



## **“Fixing the Hole in the Safety Net for Children” UNICEF Thailand’s Successful Campaign for a Child Support Grant**

### **Introduction<sup>i</sup>**

Thailand is classified by the World Bank as an upper middle income country, one of a cluster of nations in the region with economies moving steadily up the income scale.<sup>ii</sup> At the same time, UNICEF estimates that more than two million children in Thailand under the age of eighteen still live in impoverished families that are unable to fully meet their basic needs. The result is that these children often suffer a host of nutritional, safety, and other urgent challenges and threats.

In 2008, UNICEF Thailand began speaking with allies and other institutions about pushing for national adoption of a child support grant, a system of government payments for families with children that could help alleviate some of these challenges. It undertook research, developed proposals, recruited support, began discussions with government officials, and steadily moved to build a national campaign to enact a support grant system. In some moments it seemed the effort was blocked and moving nowhere. In others it found bursts of political momentum. Steadily, with consistent effort and a well-developed strategy, it was able to make progress.

In April 2015 Thailand’s National Cabinet officially approved establishment of a national Child Support Grant, aimed at benefiting approximately 135,000 children under the age of one who live in poor families, equal to 20 percent of newborns. The government allocated USD \$20 million to finance monthly grants of 400 Thai Baht (about USD \$12), an amount, according to UNICEF, capable of making a substantial difference in the lives of the recipient children. In March 2016 the Thai Government approved an expansion of the Child Support Grant, increasing the monthly payment to poor families to 600 Baht (about \$17) and expanding eligibility to children up to age three.

UNICEF’s successful campaign to enact a national Child Support Grant offers important lessons for UNICEF advocacy more broadly: how to put an issue on the national agenda, how to address and pre-empt potential political resistance, how to use UNICEF’s convening power and global reach as an advocacy resource, how to recruit and use non-traditional allies, how to bring data and stories together into a powerful narrative, and how to redefine your objectives into something achievable that builds towards your broader vision. Most importantly, it

demonstrates the power of persistence and the lesson that strategic advocacy efforts require long-term commitment, and that those commitments are warranted by the potential, large payoffs for children in the end.

## **II. Picking the Objective**

The starting point for any advocacy campaign is the identification of the objective, the ultimate goal that the effort seeks to achieve. The seed of UNICEF Thailand's decision to pursue a national child support grant was planted with the arrival, in 2007, of Andrew Claypole to serve as the office's Chief of Social Policy. Claypole took note of the country's lack of any sort of payment system to support families with children, a staple of social policy in most high-income countries. In the aftermath of the 2008-2009 global financial crisis, UNICEF began to look in a more focused way, worldwide, at the urgency of a 'social protection floor' for all children to ameliorate the impacts of the crisis and similar downturns in the future. Claypole sensed a moment of opportunity.

With the strong support of senior management (under what would be three different Representatives) Claypole began meeting with key civil society allies and academics who were already looking at the child poverty issue in the country. His first ideas were ambitious, though rooted in solid evidence. UNICEF proposed a child support grant system that was universal (available to all families in the country regardless of income) and extend all the way through graduation from high school.

"Universality made sense," Claypole argues, "because the cost and complexities of screening by income ends up costing as much or more as extending the grant to all families. There is also a great risk that the screening process will end up excluding some families who ought to be eligible."<sup>iii</sup> But the other organizations whose support UNICEF would need as allies expressed the view that the idea was too ambitious to be politically feasible as a first step. Instead, UNICEF and its civil society allies decided to propose a more specific universal plan aimed at all children from birth through age six, at a level of 600 Baht (\$17) per month. The groups' rationale for ending the grant at six was because at that age a set of other universal forms of government support kicked in as children began school, such as school lunches, support for books and uniforms. UNICEF now had a concrete proposal, a compromise aimed to win political support but that left ample room for expansion over time.

## II. Key Audiences and the Political Map

From the start, UNICEF and its allies surveyed the political chess board carefully and devoted time to understanding both the decision-making process involved and the political dynamics that would affect it. As the country office writes, “UNICEF Thailand invested in heavy political intelligence and extensive formal and informal discussions and exchanges with key political figures.”<sup>iv</sup> That intelligence-gathering surfaced three key factors that would shape UNICEF’s advocacy strategy.

