



THAILAND
Thailand Child Support Grant (CSG) Impact Assessment Endline Report

How will Thailand counteract intergenerational poverty with its child support grant?

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EDITORIAL INSIGHT

The panel commended this highly influential evaluation for generating evidence that allowed UNICEF to engage with policymakers at the highest levels. This influence ultimately led to the Government of Thailand’s decision to extend its Child Support Grant to benefit an additional 1.1 million children in the country. The panel was also impressed by the exemplary and innovative advocacy and partnerships strategy that followed the evaluation to ensure the adoption of its findings and implementation of its recommendations.

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Suriya, 33, and his three-month-old daughter Monluckis in Samoeng district of Chiang Mai, Thailand, are among those who benefit from the Thailand Child Support Grant.



With its achievement of upper-middle-income status, Thailand has made considerable progress in improving the health of women and children. However, about 30 per cent of children in the country still suffer from developmental delays caused by malnutrition, poor child-rearing practices, and inadequate and ineffective early childhood education.

Child support grants (CSGs) have a strong track record in breaking the intergenerational transmission of poverty, and have produced human development benefits in low-, middle- and high-income countries alike. In 2015, the Government of Thailand launched an unconditional monthly grant for pregnant women and women with children under 12 months old living in poor and near-poor households. The CSG was intended to improve the status, and particularly the nutrition, of young children. In 2016, the Government extended the grant to support children up to 3 years of age living in eligible households.

This evaluation found that the CSG programme had a positive impact on the situation of young children in Thailand, including by improving feeding practices and reducing stress for mothers. It also revealed, however, the exclusion of significant proportions of families eligible for the grant. The evaluation has informed an expansion of the programme, increasing the number of children who could benefit from 700,000 to 1,800,000.

PURPOSE

Thailand's Deputy Prime Minister Yongyuth Yuthavong approved implementation of the CSG programme in 2015, stressing the importance of collecting credible data to guide future planning. He emphasized the need for evidence that could link the grant to poverty reduction, child health and access to social services. This prompted the design of a country-led impact evaluation intended to provide policy inputs for improving the efficiency and efficacy of grant delivery and maximizing the benefits for children, based on the experience of the programme's initial years. The evaluation aimed to assess the programme's achievements against expectations established in the original theory of change, and to pinpoint areas for improvement as the programme gained momentum.

The evaluation effort rapidly brought together UNICEF Thailand, Thailand's Department of Children and Youth, the Thai Health Promotion Foundation, the Economic Policy Research Institute and the Thailand Development Research Institute. This public-private evaluation partnership was able to gather a rich mix of data as the grant programme unfolded. By 2019, the coalition had acquired insights on who was and was not receiving the grant; what beneficiaries were using the grant for; how children and their mothers benefited; and factors holding back the programme.

Evaluating the implementation processes of a new programme to provide a verdict on its effectiveness is neither helpful nor accurate. The focus must be on identifying bottlenecks and suitable corrections/improvements.

– Evaluation report



APPROACH

The evaluation's multi-stakeholder arrangement, though complex, was key to its success. Broad ownership of the results was maintained, and the coalition's considerable combined resources made it possible to study more than 5,000 households over the course of two years – twice the sample size typically used in cash transfer evaluations.

Given the momentum of the CSG programme, the evaluation needed to be started quickly. The evaluation design included a non-experimental impact assessment methodology as an alternative to a time-consuming randomized approach. It employed a matching strategy, whereby a treatment group of households receiving the grant was matched with a credible comparison group of households. Based on propensity scores, the comparison group was determined similar to the treatment sample in every respect apart from grant programme participation. A team of evaluators from four regions of Thailand carried out quantitative and qualitative fieldwork, initially speaking with pregnant women about to give birth (rolling baseline) and then returning to survey each mother with child one year later (endline).

Through these methods, the evaluators pursued three lines of inquiry. An impact assessment component investigated the benefits of the CSG for children and mothers included in the treatment sample, and used qualitative interviews and focus group discussions to explain impact pathways. A targeting assessment measured inclusion and exclusion errors affecting how well the grant reached targeted households, and explored possible reasons for these errors. Finally, a process review traced the efficacy of programme implementation, including eligibility and enrolment processes.

KEY RESULTS

Measurable impacts

The evaluation found that the CSG programme has produced some significant impacts. Notably, it has reduced acute malnutrition, as demonstrated by a lower incidence of wasting, especially among very poor households. Measured at 26 per cent in the comparison group of very poor households, the prevalence of wasting fell to just 9 per cent among those receiving support.

Support improves feeding practices, as expected. In particular, the prevalence of breastfeeding in very poor households has increased, as the grant allows new mothers to stay at home for longer before returning to work. The money is used to pay for better health care as well as developmental resources such as books and toys.

