

Country: Thailand

IPU geopolitical group: Asia-Pacific Group

National Assembly of Thailand

Focus area: Strengthening the enabling legal environment and budget alignment procedures to accelerate progress on the national development priorities and the SDGs.

Key highlights (messages)

- By establishing concrete impact assessment criteria, parliaments can strengthen the systematic legislative review process when aligning the national legal framework with the SDGs.
- Parliaments can enhance the post-voluntary national review (VNR) process through oversight measures, such as monitoring the execution of the review's key findings and next steps, and by following up on the priority interventions planned to address the most critical bottlenecks.

Context

After the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the National Assembly of Thailand established the Parliamentary Sub-Committee on Follow-up and Review of SDGs Implementation and International Obligations under the Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs. The specialized sub-committee is responsible for monitoring national compliance and progress towards achieving the SDGs in the country. Over the course of several years, the National Assembly consolidated an integrated approach to strengthen an SDG enabling legal environment. It has been promoting systematically mechanisms that align and scrutinize budget allocations for SDG priority areas.

SDG integration into parliament's core functions

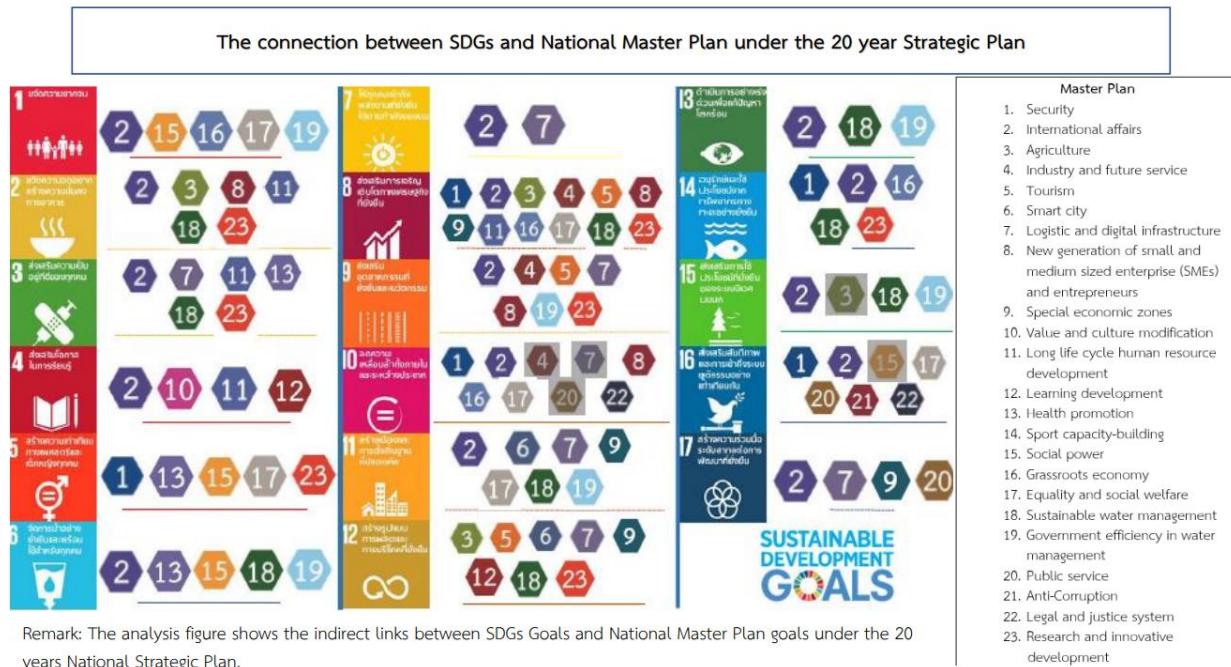
Both the House of Representatives and the Senate have set up their own standing committees mandated to review budget preparations, and investigate and monitor budget management, including inquiry into and evaluation of annual budget appropriations and implementation. The committees of both houses, in close cooperation with the Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council (NESDC), systematically oversee national budget allocations to ensure that they meet the national development priorities and SDGs implementation.

The Parliamentary Budget Office (PBO), which is under the Secretariat of the House of Representatives, is another unit that has an important role in examining fiscal evidence and its relevance for SDGs achievement. The PBO's mandate is to provide academic and statistical support to the (ad-hoc) Parliamentary Budget Committee and individual members of parliament (MPs) on annual budget appropriation and expenditure analyses, and to provide macroeconomic analyses and evaluation of the government's expenditures. For example, in 2021, among other parliamentary tasks, the PBO submitted

more than 77 papers on budgetary analyses and academic reports on different topics to support the work of the standing committee charged with monitoring budget implementation.