First, within the government, it would ultimately be the National Cabinet that would have to give formal approval for the plan. UNICEF identified two key actors that would be pivotal in convincing them. One was the government’s technical planning apparatus, the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB). While wider political winds would have an impact, the NESDB was the key political gatekeeper en route to the Cabinet. Fortunately, UNICEF already had a solid working relationship with the Board, which had engaged with UNICEF as part of a 2008-2009 global child poverty study.

Another key point of influence with the Cabinet and the NESDB was Thailand’s Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) for Social Development, Dr. Yongyuth Yuthawong, who carried the portfolio for children’s issues within the government. The DPM became a very important ally on the inside of the political process and in the position high enough to influence several major actors such as the NESDB and the Budget Bureau, which is generally disapproving of such budget requests for new policy. Nattha Keenapan of the UNICEF communications team observed, “It was really the Deputy Prime Minister who became the big guy who pushed on this.”<sup>v</sup>

The second factor that UNICEF knew would have a substantial impact on the plan’s political fortunes was general skepticism about the idea of using cash payments to caregivers as a way of supporting children. Claypole recounted, “People would say, ‘This is just a western idea. You don’t understand Thai culture. If you give people free money they’ll just smoke it or drink it.’” It became critical to overcome this skepticism and show that the program really could work, that it really would aid the children targeted and not be spent on other things by careless parents. As explained below, UNICEF would confront this skepticism by showing how the plan worked in other places with great success.

A third factor, and an important one, was that as UNICEF was pushing the proposal just as Thailand was in the midst of a political explosion. Tensions between the country’s main political factions and the various political parties that represented them had spilled into the streets and on several occasions into deep violence. At the center of the revolt in Bangkok were accusations that a series of ‘populist’ measures aimed at winning political support among the poor, such as a rice-price support scheme, were draining the public treasury of billions of

dollars and were a source of major corruption. UNICEF knew that a new program to provide cash payments to poor families could easily get viewed through that same lens, as just another ‘populist’ plan, and get caught up in the political crossfire of that conflict.

All three of these factors were taken carefully into consideration as UNICEF and its allies planned and executed strategy elements such as the campaign’s messaging and the specific activities it undertook to win government approval.

### **III. Building Alliances**

While UNICEF Thailand was, from the start and throughout, the key driving force for the adoption of the child support grant, its effort was complemented significantly by an important set of working alliances with civil society actors, allies in the media, and others.

One of the most important of those allies was the Thailand Development Research Institute (TDRI), a well-respected nonprofit think tank. The TDRI had also collaborated with UNICEF earlier in the 2008-2009 global child poverty study and had a close working relationship with UNICEF staff. Because of its well-regarded technical expertise (Institute staff were not only recognized for their expertise in Thailand but sought out for international projects as well) the TDRI has influence with the government’s NESDB (the planning board). UNICEF approached the TDRI early and formed a close working partnership, including on studies to assess the affordability and fiscal space for a child support grant. TDRI was among the partners suggesting that UNICEF scale down its proposal to something more politically sell-able with the government, in particular targeting it toward just poor families and to children six years and younger.

UNICEF also formed a set of key advocacy alliances with Thai civil society organizations and NGOs. “We had an NGO coalition group for children that met with the Deputy Prime Minister as well,” said Kanda Sutthanunt, a member of UNICEF’s social policy team.<sup>vi</sup> “We had some very powerful groups with us.” This included organizations such as Foundation for Children Development, Foundation for Slum Babies, Doungprateep Foundation, Mercy Foundation, Sahathai Foundation, Chulalongkon University, and others. In addition UNICEF has worked with the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security (MSDHS) to advocate for the grant through formal government planning committees. This allowed them to raise the case for child support grants in various official forums with the government, building an overall positive atmosphere around the issue. This included informal communication between allies and high-level decision-makers all the way to the Cabinet level. UNICEF also worked with the Law Reform Commission of Thailand (LRCT) to build support for the program. These-alliances came together most powerfully in a National Seminar on the child support grant idea held in January 2015, an event described in more detail later.

