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## **Social Welfares for Support Early Childhood Development in Thailand: Policy and Recommendation**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Early Childhood needs a special care in all aspects, as their brains and bodies are quickly developed at this stage. Providing that these children are raised well in a way that their IQ and EQ are developed accurately, their learning skills will be developed more expeditiously in the future. The government can maximize the future well-being of children by supporting their parents through good social welfares, which are child support grant and the right of pregnancy and maternity leave.

*Keywords:* Social Welfare, Early Childhood, Child Support Grant, Right of Pregnancy, Maternity Leave

*JEL Classification:* H53, I31, I15

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## **1. Introduction**

Early Childhood refers to the period when children are 0-5 years of age. It is necessary that children at this stage are specially taken care of in all aspects, as their brains and bodies are quickly developed at this stage. Providing that these children are raised well in a way that their intellect, astuteness, and emotional intelligence are developed accurately, their learning skills will be developed more expeditiously in the future. The cost of their education, as a result, will decrease and these children in the early childhood will turn out to be high-quality asset of the country. The government can maximize the future well-being of children by supporting their parents through good and sufficient social welfares, which are child support grant and the right of pregnancy and maternity leave.

### **1.1 Situation of Children at the Stage of Early Childhood in Thailand**

The number of children at the stage of early childhood in Thailand in December 2016 is 4,039,330 persons, or approximately 6.27 percent of the total Thai population. Kumraksa Niramai et. Al, 2014, conducted a survey on the Situation of Child Developmental Promotion in 2014, it was found that 27.5 percent of children at the stage of early childhood have developmental delays; verbal delays are the highest in number, accounting for 23.7 percent of all developmental delays. These developmental delays are considered as a critical issue as they negatively affect the lower Intelligence Quotient (IQ) as well as delayed learning process of children (Luciane da Rosa Piccolo et. Al, 2016). Also, this will result in learning disability in children (Graham K Murray et. Al, 2007).

Department of Mental Health, Ministry of Public Health has conducted a survey on IQ and EQ (Emotional Quotient) situation in Thailand during the year of 2016. It was found that average IQ of Thai children is 98.23, which is considered to be quite low, within the average level. An average IQ of children in all countries is 100. However, it was found that 31.81 per cent of Thai children have an IQ lower than 90; and 5.8 percent of those have an IQ lower than 70. According to the global criteria, it is specified that, in a country, there shall not be more than 25% and 2% of population with IQ lower than 90 and 70, respectively. With regard to EQ test, it was found that 77 percent of Thai children have an EQ of average level. There are only 23 percent of Thai children with an EQ lower than average level, requiring support for their EQ development. Therefore, it can be seen that the situation concerning children at the stage of early childhood needs to be resolved urgently, otherwise these children will grow up to be inefficient resources in the country. It is necessary for public sector, private sector, as well as parents of those children themselves to cooperate with each other in order to solve this problem. The government plays such a vital role in pushing forward this policy and helping parents to maximize the future well-being of their children through sustainable, appropriate and sufficient social welfare. Such welfare includes child support grant and the right for maternity leave.

## **1.2 National child support grant in Thailand and its problem**

There are two main government agencies responsible for paying child support grant including the Social Security Office, and the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security.

### **The Social Security Office**

The Social Security Office will pay, from its social security fund, child support grant for 0-6-year-old children at the amount of THB 400 per month to parents who are eligible for social security benefits. According to the 2015 report, it is indicated that THB 6,535.35 million of child support benefit was paid from the social security fund.

### **Ministry of Social Development and Human Security**

The Ministry of Social Development and Human Security provides THB 400 per month from the 0-1-year-old newborns' support scheme to parents who are not eligible for social security benefits and have an average income per person not exceeding THB 3,000 per month. After an interview of Ms. Siritanaporn Bhurihiranbhachara, the Director of the Centre for Newborns' Support Grant Scheme ("the Scheme"), it was indicated that the total amount of THB 620 million of child support grant was paid out by the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security in 2015.

Furthermore, the government has initiated measures to give child support grant to parents whose children are newborns up to three years old. On 22 March 2016, the Cabinet approved a proposal made by the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, extending the period in which parents having children are eligible for child support grant, from the age of newborns up to one-year-old, to the age of newborns up to three years old. Additionally, the amount of child support grant was increased from THB 400 to THB 600 per month. Persons who are entitled to such grant must be the poor or the vulnerable groups with risk of poverty i.e. families with an average income per person of lower than THB 3,000 per month.