In addition, all parliamentary budget allocations and utilization analyzed by the PBO are measured and assessed against Thailand’s 20-year National Strategic Plan (2018-2037) and the National Economic and Social Development Plan which are policy instruments that directly or indirectly integrate SDG priority targets (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1. The linkages between the SDGs and the National Master Plan under Thailand’s 20-year National Strategic Plan



The National Assembly has elaborated an ad-hoc criteria-based assessment framework for examining, in terms of rationale and necessity, submitted draft legislation. Explanatory notes on which SDGs the draft law is contributing to or fulfilling are also provided. Although there is no formal parliamentary mechanism to measure the alignment of draft laws to the SDGs, the National Assembly of Thailand, places great importance on promoting SDG 16. For instance, in 2019, the National Assembly adopted an act that imposed ex-ante assessments of the legal and regulatory impact and effectiveness of draft bills and an evaluation every five years of the degree to which a passed law was successfully (or unsuccessfully) implemented to improve accountability and inclusiveness at all levels.

Innovative approaches to enable progress towards:

(i) Achieving universal health coverage for all, and improving access to quality healthcare (including to sexual and reproductive health services) for vulnerable and marginalized populations:

In 2019, the National Assembly of Thailand endorsed the Act on the Primary Health System with the overarching objective to improve the quality of medical and health services for all people and advance health-care inclusion for vulnerable and marginalized groups. The National Assembly also helped steadily increase budget allocations for the National Health Security Fund (NHSF) to finance the Universal Health Coverage System in 2020-2021. In the past three years, the NHSF has received the highest budget allocation compared to other national health bodies. In 2021, for example, the NHSF received more than US\$ 4.3 billion which was an exponential increase from US\$ 19 million in 2018.

In addition, the emergency relief package aimed at mitigating the social and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, provided citizens with equal access and free of charge treatment through the COVID-19 Universal Coverage for Emergency Patients Scheme.

(ii) Integrating disaster risk reduction and climate change measures into national laws, policies and strategies:

Since 2018 a number of climate-related laws have been adopted.¹ In 2020 budget allocations were secured for targeted projects under the Strategic Plan on Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation to reduce carbon emission and create adaptive capacity to prevent and mitigate the impacts of natural disasters and climate change in the long term. A new Climate Change Bill currently under deliberation, proposes to oblige private enterprises to report their greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions to the national greenhouse gas inventory and to set administrative fines for failure to do so. The Climate Change Bill and related documentation are drafted by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment which has to seek the Cabinet's approval before the text is introduced in parliament.

Also, to tackle the climate emergency and reaffirm its commitment to advance SDGs 3, 11 and 13, the Thai National Assembly is planning to hold a public hearing on the draft Clean Air Act recently submitted by the Thailand Clean Air Network to the parliament. The draft bill will ensure citizens' rights to clean air and require the State to provide an air pollution management system, including the technological infrastructure for the development of data collection and a surveillance system on air pollution to safeguard people's health and improve their quality of life.

Supplementary activities

The National Assembly was actively engaged during the 2017 and 2021 Voluntary National Review (VNR) preparations and provided numerous recommendations on the next steps for SDG implementation in Thailand. This included, for example, recommendations on: how to make future VNR processes even more inclusive in terms of stakeholder engagement; the promotion of domestic SDG sensitization on key VNR findings to raise public awareness and further strengthen the cross-sectoral efforts for more effective SDG implementation; and on fostering debates in relevant parliamentary committees on the VNR findings regarding structural challenges.

¹ These laws are the following: (1) 2018 Act on National Environmental Promotion and Preservation (2nd Amendment); (2) 2019 Act on National Park; and (3) 2019 Act on Forestry (8th Amendment).

Even though there is no institutional or dedicated mechanism to engage citizens in the efforts aimed at SDG achievement, the National Assembly organizes regular public hearings and plenary sessions on thematic issues related to the SDGs. This is in addition to its long-standing parliamentary petition system which is the main channel for public participation in parliament's legislative work. MPs are also encouraged to incorporate relevant SDGs in their working plans and promote in their core functions and responsibilities a multi-stakeholder and multi-level approach to SDG implementation.

The Senate Sub-Committee on SDGs implementation and follow-up regularly engages with various stakeholders, including the United Nations, academia and civil society organizations. In 2021, the Sub-Committee planned to organize field hearings in three pilot provinces to spearhead the SDGs localization process in the country. Unfortunately, the plans had to be postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2020, the Secretariat of the House of Representatives of Thailand and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) that aims to enhance the knowledge and capacities of parliamentarians and parliamentary staff regarding the SDGs and to facilitate more informed interactions between the House of Representatives and development actors on SDG implementation.

Challenges and lessons learnt

Like many other national parliaments, the Thai National Assembly had to deal with certain challenges in its parliamentary work on SDG achievement, particularly the low awareness and limited ownership of the SDGs among a large number of parliamentarians who perceive the SDGs as irrelevant with little added value to their legislative or constituency work. The lack of institutional bodies or dedicated focal points to systematically integrate the SDGs into parliamentary and legislative procedures, as well as the lack of meaningful oversight and budgetary mandates are major issues. Therefore, it is necessary to mainstream the SDGs into the existing parliamentary work processes and avoid placing the SDGs into parliamentary committees' silos with no cross-cutting mechanisms.

Sources and links:

SDG resource section of the National Assembly of Thailand:

https://web.parliament.go.th/view/7/Speeches_and_Interventions/EN-US

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