Another surprise ally, but a key one, was Prof. Dr. Varakorn Samakoses, a well-known economist and columnist, who also serves as President of Dhurakij Pundit University in Bangkok, one of the country's leading business schools. Dr. Samakoses was invited to join the international study tour that UNICEF organized to South Africa to see the results of a child support grant program there (described in more detail below). Said Claypole, "He got it almost immediately, the whole concept of it, and he wrote several articles about it." The respected economist also promoted the child support grant plan in his weekly radio program. He became a champion that wasn't as predictable as UNICEF or other child advocacy groups. "When you get prominent figures like that who don't initially know anything about it, and then they become advocates, they have their own networks of influence and those people in turn also become promoters of the idea," Claypole added.

In 2013, UNICEF also worked with other UN agencies to produce a report on social protection in Thailand. The report highlighted several gaps in Thailand's social protection programs, including the lack of a child support grant.

#### **IV. The Campaign's Advocacy Messaging**

UNICEF put a good deal of strategic thought into how to communicate their case for the child support grant in a clear, consistent, and compelling way. It did that with a set of three core messages that it repeated over and over in a variety of ways. These were maintained as a constant from the beginning of the advocacy campaign through its ongoing efforts to expand the grant program.

*1. The early years of a child's life are critical and providing financial support to poor families is a sound social investment.*

This argument, based on clear evidence, was critical to UNICEF's messaging, especially as it decided to target the support grant children six years of age and younger. As UNICEF elaborated in a December 2014 news release, "The first few years of a child's life are the most important for their mental and physical development. It is during this time that investment in their well-being is most critical and yields the greatest results." This argument also had power because it resonated with an intuitive understanding by anyone with children in their lives, as parents or as extended family. It rooted the campaign in solid, accepted logic.

*2. The child support grant would fill a basic gap in Thailand's already-existing social safety net.*

To combat the potential perception of the child support grant as something alien (i.e. an imposed western concept) or that it was just another element of the embattled 'populist' schemes of the day, UNICEF made the case that the grant was consistent with Thailand's other

widely-accepted social safety net programs and, in fact, was aimed to fill a key gap in those programs. UNICEF presented the grant as a logical sibling to other existing universal cash support programs for people with disabilities, the elderly, people with HIV, and others. “The child support grant is the one big piece of social protection that is still missing in Thailand,” said UNICEF Representative Bijaya Rajbhandari, in public comments during the campaign. He pointed out that more than four million children in Thailand under six were not protected by any social protection floor of any kind.

*3. The child support grant is about real families with real problems and has a proven track record of success elsewhere.*

UNICEF’s communication efforts on behalf of the grant proposal were carefully rooted in real stories about real children. Claypole referred to one heart-wrenching story that was cited during the campaign, about a young mother who worked two jobs and was still unable to pay her family’s electricity bill. When her power was shut off her children were left to use candles for lighting while she was at work. One of the candles fell, started a fire in the house and took the lives of both her children. “Poverty literally does kill,” Claypole said, echoing a theme of the messaging campaign behind the grant proposal. The campaign offered real examples of what a grant could buy for these families – food, transport, etc. It also grounded them in real examples from countries like South Africa that already had a successful child support grant system in place.

The effect of this triad of messages was to give the proposal a moral base, strong evidence-based credibility, and to build in a defense from the start against the potential backlash from those who might dismiss it as a waste of funds or something unproven.

Later, after the approval of the first grant in March 2015, when UNICEF’s advocacy efforts shifted toward expansion of the program, they topped their messages with another one as well. “An added message this year, now that the grant has been approved, is to congratulate the government,” noted Nattha Keenapan. “We tell them they are doing a great job of getting people enrolled in the program.” By making the program a source of public pride for the government, that builds powerful political incentive for the government to become its promoter and to support adding more families and children under its social protection umbrella.

## **V. The Campaign’s Main Activities**

UNICEF’s campaign for the child support grant involved an ongoing set of formal and informal conversations with key actors over a multi-year period to solicit their support. It involved research. It included message development and media outreach. These activities and others are the nuts and bolts of effective advocacy campaigns. Beyond these however, advocacy

campaigns also undertake other activities that bring all these elements together in a focused way aimed at moving progress further forward. Often these require substantial investment of resources, including staff time and direct financial support.