Just as crucially, the grant improves the household environment by reducing stress and improving power dynamics, particularly women's decision-making power. Mothers – and especially those in very poor households – reported using the grant money, which they received directly, to make important decisions and investments regarding their own lives and those of their children.



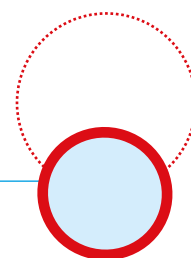
Impacts not visible in the data

Conversely, the evaluation was unable to prove significant impacts across some dimensions in which these had been predicted by the theory of change. Differences between treatment and comparison groups in overall expenditure, food expenditure or incidence of underweight children were not statistically significant. Anticipated spillover effects for other children in the household were likewise not apparent, and the report concludes that these effects would likely only become significant with a larger grant.

One factor that may have dampened impacts was an unplanned interruption to benefit payments, which paused the grant for seven months during the evaluation.

Targeting hits and misses

The targeting analysis estimated that 30 per cent of children eligible for the grant were not receiving it, due to inadequate training of implementers, complex targeting processes and poor communication of eligibility rules. An inclusion error was also found, whereby some households received the grant despite being above the income threshold for eligibility (though, in most cases, only slightly). The data show that this error could be almost eliminated by raising the income threshold to absorb more of these borderline households, in which children also appear to be vulnerable to deprivation.



Usually my husband makes decisions for the money he earns, but for the grant I decided how to use the grant, because this belongs to the child.

– Focus group participant



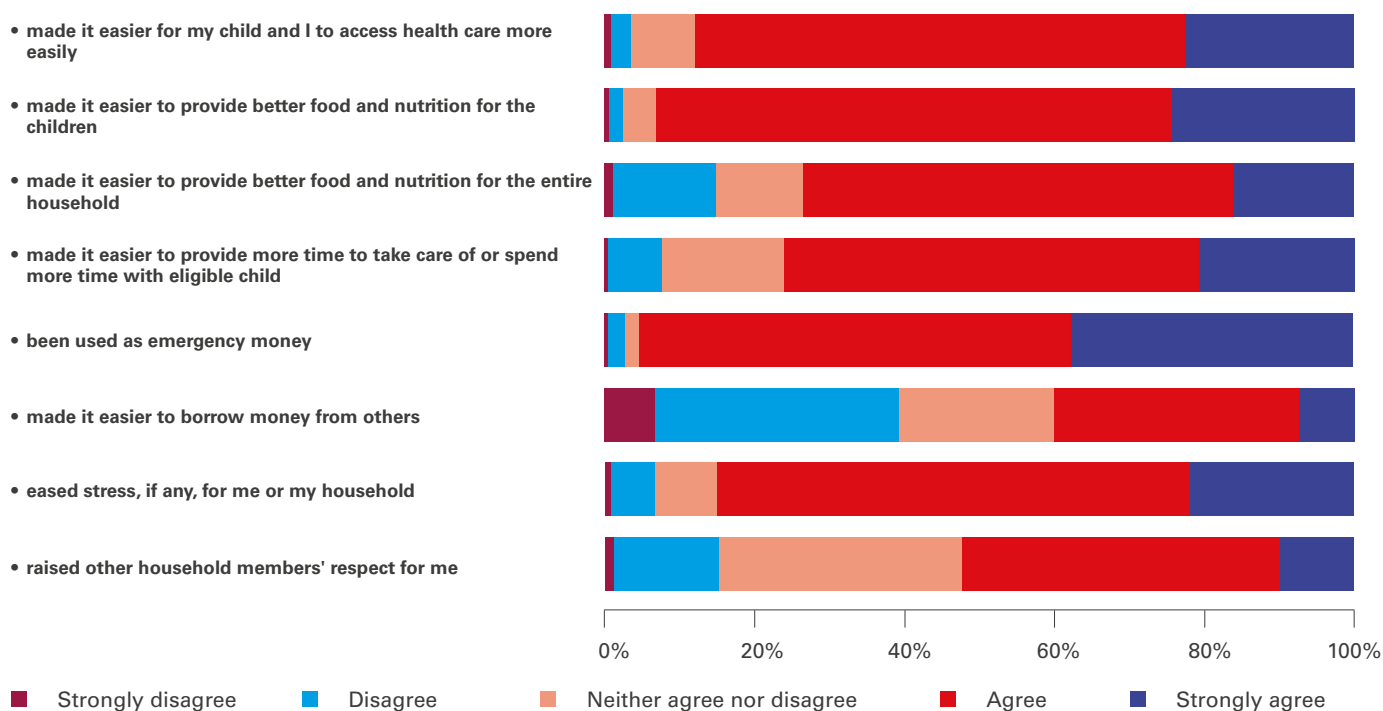
FIGURE 1
Impact on breastfeeding practices

