

Thailand's Poverty Paradox: Success Story or Unfinished Business?



Source: The Guardian

“Statistical targets are just the first step toward economic equality. True success lies in creating sustainable pathways out of poverty, ensuring all Thais have equal access to opportunities and resources for a better life.”

Despite Meeting Global Standards, Millions Still Struggle Below National Poverty Line

Thailand has made significant strides in poverty reduction, earning international recognition for its achievements. However, the country finds itself at a crossroads, celebrated for meeting global poverty benchmarks while grappling with the reality that millions of its citizens remain below the national poverty line. While officially achieving the UN's Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) of eliminating extreme poverty, closer scrutiny reveals a more nuanced picture. [Approximately 2.39 million Thais still live below the national poverty line](#), prompting critical questions about what poverty elimination truly means for Southeast Asia's second-largest economy. This paradox highlights the complexities of measuring and addressing poverty in a rapidly developing nation.

A Tale of Two Standards

Thailand's poverty statistics, at first glance, are impressive. The proportion of the population living

on less than \$2.15 per day—the World Bank's international poverty threshold—stands at just 0.6%, effectively placing Thailand among countries that have eliminated extreme poverty. This accomplishment positions Thailand favorably when compared to many developing nations. However, domestic realities tell a different story. When assessed against Thailand's own poverty line of 3,043 baht (\$85) per person per month, the figures shift significantly, with 3.41% of Thais still classified as poor.

This discrepancy underscores a critical issue: the difference between international benchmarks and national realities. [While the global poverty line provides a useful comparative metric, it often fails to capture the higher living costs and socio-economic conditions specific to individual countries.](#) For Thailand, these conditions manifest in stark regional disparities, uneven development, and rising income inequality. Understanding the full scope of poverty requires delving into how it manifests across the country's diverse regions,

where challenges differ markedly between urban and rural populations.

Regional Disparities: A Two-Decade Perspective

A comparison of poverty lines in Thailand between 2000 and 2023 reveals both progress and enduring challenges. In 2000, the poverty line ranged from 1,283 to 2,161 baht per month across provinces, with the northeastern and northern regions heavily shaded in red, indicating the highest poverty levels. These areas, characterized by their reliance on agriculture and remoteness from economic hubs, faced significant obstacles in accessing resources and opportunities. Fast forward to 2023, and while the poverty line has risen significantly to 2,546 to 3,616 baht per month, the geographical patterns of inequality remain largely unchanged. The northeastern and northern provinces continue to struggle with the highest poverty thresholds, reflecting structural challenges that persist despite economic growth.

Bangkok and the central provinces, by contrast, have benefited from better infrastructure, economic opportunities, and resilience to economic shifts, maintaining relatively stable poverty lines. [This uneven progress underscores a critical issue: economic growth alone is insufficient to resolve deep-rooted disparities.](#)

Addressing poverty in Thailand requires not just nationwide development but targeted interventions that account for local contexts. Investments in rural infrastructure, access to

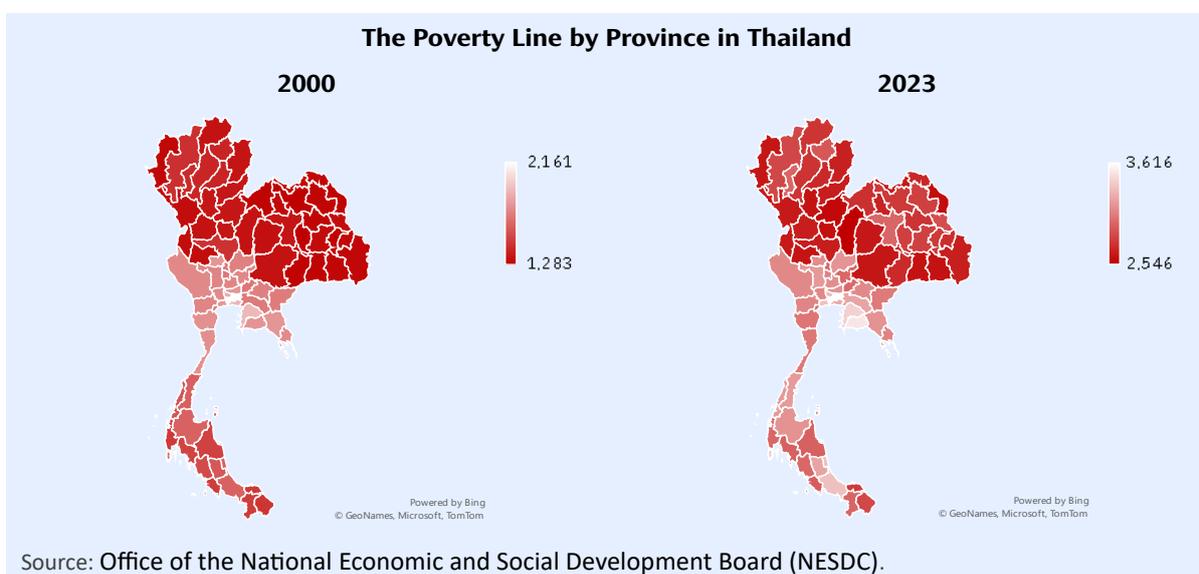
education, and healthcare in underserved regions are crucial to ensure equitable growth.