In addition to UNICEF's many ongoing efforts to promote the child support grant, it also stepped up its efforts into what it refers to as 'higher-level policy advocacy', moving beyond the basic presentation of evidence. It joined with its allies and others to develop three key activities that had a substantial impact on the success of its efforts:

### *1. The Child Support Grant Study Tour to South Africa (May 2012)*

In May 2012 UNICEF took a gamble and organized a labor and resource intensive 'international study tour' through which it took nine Thai government officials and key non-governmental actors to South Africa to see that country's well-established child support grant program in operation. Andrew Claypole, acknowledging that such study tours are sometimes "disparaged" as an effective learning tool, called the tour a turning point in UNICEF's efforts to win Thai government support. The tour was led by the government's planning agency, the NESDB, and included a variety of line ministries and other entities that would have actual hands-on responsibility for developing and implementing a child support grant scheme in Thailand. It also included, as noted earlier, the influential economist and academic, Dr. Samakoses.

"You are literally there, twelve hours a day, working together and talking about these issues and seeing a highly sophisticated payment system that was working there in a very concrete way in a country at a similar level of economic development," said Claypole. UNICEF supported the study tour, at a cost of \$20,000, but Claypole argued that when such tours are organized in the right way and carried out for the right reasons, they can make a huge difference. UNICEF says that the study tour to South Africa on child support grants did just that.

### *2. The National Seminar on Child Support Grants at the Parliament of Thailand (January 2015)*

In January 2015 UNICEF helped put together a National Seminar on Child Support Grants hosted by the Deputy Prime Minister for Social Development, the champion on the issue within the government. The half-day seminar in Bangkok drew more than 200 participants including members of the Thai Parliament, a variety of relevant ministries within the executive branch, civil society organizations, academics, the media and others. UNICEF was represented not only by its staff but by a key goodwill ambassador, Mr. Anand Panyarachun, a former Prime Minister of Thailand who had also become a champion of the child support grant following several briefings by UNICEF.

The Seminar at the Parliament drew the attention of the media and political actors and raised the issue to a more public level. It allowed for a broad debate on the support grant plan, including familiar criticisms that parents would use the funds for other purposes and that it would not benefit the children. By creating a forum where these arguments could surface in public, UNICEF and other analysts were able to use evidence to refute the concerns and make their case not only before those who were supportive but also those who were skeptical.

In advocacy, it is a fundamental mistake to pretend that counter-arguments against you don't exist. In most cases, the most effective thing to do is to allow those arguments a clear voice and to then to challenge them if they are incorrect. The Seminar allowed UNICEF and its allies to do that in an organized and public way. The event at the Parliament instantly sparked public debate and also increased public demand for child support grant policy.

### *3. The Media Field Trips (March 2015 and February 2016)*

In late March 2015, after the National Seminar and on the eve of the government's adoption of the child support grant, the UNICEF communications staff organized a media field trip for fifteen key national journalists. The media field trip was organized at a time when media coverage had become increasingly critical of the child support grant policy. The two-day journey took the journalists to a pair of rural villages in Thailand's more impoverished northeastern areas where child poverty is most prevalent.

The trip began with a comprehensive briefing by UNICEF staff, covering topics such as: overall challenges facing early childhood development in Thailand; the gap in social protection; the basics of a child support grant; the relatively small budget required to finance a child support grant system; and relevant experiences from other countries. An economist from the TDRI also joined the briefing by telephone, giving the reporters access to as much detailed information as they might want.

In the field, journalists were taken to a child support center to meet with local experts that could explain the real impacts of child poverty in the area. They were also taken to villages to see the impacts of child poverty directly and to speak with parents and grandparents who were able to tell their own stories and explain the ways in which a child support grant system could assist with their children's lives.

Coming on the eve of the plan's formal adoption by the government, the aim was to put its announcement and launch in a positive public light and prevent any serious backlash against it. "The goal of the trip was to promote better understanding of the plan and to show the general public that the support grant was crucial to child development," observed Keenapan. "After the trip we saw many positive articles about the child support grant and none that were negative."



UNICEF repeated the process with a second media field trip in February 2016, linked to its efforts to expand the grant to more families and higher stipends. Together the two media outings generated at least 37 news stories and opinion columns, UNICEF says, all of them touting the benefits of the grant program to a wide public audience.

UNICEF's media trip offers a powerful example of how to blend technical evidence (the briefing) with direct exposure to the issues and powerful personal stories that brought that evidence to life. That merging of the two is a key part of almost all effective UNICEF advocacy.

