Fund. During the early phase of the COVID-19 outbreak, the Education Equality Fund allocated subsidies for purchasing food to

753,997 poor students nationwide. That Fund and the Department of Skill Development under the Ministry of Labour also implemented many other projects to promote education and professional skill development among disadvantaged youths nationwide.

The government has allocated funds and invested heavily in order to alleviate the adverse impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Thai laborers and promote employment creating-jobs countrywide. Nevertheless, the number of currently targeted groups remain relatively low compared with the number of NEETs, which exceeds 1.3 million persons. Therefore, it is paramount to rethink the future of work in Thailand amid the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath.

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The growing population of NEETs must be handled seriously before the problem escalates and costs more in the future. Each day of youths being NEETs costs them an opportunity to develop their skills and experience. The COVID-19 pandemic also aggravates the existing dilemma among young people. Pragmatic actions and developmental projects must be implemented at once to unleash the potential of youth before the NEET problem becomes unsolvable.

It is noticeable that both government agencies and the private sector have operated developmental projects for skill development and enhancing employability. Nevertheless, the scope remains limited compared with the size of the affected population. It would be more impactful if the public and private sectors could share resources and technologies collaboratively. Therefore, the government and related entities must formulate a working committee in partnership between public and private sectors to share resources and networks to promote the future of work sustainably through

the following actions:

- **Rethink the social safety nets by enhancing the benefits in current welfare programs:** Thailand has a social security system covering formal and informal employment with benefits. However, Thailand spends an estimated 3.7 percent of GDP on its social protection system, which in 2015 lagged those of other countries, such as Vietnam and China both at 6.3 percent and South Korea at 10.1 percent (Ariyapruchya et al. 2020). The existence of the COVID-19 pandemic raises the importance of rethinking the foundations of social protection policy and adjusting benefits in current welfare programs. Although the government's remedial measures are not yet inclusively covered, evidence shows that a huge number of young people are left unemployed with no jobs and no money. Therefore, the Social Security Office under the Ministry of Labour and the National Savings Fund under the Ministry of Finance must collaborate on the possibility of expanding benefits and measures to attract more public participation. By doing so, more Thai citizens will be covered by a robust and inclusive social safety net.
- **Promote digital technology as egalitarian:** Although Thai households have a higher share of households with Internet access than those worldwide, they have a lower share of households with access to a computer. Statistics show that only three percent of low-income households have a computer with Internet access. The digital divide magnifies challenges and unequal opportunities, such as online learning and online application for jobs. Therefore, government agencies, namely the Ministry of Digital Economy and Society and the Ministry of Interior, should promote acces-

sible free Wi-Fi hotspots as well as provide subsidies for purchasing computers or at least low-cost smartphones to mitigate the digital divide.

- **Enhance youth employability through active labor market policies:** Active labor market policies play an important role in cushioning income losses, protecting existing jobs, and facilitating employment. Prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, young people already faced challenges in the transition from school to work. With COVID-19, the obstacles are multiplied. Therefore, both the public and private sectors must collaborate closely to invest in skill development. Fiscal stimuli to create labor market demand needs to integrate increased expenditure on active labor market programs and subsidies for education and skill development to mitigate the effects of unemployment. This approach will raise productivity and incomes, reduce discouragement, and ensure that education and training policies respond better to the current and future demands of labor markets.

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