The enduring regional inequality highlights how poverty reduction must go beyond economic statistics. The northeastern and northern regions' continued struggles reveal the limits of growth-driven strategies in addressing the nuanced realities of poverty.

ASEAN Context and Future Challenges

Thailand's progress in poverty reduction is noteworthy within the broader ASEAN context. Countries like Vietnam have similarly achieved significant reductions in poverty, bringing their rate down to 4.3% in 2022 through strategic economic reforms. Indonesia, too, maintains a relatively low poverty rate of 9.5%. However, neighboring nations such as Cambodia and Myanmar continue to face much steeper challenges, with poverty rates of 21.5% (2021) and 24.8% (2017), respectively. Thailand's position in this spectrum reflects a broader regional trend: while many ASEAN nations have made remarkable progress in poverty alleviation, the pace and scope of success vary widely depending on policy approaches and structural conditions.

For Thailand, the challenge is no longer simply reducing poverty but addressing its multidimensional aspects. Beyond income levels, multidimensional poverty considers access to education, healthcare, housing, and social mobility—factors that significantly impact overall



quality of life. Urban centers like Bangkok face their own set of challenges, including affordability crises where rising housing and service costs outpace income growth, creating new forms of urban poverty. Meanwhile, rural areas, particularly in the North and Northeast, are highly vulnerable to environmental shocks, limited infrastructure, and weak safety nets.

Thailand's progress is impressive compared to some ASEAN peers, but it also highlights gaps in the equitable distribution of resources. As the country looks to its future, balancing economic growth with strategies to reduce inequality and address multidimensional poverty will be critical.

The Path Forward: Beyond Statistical Success

Thailand's poverty reduction journey is far from over. As emphasized by the Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council, "While we've made significant progress in reducing extreme poverty, our work isn't finished. The goal now is to ensure that development reaches every corner of the country."

Moving forward, Thailand must adopt a multi-dimensional approach to tackling poverty. Reducing income inequality, particularly in rural regions, requires sustained investments in infrastructure, education, and healthcare. Expanding social protection systems, such as cash transfers, unemployment benefits, and targeted subsidies, will be critical in supporting vulnerable populations and addressing immediate needs.

Inclusive economic growth strategies must also be prioritized. Creating decent jobs, supporting small businesses, and encouraging local entrepreneurship are essential to building resilient communities. The benefits of economic growth must be extended to all regions, not just urban centers, to bridge the development gap and promote equity.

Addressing multidimensional poverty also necessitates improved access to quality education and healthcare. These services must be made truly accessible to all, regardless of geographic location or socio-economic status, to break the cycle of poverty and promote long-term social mobility. Additionally, investments in affordable housing and public infrastructure will ensure that even urban areas are equipped to handle rising costs of living.

Climate change adaptation should be a cornerstone of Thailand's poverty reduction strategy. Sustainable farming practices, disaster resilience programs, and investments in renewable energy can mitigate environmental risks while fostering long-term economic stability. Protecting at-risk populations from climate-induced shocks is essential for achieving sustainable development.

Conclusion: The Journey Ahead

For the millions of Thais still living below the national poverty line, the distinction between international and domestic benchmarks is largely irrelevant. Their daily struggles underscore the fact that achieving statistical targets is only the first step toward true economic equality. The real measure of success will be the creation of sustainable pathways out of poverty that ensure all Thais, regardless of where they live, have access to opportunities and resources for a better quality of life.

Thailand's experience highlights the complexities of poverty reduction in a developing economy. While remarkable progress has been made by international standards, persistent challenges demonstrate the need for nuanced and comprehensive approaches. As the country continues its development journey, the focus must remain on ensuring that economic growth translates into meaningful improvements for all citizens, particularly those who have historically been left behind. **By addressing these challenges head-on, Thailand can move closer to its goal of not just statistical success, but true, inclusive progress.**

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