According to the registered statistics, it was reported that, in 2015, there are 2,105,719 newborns aged between 0 and 3 years old, and there are 4,429,374 children aged between 0 and 6 years old in Thailand. Among these children, 619,333 newborns aged between 0 and 3 years old and 1,302,765 children aged between 0 and 6 years old are assisted in the form of child support grant of THB 400 per month paid from the social security fund. It can be seen that the numbers of children receiving child support grant accounted for approximately 29 per cent only. Of these numbers, only 103,268 newborns aged between 0 and 3 years old are in the Scheme.

Thus, it is recommended that the government and all relevant agencies make this policy their priority, whether or not they are already assisted by the Social Security Office. This is to ensure that underprivileged children at the stage of early childhood are appropriately cared for according to their age range, resulting in healthy children who will grow up to be valuable assets to efficiently develop and drive forward the nation in the future.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1 Return of Early Childhood Development**

According to James J. Heckman (2012) indicates that investment made to develop children at the stage of early childhood from the period of newborns up to five years old generates the highest returns. Therefore, the nurturing of children since the stage of early childhood from the very beginning stage of their lives will be the more efficient and cost-effective investment. This is thus the effective way to elevate the standard of human resources in the country. It may be said that investment made in educating children at the stage of early childhood is a worthwhile and cost-effective strategy in supporting the growth of economy in both upturn and downturn, as well as during the budget crisis. Furthermore, according to James J. Heckman's research (2008), it was found that investment made in educating children at the stage of early childhood will generate the highest returns. Such return will keep decreasing if the investment is made at the later stages.

UNICEF (2012) indicated that appropriate nurturing of children at the stage of early childhood according to their age stages will enable them to have higher-than-average physical skills, intellect, and emotional intelligence, as well as better opportunities to advance their learning skills. Once these children grow up to be high-quality labour with high income which is sufficient for their living, this will positively affect the crime rate, decrease the numbers of crimes and significantly reduce societal problems.

Accordingly, the government shall not ignore the policy of nurturing children at the stage of early childhood appropriately, sufficiently, and universally and make it a priority. The government has the duty to provide suitable social welfare for all children ranging from babies in mothers' wombs to 5-year-old children. The welfare includes right for pregnancy and maternity leave and child support grant.

### **2.2 Child Support Grant Scheme**

UNICEF (2011) has conducted studies on child support grant scheme in South Africa on the topic of "South Africa's Child Support Grant: Overall findings from an integrated qualitative-quantitative evaluation." It is said that South Africa is one of many countries that consider child support grant its high priority. Initially, in 1995, the South African government aimed to grant child support as well as other related benefits and rights to 30 percent of the poorest families in the country. The child support grant has been dispersed since 1998 onwards.

The studies by UNICEF shows that child support grant positively affects millions of children in South Africa. In other words, the child support grant enables children in the country to receive all necessary nutrition, education, as well as good health. Furthermore, child support grant has long-term benefits as the investment significantly reduces the poverty in the country and vulnerabilities in the future.

It was also found that children receiving child support grant are likely to have good score, lower tendency to become child labour and significantly lower risk of associating themselves with behaviors against good health and wellbeing e.g. drug abuse. This study indicates that major advantages resulting from the government's child support grant scheme are as follows:

1. Child support brings about positive effect in direct and indirect development of children;
2. Child support has not only short-term, but also long-term positive effect. This is recognized by an increase in work performance of children receiving child support grant. This significantly reduces the risk of them being trapped in the poverty cycle; and
3. The government shall continue to implement child support grant scheme in the future.

In the case of Thailand, TDRI (Thailand Development Research Institute) together with UNICEF have conducted a study on “Child Support Grant – CSG: the missing gap in the Thai welfare system” (2014). According to the study, it is stated that child support grant is basic welfare created in order to nurture children of age of 0-6 years old. The objective of the scheme is to give equal access to every child in Thailand so that they are taken care of and their abilities and potential can be developed to their possible best. Since 2000, the Thai government attempts to create universal-coverage welfare scheme for everyone including working population, aging population, as well as disabled citizens. Nevertheless, TDRI and UNICEF recognize that the government lacks financial resources to provide child support grant to assist 0-6-year-old children whose parents are not eligible for benefits. The two organizations together proposed that the government pays child support grant at the same amount as the minimum benefit for the elderly i.e. at the amount of THB 600 per month. There are two ways of undertaking child support grant: firstly, by providing child support grant of THB 600 to each child who is 0-6 years of age whether or not their parents are eligible for benefits; secondly, by providing child support grant of THB 600 to 0-6-year-old children whose parents are not eligible for benefits and THB 200 to children whose parents are eligible for benefits. This is because parents who are eligible for benefits will already receive childcare money of THB 400 per month from the social security fund. In addition, it is proposed that the budget on this scheme may alternatively be reduced by not giving child support grant to parents who are financially capable of raising their children such as those who are within the high-income tax bracket, specifically, those who have an annual assessable income exceeding THB 80,000.

