



World No Tobacco Day

May 31, 2017

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In celebration of the **2017 World No Tobacco Day**, the Asian Forum of Parliamentarians on Population and Development (AFPPD) is pleased to share excerpts from an interview with **Hon. Dr. Jetn Sirathranont**, Member of the National Legislative Assembly of Thailand and AFPPD Secretary-General. This year's theme is **"Tobacco – A Threat to Development,"** highlighting the need for governments and the public to strengthen their efforts to prioritize and accelerate tobacco control efforts at the individual, national and global levels.

Tobacco is the leading preventable cause of death. In addition to health effects, tobacco consumption and exposure to tobacco smoke also have social, economic and environmental consequences. It is linked to worsening poverty, decreasing economic productivity, contributing to climate change, among other disastrous impacts. In this interview, Hon. Dr. Sirathranont spoke to us about tobacco use in Thailand, a "high-burden tobacco-use country," and how the government is confronting this critical issue. As the AFPPD Secretary-General, Hon. Dr. Sirathranont has been involved in numerous AFPPD events. Most recently, he participated in the G7/20 International Parliamentarians Conference in Rome as part of the AFPPD delegation.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), approximately **6 million people** die from tobacco use every year.

BACKGROUND



Hon. Dr. Jetn Sirathranont

Member of Parliament, Thailand and AFPPD Secretary-General

Hon. Dr. Jetn Sirathranont has served as Secretary-General of AFPPD since 2014. He is a medical doctor and has been working on health issues as a legislator. In his capacity as the current Chairperson of Thailand's National Legislative Assembly's Public Health Committee as well as AFPPD's Secretary-General, Hon. Dr. Sirathranont is leading advocacy efforts to address teenage pregnancy issues through a Reproductive Health Protection Bill in Thailand. Hon. Dr. Sirathranont has served twice as Member of the Senate of Thailand from 2008 to 2011 and from 2011 to 2014.

INTERVIEW

May 23, 2017

Could you briefly tell us about tobacco use in Thailand and its impact on Thai society? Has the situation improved over the years?

Smoking is currently ranked as the 2nd leading risk factor that accounts for the most disease burden in Thailand. The impact on the Thai society is substantial and extends beyond healthcare costs.

In 2017, it is estimated that over 15% of the Thai population are smokers. More worrisome is the fact that about 40% of Thai males aged 15 or older are smokers while the National Statistical Office of Thailand estimates that 50,000 annual deaths are due to tobacco-related diseases. The annual economic burden from smoking costs Thailand nearly 1% of GDP. Nevertheless, the situation has improved over the years. For instance, the smoking rate among males reduced to 40%, down from 60% three decades ago. The number of smokers remains the same at approximately 11 million despite a population growth of over 17 million adults. Smoking in public places and at home also decreased in most parts of the country.

How has the government address this issue in recent years, particularly in the context of the MPOWER¹ policy package launched by the WHO?

Since 1992, Thailand has passed two comprehensive tobacco control laws² to prevent and curb tobacco use. The government has also issued the Health Promotion Foundation Act in 2001 which established the Health Promotion Fund (ThaiHealth) to finance tobacco control projects and other health initiatives. At the international level, the government of Thailand also ratified the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) in 2004.

In the context of the MPOWER package, Thailand's efforts have been strong in the areas of tobacco tax increase, and advertisement, promotion and sponsorship bans.

From 1993 to 2015, there were 11 tax increases in total on tobacco products. The current excise tax accounts for 70% of cigarette retail prices which are in line with the WHO's recommendation. Concerning tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship bans, the Tobacco Product Control Act of 1992 has strict regulations on this matter. However, enforcement remains a key challenge. While these efforts are commendable, we still face challenges in second-hand smoking protection and in provision of adequate support to quit tobacco use. Enforcing the regulation to ban public smoking is still limited while the smoking cessation services have been ineffective. The first line medication for smoking cessation is still not covered under the National Health Insurance.

Could you share with us some of the key lessons learned from the efforts of the Thai government in implementing measures to reduce tobacco use?

Among the key lessons learned, I would like to first stress the need for a comprehensive multi-sectoral approach to address tobacco use. We have to send the message that tobacco control is beneficial for good health as well as for a healthy economy. Second, tobacco tax increase is a favorable policy that can generate a significant revenue, stabilizing the number of smokers and decreasing smoking prevalence. Third, I would like to highlight the Health Promotion Foundation (ThaiHealth) as an effective independent government agency for funding health initiatives. A dedicated funding from the 2% surcharge on alcohol and tobacco excise tax provides sufficient resources for tobacco control projects. Also, collaboration between

1. To expand the fight against the tobacco epidemic, the WHO has introduced the MPOWER package of six proven policies: 1) Monitor tobacco use and prevention policies, 2) Protect people from tobacco smoke, 3) Offer help to quit tobacco use, 4) Warn about the dangers of tobacco, 5) Enforce bans on tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship, and 6) Raise taxes on tobacco.

2. Hon. Dr. Jetn Sirathranont referred to the Tobacco Products Control Act, B.E. 2535 and the Non-Smokers Health Protection Act, B.E. 2535.



Hon. Dr. Jetn Sirathranont (MP, Thailand and AFPPD Secretary-General) presented at the 11th Women Ministers and Parliamentarians Conference in November 2016 in Bangkok, Thailand. (Photo: AFPPD)

different actors, including the Ministry of Public Health, NGOs, academia and the private sector, was a key to implementing these projects.

Overall, as a result of Thailand's tobacco control efforts over the last decades, I am proud to share that the number of smokers in the country has reduced by 6 million today.

In 2017, the National Legislative Assembly of Thailand unanimously passed the final reading of the Bill on Tobacco Products Control. Could you elaborate on this in the context of the role of parliamentarians to ensure its effective implementation and monitoring?

The Tobacco Product Control Act 2017 will replace the Tobacco Products Control Act of 1992, and will include provisions that strengthen prevention and reduction of tobacco use, especially among youth. For instance, the legal age for purchasing tobacco is increased from 18 to 20 years old. Selling single stick cigarettes and displaying tobacco products have also been banned as well as all forms of advertising, promotion and marketing. The new law also requires each Thai province to establish a provincial tobacco control committee, facilitating more local implementation of tobacco control

projects throughout the country. Parliamentarians play an essential role in monitoring this new law, by holding the Ministry of Public Health to account and periodically report on the progress and challenges of implementation.

How can parliamentarians play a better role in accelerating the efforts of tobacco control in Thailand?

Parliamentarians can play an effective role in making more tobacco control policies and legislation, supporting proposals to allocate adequate budgets to implement tobacco control projects, and ensuring regular monitoring of progress. The US Congress, for example, requires the Department of Health and Human Services to report on the progress related to tobacco control annually. This is an example that we can learn from.

Parliamentarians have much to share and it is crucial for us to network and work together through a shared platform. AFPPD is one example that provides a meaningful sharing space through its national and regional events.