#### *4. Continuous support for the implementation of CSG*

After the CSG was first approved in March 2015, the Department of Children and Youth (DCY) was assigned to be the agency to establish and manage the process of implementing the CSG. UNICEF has continued to provide technical and financial support to the government on numerous tasks to support implementation, including assisting with the development of the CSG manual for local implementers, supporting the production of communication materials, and providing support for setting up the program's monitoring system.

This continuous support on implementation is crucial in several ways. First, it demonstrates UNICEF's commitment to work with the government to make CSG successful. This contributes to fostering good relationships between UNICEF and those responsible for the program's implementation. Second, if that implementation is a success, the evidence to support its expansion will also be strengthened, as it has been with the first expansion.

### **VI. Key Lessons for UNICEF Advocacy**

UNICEF Thailand's work to develop and promote a Child Support Grant program ended in a clear success. As of March 2016 more than 64,000 pregnant women and mothers had been enrolled in the new program. That is approximately half of the number eligible but a significant achievement for a new program and excellent in terms of early enrollment rates in other countries. Those enrollments are expected to expand significantly in 2016 as more families learn about the program and especially as the Thai government expands the program to cover poor children through age 3. It seems likely that UNICEF and its allies will be able to promote further expansion over time to children older than three and perhaps grants of higher amounts as well.

As with all advocacy campaigns, some elements are unique to the country context and moment and not necessarily transferrable to other countries and contexts. However, the UNICEF Thailand experience does hold a set of lessons that have a broader value and are worth close consideration by other UNICEF offices as they craft their own advocacy strategies and plans on a variety of issues.

## *1. Public Campaigns Can Be Far More Effective than Technical Ones*

In many ways, the lesson from the Thailand experience that matters most is about a strategic decision that UNICEF made at the beginning, to make the campaign for the Child Support Grant a high visibility one aimed at the top ranks of Thai government and politics instead of a technical one aimed at the lower rungs of the bureaucracy. That lesson was emphasized by Wisoot Tantinan, who was in charge of the Thai office's advocacy work on the CSG until leaving recently to work with UNDP. "We usually start by focusing on the technical aspects of an issue. But we also have to think beyond the evidence to how to work with civil society groups, the media and high level officials. Intensive political economic analysis is an essential part of understanding all players in the policy making process"<sup>vii</sup>

For the Thailand office's work on child support grants that meant, said Tantinan, forming a strong working alliance across the entire office. This included joint efforts between the social policy team and the communications team to craft clear messages that worked at a public level, not just a technical one. That office-wide effort to make the CSG a priority including nearly every element, including senior management, operations, and many others.

The campaign was also crafted to take aim directly at Thailand's Cabinet where the political decision would be made. That included getting a basic analysis of the issue done quickly to take advantage of key political opportunities. Tantinan said that proved far more effective than waiting two years for a more substantial report that wouldn't really add any additional political impact. "It doesn't take an extra year or two to analyze that there is a major gap in the social protection system for children. When we presented this shorter analysis to the media, they understood it very well." This is a change, he observed, in the common UNICEF practice of undertaking much longer studies as the main tool for advocacy.

## *2. Relationships Matter*

Beneath all the strategized elements of advocacy (messages, actions, etc.) lies a foundation just as fundamental, especially in political cultures like Thailand's: relationships. UNICEF began its effort with a set of solid and mutually-respectful working relationships with virtually all the key actors involved, both inside the government and out. These relationships were built on previous work together, so that when UNICEF started knocking on doors on behalf of the child support grant it was not making cold calls.

Relationships are a particularly strong asset that UNICEF brings to its advocacy work in most countries. As in Thailand, UNICEF generally has a chain of positive and established working relationships that stretch from the community level to the top ranks of government. The convening power to be a bridge between the two is a powerful advocacy asset, one the Thailand office deployed to very good use.

### *3. Sometimes Compromise is Key*

In several key aspects, the plan adopted by the Thai government was far less ambitious and far-reaching than what UNICEF originally proposed. It did not cover children from birth through school age. It was not universal (i.e. covering all children in Thailand) but was instead targeted only to the poor. UNICEF in Thailand has not given up on its original vision, but in ceding to political practicality it has placed its foot squarely in the door and laid a strong foundation upon which it can continue to build with further advocacy. UNICEF noted that In Thailand's political economic history, every universal social protection program started with a targeting approach. Once it is there, public demand then sparks political pressures for expansion. If UNICEF had insisted on a more ambitious government approach from the start it would likely have alienated both key allies and also its champions in the government, with the result of getting nothing at all.