### **2.3 Maternity Leave**

One of the salient factors leading to physically and mentally healthy children at the stage of early childhood is mother’s breast milk. The World Health Organization (WHO) suggests that babies should receive exclusive breastfeeding for six months. After that, infants should receive complementary food with continued breastfeeding up to two years of age or longer. This is in order to develop healthy body’s immune system and mature intelligent development. Moreover, infants’ good physical health usually leads to good emotional development. The government should therefore promote the right for pregnancy leave and maternity leave for six months after birth so that mothers can fully take care of their babies without concerns about childcare expenses, or lost or insufficient income resulting from pregnancy or maternity leave.

According to the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) Family Database and information by the Thai Ministry of Labour, which compares the right for pregnancy leave and maternity leave in Thailand with developed OECD countries (excluding the US), it is explicitly shown that Thailand has the shortest period

of pregnancy leave i.e. 90 days or approximately 12 weeks. Furthermore, there is no right for paid maternity leave in Thailand.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 The Proposal of National Child Support Grant: Introducing universal coverage for child support**

From interviewing from many experts in Child Support Grant and also many low income households in Thailand, the initial assessment was made by author. It was found that workers who earn a minimum wage of THB 300 for 26 days in a month will have a monthly income of THB 7,800. It was also assessed that a total of minimum expenses per month is approximately THB 7,229. Therefore, this means that workers who earn minimum wage would have only THB 571 left to spend in a month. However, it must be taken into account that this calculation is based on expenses of a single person. In cases where a person and his/her spouse earn minimum wage, they would have only THB 2,795 left to spend in a month. As a result, workers who earn minimum wage, either single parents or parents with spouse, are burdened with extra expenses related to their young children. It is evidently almost impossible for those parents to live their lives, child support thus becomes necessary for low-income workers, especially for those who earn minimum wage.

Due to the early childhood expense survey, this paper agrees with the TDRI that the amount of child support grant should be equal to the amount of benefits welfare for the elderly i.e. THB 600 per month. We therefore propose that the payment of child support grant shall be made in four circumstances as follows:

1. Child support grant of THB 600 per month shall be provided to each child aged 0-3 years (“Option 1”).
2. Child support grant of THB 600 per month shall be provided to each child aged 0-3 years whose parents are not eligible for both the social security benefit and the Scheme; THB 200 per month shall be provided to each child aged 0-3 years whose parents are eligible for the social security benefit. This is because a child support grant of THB 400 per month have already been paid by the Social Security Office; No child support grant shall be paid to parents who are in the Scheme as THB 600 per month per child would have already been paid to those parents in the Scheme (“Option 2”).
3. Child support grant of THB 600 per month shall be provided to each child aged 0-6 years (“Option 3”).
4. Child support grant of THB 600 per month shall be provided to each child aged 0-6 years whose parents are not eligible for both the social security benefit and the Scheme, and; THB 200 per month shall be provided to each child aged 0-6 years whose parents are eligible for the social security benefit. This is because a child support grant of THB 400 per month per child have already been paid to those parents by the Social Security Office (“Option 4”).

### 3.2 The right of pregnancy leave and Maternity Leave

It is absolutely vital that infants should receive mother's breast milk for at least six months. At present, the percentage of mothers who give exclusive breastfeeding for the period of less than six months is as high as 87.7 percent. One of the main reasons is that there are only 90-day period of pregnancy leave. By asking for longer period of pregnancy leave, employers may refuse to give permission or give permission to unpaid leave. This results in a deficit of monthly income while monthly expenses still continue. Therefore, most mothers decide to go back to work after the 90-day period ends. The negative effect resulting from this is that infants will not receive breastfeeding for the whole period of six months (180 days), thus negatively affecting the development of the infants' immune system, health and skills. Moreover, the mothers should receive monthly income in full, but no more than THB 15,000, in order to avoid ordinary monthly expenditure problem when they do not work during the maternity leave period.

### 4. Data

The number of early childhood in Thailand, the number of labour force in Thailand and their income levels were collected from National Statistical Office of Thailand in 2016 yearbook. In addition, the current child support grant and the maternity paid were obtained from Social Security Office.