	Mean values for eligible children residing in:		Impact	Absolute value of t-statistic	Interpretation
	Treatment households	Matched comparison households			
All households	0.79	0.73	0.06	2.23**	CSG receipt increases the prevalence of breastfeeding for the first six months of life by six percentage points
By income level					
Households <THB 1500	0.85	0.73	0.12	2.68***	CSG receipt increases the prevalence of breastfeeding for the first six months of life by twelve percentage points
Households <THB 3000	0.82	0.8	0.02	0.73	Not statistically significant
Households <THB 600	0.8	0.72	0.08	3.01***	CSG receipt increases the prevalence of breastfeeding for the first six months of life by eight percentage points

Note: Child Support Grant (CSG)

Source: Based on a single difference analysis

FIGURE 2
Mothers report: The child support grant has ...



Source: Adapted from *Figure 6. Use and effect of CSG on households*, full report, p. 49.

Problems of process

Implementation was found to be imperfect. Interviews revealed that the CSG programme suffered from inadequate training of implementers and a lack of coordination between the two ministries responsible for implementation and monitoring processes. Application and enrolment processes presented gaps, around targeting, poor communication of rules and operational glitches for households setting up bank accounts.

Delayed payments occurred when a shortage of funds led to many households not receiving benefits for seven months. This did, however, produce an interesting evaluation finding. When the delayed payments finally reached households as a large lump sum, many reported using the grant money differently from other times, directing it to major investments such as agricultural equipment purchases or engaging the services of agricultural workers.

INFLUENCE ON POLICY AND PROGRAMMING

Expanding what works

The evaluation report calls on the Government of Thailand to progressively expand the CSG programme to age-eligible beneficiaries within a larger income band, thus minimizing inclusion and exclusion errors. It also recommends raising the age threshold to increase lifelong benefits for children, and emphasizes the need to regularly revise the grant value, at least in line with inflation, to maintain impact.

Evidence generated by the evaluation coalition directly influenced the Government's decision in 2019 to expand the reach of the CSG. This raised the eligible age threshold from children under 3 years to children under 6 years and the annual household income threshold from 36,000 Thai baht (US\$1,166) to 100,000 Thai baht (US\$3,240). With these changes, the benefits of the grant, previously available to 700,000 children, will now reach as many as 1,800,000 children.

How the message was delivered

This immediate result shows the positive influence that an evaluation can have when it is well timed and responds to a specific need for evidence. Equally, the outcome owes much to groundwork previously laid by UNICEF Thailand and its partners. Investments in advocacy and strategic coalition building created a receptive environment to the evaluation findings and recommendations.

For over a decade, UNICEF Thailand has built a case for introducing a universal CSG as part of the country's social protection efforts. When the Government initially extended grant support to children up to 3 years (from the previous threshold of 12 months), UNICEF Thailand seized the momentum to continue advocating for more inclusion. Meanwhile, reports from the field indicated how poor households could benefit. These efforts had strong political backing, including from the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister for Social Affairs and members of the Cabinet.



It's hard to measure income. For example, someone who works in agriculture doesn't know how much they earn per year – they only know that they can survive. But the criteria for this programme are fixed.

– Key informant in local administrative organization





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Three-month-old baby Kanrawee in Samoeng district of Chiang Mai, Thailand.

BOX 1

ADVOCACY AND EVIDENCE RESPONDING TO CONTEXTUAL NEEDS

The evaluation has had a direct impact on the situation of young children in Thailand by:

- informing a long-term advocacy strategy to complement the evidence compiled, with a media campaign to generate public consensus in support of extending benefits to more children
- expanding the CSG in 2019 by increasing the eligible age threshold as well as the household income threshold
- prompting alliance building with partners such as civil society organizations, in particular the Coalition on Universal Child Support Grant.

The evaluation provided these decision-makers with meticulously compiled evidence. Knowing that a report alone was not enough, however, UNICEF Thailand also developed various creative instruments to disseminate the findings: op-eds for print and online channels, infographics, and a video featuring 'faces of exclusion' (children who did not receive the grant). It engaged the Coalition on Universal Child Support Grant, which used media efforts, policy briefs and a Facebook campaign to generate public consensus for extending support. In November 2018, the Coalition organized a public event to present the key evaluation results to politicians and call for the grant to cover children up to 6 years of age – which soon became a reality.

LOOKING AHEAD

The evaluation report highlights considerable work to be done beyond expanding coverage of the CSG programme, and this work is ongoing. The report reveals an urgent need to overcome the implementation barriers resulting from inadequate interdepartmental and interministerial coordination. It calls on the Government of Thailand to pursue training and capacity building for local-level implementers and to build a cadre of officials with the knowledge to support programme implementation.

Finally, the report asserts that cash alone is not enough to generate widespread impact. Ultimately, the grant should be complemented by high-quality provision of essential services for children and their families.



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