The question of when to compromise and when not to is always a hard issue in advocacy. Does a compromise get you something useful or does it let the wind out of the sails of what is really needed and make your ultimate objective further away, not closer? There is no universal rule that covers every situation. There is however a useful principle and it is the one UNICEF Thailand followed on child support grants: If you can't get all of what you want, see if you can get something that is simultaneously worthwhile to win on its own and that creates momentum for more. In the same way that the first gear in a car does the hardest work (getting a two-ton object to move from stationery to creeping forward is much harder than getting a speeding car to go a little faster), getting a brand new program first started is the more burdensome task. UNICEF Thailand has helped push child support grants squarely into gear as well as their initial expansion.

### *4. Know the Political Winds that Blow Against You and Take Them on Directly*

UNICEF and its allies understood from the start that two key winds were blowing against them. One was the belief that caregivers who received assistance under the program would actually spend the funds on themselves rather than on their children ("They'll drink it."). The other was concerns about the practicality of implementation, including eligibility and disbursement mechanisms, by those who would actually have to do that job. UNICEF addressed both issues head on.

To combat the view that families would not use the funds responsibly for their children UNICEF mustered clear and compelling evidence from studies and analysis of other similar programs in other countries and argued that Thai families loved their children no less. To address concerns of implementation and to make the program more palatable to key actors in the government, UNICEF took a group of them to South Africa, showed them how it worked in practical terms and suggested that the Thai government was no less competent to do the task. In addition,

UNICEF and its allies pitched the program as something not alien and unfamiliar, but akin to other support grant programs it already had for other groups that needed social protection, such as for the elderly and people with disabilities. They made an effective case that establishing a support grant for children was simply mending a hole in the safety net.

#### *5. Build Alliances that Bring Something to the Table You Don't*

While UNICEF certainly had important allies among civil society groups and others with strong records on children's rights, that was a credential that UNICEF already had itself. That children's advocates supported giving government funds to children was neither in doubt nor unexpected. What UNICEF needed most were allies who filled a different role, who were not so easily predictable, and who could speak with credibility on aspects of the plan where UNICEF's credentials were not as strong.

In this aspect several allies were key. One was the Thailand Development Research Institute. It was not viewed primarily as a children's advocate but as an authoritative technical voice on development. TDRI's voice in support of the plan, as a positive development program for Thailand, altered the political chemistry around the issue and helped win support, most especially, from the essential National Economic and Social Development Board. Winning an alliance with the Deputy Prime Minister for Social Development was also key, giving it a champion directly on the inside of the Thai government at its highest levels. This also helped support for the program survive a series of ministerial re-shuffles in the Thai Cabinet. Also important was the alliance formed with Dr. Samakoses the professor and columnist who helped make the case to the broader public. Each of these alliances complemented UNICEF's own strengths in valuable ways that made a substantial difference in the outcome.

#### *6. Stay Focused on the Human Dimension*

Few organizations that carry out advocacy, on any issue, are as well-rooted as UNICEF in data, research, and analysis – the hard evidence of advocacy. But often UNICEF fails to fully match its evidence capacities with an ability to also root its advocacy in the human stories and examples that give that advocacy its heart and human appeal. In its campaign for the child support grant, UNICEF Thailand did both.

In its media field trip it brought journalists right to the doorstep of the children impacted by poverty and showed how the program could make a difference. In its media work in general it told stories of specific families. It also grounded its voice in the concrete positives of what the grants could achieve and still does in its ongoing efforts aimed at expansion. Thomas Davin, UNICEF's current Thailand Representative told the story of one family in an editorial submitted to the *Bangkok Post* in March 2016. "When Apinya Satarom's four-month old baby, Jessada, fell

dangerously ill one night last month, she used the cash she had just received under this scheme to pay for transportation to the hospital.”

Few things often prove as powerful in advocacy as a simple and authentic human narrative.