### 5. Results

#### 5.1 Government Budget in Support of the Universal Coverage for Child Support

According to the four circumstances above in section 3.1, the government has to pay for child support grant as shown in Table 1

TABLE 1: Government Budget in Support of the Universal Coverage for Child Support

|          | Government Budget<br>in Support of Policy<br>(THB) |                | Proportion to Overall<br>National Budget | Proportion to GDP |
|----------|--|----------------|--|-------------------|
|          | Monthly  | Annually       | Percentage                               | Percentage        |
| Option 1 | 1,263,431,400                                      | 15,161,176,800 | 0.56                                     | 0.15              |
| Option 2 | 953,737,443  | 11,444,849,314 | 0.42                                     | 0.12              |
| Option 3 | 2,657,624,400                                      | 31,891,492,800 | 1.17                                     | 0.33              |
| Option 4 | 2,074,557,600                                      | 24,894,691,200 | 0.92                                     | 0.25              |

Source: Calculation by author

Anyhow, as the policy of universal coverage of child support inevitably creates financial burden for the government. In other words, the child support grant scheme more than doubles current government's spending on child support. To reduce government spending in accordance with this policy, the government may choose to

provide child support grant to low-income families only. Low-income persons can be defined based on the amount of their earnings as well as the status of their work. In this paper, the low-income population is the one who earns income lower than or equal to THB 15,000 per month or the persons are unemployed, or seasonally unemployed. The reason behinds using THB 15,000 to represent low income people in Thailand because by law, these number are the minimum wage for state employees with a bachelor's degree in Thailand.

**Budget Reduction Guideline: Workers who receive earnings lower than or equal to THB 15,000 per month, or unemployed, or seasonally unemployed.**

According to the labour force survey conducted by the National Statistical Office in Thailand in 2015, it is indicated that there are a total population of 54.17 million persons aged over 15 years old. Of those numbers, there are approximately 14.2 million workers who earn less than or equal to THB 15,000 per month, or unemployed including seasonally unemployed. Therefore, the numbers of low-income workers aged over 15 years old accounted for 26.22 percent of the over-15-year-old population in the country.

In this research, it is assumed that the proportion of children whose families have low income to the Thai population and the proportion of low-income workers to the Thai population are equal. By that assumption, based on basic calculation, it was found that, firstly, there are 133,830 children aged between 0 and 3 years old whose families have low income and whose parents are eligible for social security benefits; secondly, there are 103,268 children aged between 0 and 3 years old whose families have low income and whose parents are eligible for benefits under the Scheme, and; thirdly, there are 217,921 children aged between 0 and 3 years old whose families have low income and whose parents are not eligible for social security benefits and benefits under the Scheme.

Meanwhile, firstly, there are 281,511 children aged between 0 and 6 years old whose families have low income and whose parents are eligible for social security benefits; secondly, there are 103,268 children aged between 0 and 6 years old whose families have low income and whose parents are eligible for benefits under the Scheme, and; thirdly, there are 572,351 children aged between 0 and 6 years old whose families have low income and whose parents are not eligible for social security benefits and benefits under the Scheme.

**Government Budget in Support of low income families**

The government budget in support of child support grant scheme for families with low income only (earnings less than or equal to THB 15,000 per month) can be shown below as follows (Table 2):

Accordingly, it will cost the government approximately THB 4.8 billion or 0.18 per cent of the annual budget of the Thai Government in 2016, or approximately 0.056 per cent of the country's GDP in 2016.

TABLE 2: The government budget in support of child support grant scheme for families with low income only (earnings less than or equal to THB 15,000 per month)

|          | Government Budget<br>in Support of Policy<br>(THB) |               | Proportion to Overall<br>National Budget | Proportion to<br>GDP |
|----------|--|---------------|--|----------------------|
|          | Monthly  | Annually      | Percentage                               | Percentage           |
| Option 1 | 273,011,032  | 3,276,132,381 | 0.12                                     | 0.03                 |
| Option 2 | 157,518,330.58                                     | 1,890,219,967 | 0.07                                     | 0.02                 |
| Option 3 | 574,277,938  | 6,891,335,258 | 0.25                                     | 0.07                 |
| Option 4 | 399,712,934.50                                     | 4,796,555,214 | 0.18                                     | 0.05                 |

Source: Calculation by author

## 5.2 The right of pregnancy leave and Maternity Leave and Maternity Leave

According to section 3.2, the proposal of the number of days for pregnancy leave and maternity leave (Table 3) and the proposal of the government budget (Table 4) as follows:

TABLE 3: The proposal for the right of pregnancy leave and maternity leave

| Option | Payee                | 1 <sup>st</sup> Month | 2 <sup>nd</sup> Month | 3 <sup>rd</sup> Month | 4 <sup>th</sup> Month | 5 <sup>th</sup> Month | 6 <sup>th</sup> Month |
|--------|----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| 1      | Employer             | Fully paid            | Half paid             | -                     | -                     | -                     | -                     |
|        | Social security fund | -                     | Maximum THB 7,500     | Maximum THB 15,000    | Maximum THB 15,000    | Maximum THB 15,000    | Maximum THB 15,000    |
| 2      | Employer             | Fully paid            | Half paid             | -                     | -                     | -                     | -                     |
|        | Social security fund | -                     | Maximum THB 7,500     | Maximum THB 15,000    | -                     | -                     | -                     |
| 3      | Employer             | Fully paid            | Half paid             | -                     | -                     | -                     | -                     |
|        | Social security fund | -                     | Maximum THB 15,000    | Maximum THB 7,500     | -                     | -                     | -                     |

TABLE 4: The Government Budget in Support of this Policy

| Option   | Budget<br>(THB) | Maximum Substitute Benefit<br>Replacing Original Benefit<br>(THB) | Maximum Substitute Benefit<br>Replacing Original Benefit<br>(Percentage) |
|----------|-----------------|---|--|
| Option 1 | 19,324,912,500  | 16,104,093,750  | 500  |
| Option 2 | 6,441,637,500   | 3,220,818,750   | 100  |
| Option 3 | 0               | 0   | 0  |

Source: Calculation by Author

## 6. Policy Recommendation

### 6.1 Child Support Grant

Due to inadequate income of low income family, the child support grant should be paid at THB 600 per person per month, to low-income families including those families with children aged 0-6 years old with an average income per person lower than THB 15,000 per month. If parents of those children are not eligible for social security benefits and benefits under the Scheme, they will be given child support grant of THB 600 per month per child. On the contrary, if parents of those children are eligible for social security benefits and /or benefits under the Scheme, they will be given child support grant of THB 200 per month per child on top of childcare/child support grant of THB 400 per month per child paid by the Social Security Office.

Even though the increase in child support grant scheme inevitably increases financial burden on the government, after a careful consideration, this child support grant cannot be seen as a waste or a loss of money but a good and worthwhile long-term investment in human resources of the country. As Thailand has become an aging society, it is now extremely necessary to develop the younger population in the country, so that they can achieve their full potential and are ready for changes in the near future including the responsibilities of taking care of the elderly, stable politics, as well as the sustainable development of our economy and society in the country.

### 6.2 The right of pregnancy leave and Maternity Leave

The author proposes that the 90-day period of pregnancy leave shall remain the same, with an extension of family care leave of 90 days or 12 more weeks, or three more months. An extension of such family care leave shall be paid, so that mothers do not have to be concerned about their lost income which makes it insufficient to pay for extra child care expenses during their maternity leave. Under this Scheme, the Social Security Office provides, for the second month, wage from THB 3,750 to THB 7,500; for the third month, THB 7,500 will be paid in full but not exceeding THB 15,000, and the Social Security Office will pay the fourth to the sixth month of wage in full but not exceeding THB 15,000. Accordingly, it will cost the government approximately 19,000 million Baht (Option 1).

TABLE 5: The Government Budget in Support of the right of pregnancy leave and maternity leave

| Option   | Budget<br>(THB) | Maximum Substitute Benefit<br>Replacing Original Benefit<br>(THB) | Maximum Substitute Benefit<br>Replacing Original Benefit<br>(Percentage) |
|----------|-----------------|---|--|
| Option 1 | 19,324,912,500  | 16,104,093,750  | 500  |

## 7. Conclusions

Early Childhood needs a special care in all aspects, as their brains and bodies are quickly developed at this stage. Providing that these children are raised well in a way that their IQ and EQ are developed accurately, their learning skills will be developed more expeditiously in the future. The government can maximize the future well-being of children by supporting their parents through good social welfares, which are child support grant and the right of pregnancy and maternity leave.

For the child support grant, it should be paid at THB 600 per person per month, to low-income families including those families with children aged 0-6 years old with an average income per person lower than THB 15,000 per month and if parents of those children are eligible for social security benefits and /or benefits under the Scheme, they will be given child support grant of THB 200 per month per child on top of childcare/child support grant of THB 400 per month per child paid by the Social Security Office.

For the right of pregnancy and maternity leave, the government should provide an extension of family care leave of 90 days or 12 more weeks on top of the current 90-day period of pregnancy leave. If budget is available, the Social Security Office should pay monthly income in full, but no more than THB 15,000 per month for 6 months during maternity leave period.

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