### *7. Effective Advocacy Requires Both Planning and a Long-Term Commitment*

The overall advocacy plan behind the CSG campaign was carefully planned, not an ad hoc effort. That plan was born, in part, in a series of advocacy development workshops for the Thailand office staff in 2013 and 2014 led by the Democracy Center. Those sessions covered issues such as mapping the political actors involved, developing the campaign’s messaging, and other key elements. This kind of careful, advance strategic analysis and planning proved important to the success of the overall effort.

UNICEF’s long-term commitment proved more essential still. Andrew Claypole noted that it took six full years of concentrated advocacy effort to win the first approval of the Child Support Grant. He recalled one of his first conversations when the Thailand office received a new representative, Bijaya Rajbhandari, in late 2012. “So, you’ve been at this three years?” observed the new head of the office with some skepticism. However, he soon became a strong and passionate proponent of the grant. After three years of additional commitment and effort UNICEF Thailand had helped establish a new program positioned to help hundreds of thousands of children living in poor families.

Effective advocacy campaigns are not won quickly. With rotations of senior leaders that take place every three to five years in most UNICEF offices, in addition to turnover in other key staff, long-term advocacy efforts face a serious challenge. The UNICEF Thailand campaign to establish and expand the Child Support Grant has stretched across the tenures of three different country representatives, requiring that each new arrival take time to understand and respect the choices made by his predecessor and be committed to continue building upon them. That is something not always guaranteed given the reality of UNICEF staff turnover. “In middle income countries and in upper middle income countries these ‘big advocacy asks’ will take many years to achieve,” observed UNICEF’s current Thailand Representative, Thomas Davin. “Part of that success is a necessary endurance and keeping with the commitment.”<sup>viii</sup>

That commitment doesn’t end with approval of the program, but also through the budgetary process that assures its funding and through monitoring and evaluation to test how the program is actually doing in a real way in terms of serving the needs and interests of the children involved.

## 8. Effective Advocacy Can Also Involve Political Risk-Taking

Policy advocacy is a political act, which depending on the political culture in which it takes place, can also subject UNICEF to a measure of institutional risk. In the case of the CSG, especially set against the explosive politics in Thailand at the time, UNICEF took several calculated political risks to advance its efforts to win approval of the support grant system. These were risks both to its relationship with the government and also its public image in the country. Its promotion of the CSG carried a significant risk that UNICEF could get tossed into the tense political crossfire over ‘populist’ economic measures. Its correspondence to the government, expressing gratitude for the plan’s approval, could be used by political actors to advance their interests and damage UNICEF’s nonpartisan position. On the other hand, its continuing pressure on the government could also do harm to political relationships key to UNICEF’s success in the country, and subject it to charges of ‘outsider meddling.’

## Conclusion

Effective policy advocacy is a combination of smart strategy, careful patience, and persistence.

In its campaign for Thailand’s Child Support Grant, UNICEF had a strategic vision for how to pursue it. It decided at the start that to win it needed to aim at the top of the political system, not its technical underbelly. All of the key elements its strategy were carefully thought out -- from the analysis of the political map, to the alliances it formed, to the way the campaign communicated to the public. These were not carried out in an *ad hoc* manner.

Its persistence kept the campaign on track over years, even in moments when it appeared to be making little progress. Not every advocacy effort can be expected to pay off with a success. Many do not. However, the multiplier effect of even a modest policy victory is so extraordinary in comparison to the resources invested, that even rare victories justify the investments made in ones that fall short. Consider the lopsided ratio of how much support children in poor families in Thailand will receive, for many years, versus how much UNICEF invested to help bring it about. It is hard to imagine a more worthwhile investment on behalf of Thai children.

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democracycenter**

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<sup>1</sup> This case study is one in a series of four case studies commissioned by UNICEF on effective advocacy strategies. A note on methodology: the case studies were based on a review of background documents provided by UNICEF

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offices as well as information gathered through in-depth interviews with UNICEF staff who worked closely on the advocacy campaign. Within the text specific interviews are cited.

<sup>ii</sup> <http://data.worldbank.org/country/thailand>

<sup>iii</sup> Interview with the author, April 14, 2016

<sup>iv</sup> UNICEF Thailand Case Study Brief on Child Support Grant

<sup>v</sup> Interview with the author, April 12, 2016

<sup>vi</sup> Interview with the author, April 12, 2016

<sup>vii</sup> Interview with the author, April 25, 2016

<sup>viii</sup> E-mailed comments, May 3, 2016