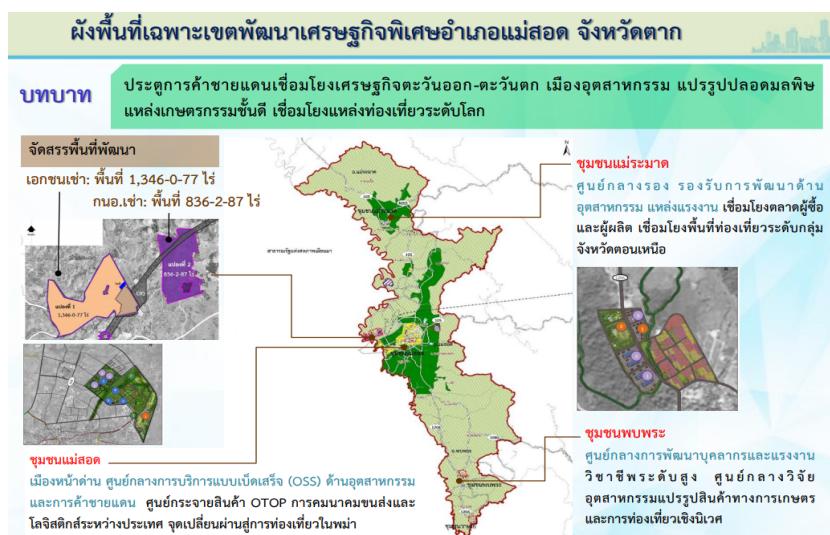


## What happens when Mae Sot is a special economic zone? by Kanya Apipornchaisakul

Mae Sot District town (Tak Province) is located on the Thai-Myanmar border, and the resident and transient population is quite diverse in terms of culture and socio-economic status. There are the indigenous people of the area, in addition to members of ethnic minorities, refugees, and cross-border migrants originating from outside of Thailand. Over the years, Mae Sot has developed policies and programs for overseeing and supporting the population of cross-border migrant workers, including their accompanying dependents (e.g., children). These programs have done so well that they are referred to as the “Mae Sot Model” for their many achievements, for example, in managing the flow of migrants. Accordingly, in the meeting of the Committee on Special Economic Zone Policy, on July 15, 2014, Mae Sot was designated as one of five “special economic zones.” Given this development, it is important to study what has been the impact on Mae Sot by being declared a special economic zone. A qualitative research project entitled: **“Child cross-border migrants: Care and access to health services and education in the special economic zone of Mae Sot District, Tak Province.”** Data were collected from cross-border migrant families and representatives from related sectors. The researcher probed the impact on the status and conditions of the cross-border population (including children) that can be attributed to Mae Sot becoming a special economic zone.



Layout of the special economic zone of Tak Province (Ministry of Interior, 2015) accessed at:

<http://gisweb.diw.go.th/diwzoning/images/content/5download/SEZ.pdf>

**Health dimension:** Development of Mae Sot District after being designated as a special economic zone has had a tendency to have a positive impact on the health service system in the area, such as the Mae Sot

Hospital. This once-modest district hospital has steadily expanded its capacity, and currently has become a 500-bed hospital. The district has also provided more capacity development for staff of Tambon Health Promotion Hospitals in the surrounding area by deploying a mobile team of doctors and nurses to mentor these peripheral personnel. Although Mae Sot Hospital has expanded in size and range of services it can provide, problems and limitations still remain, for example, in terms of staff shortages, and the high annual expenditures (as high as 60 million baht in recent years) because many of the patients do not have health insurance cards (among those who are non-Thai migrants). The most vulnerable group are the accompanying dependents of migrants which are, in essence, a hidden population of cross-border child migrants.

That said, there have been notable positive spinoffs, possibly related to Mae Sot being a special economic zone. For example, there was the announcement of Article 64<sup>1</sup> regarding the employment of migrant workers in the area. As specified in the Article, to renew their work permit, non-Thai migrant workers must also obtain a health insurance card as supporting documentation. This policy has rapidly closed the gap of migrants who do not have health insurance and, thus, has reduced the cost-of-care burden on public hospitals. Likewise, the situation of disease control and surveillance has improved. **The key informants in the area feel that Article 64 of the law promotes health-related agencies to monitor the health status of migrant labor, and the work in the clinical care and control of disease in the migrant population is more efficient.**

**Designation of Mae Sot as a special economic zone:** Some of the key informants from the health sector expressed concern that there is still lack of preparation and lack of focus on the impact which this designation is having. Being a special economic zone initially meant that barriers to business and investment were reduced. Thus, most of the development initiatives were capitalist, and there was little concern for the impact on the health system and the environment – especially as the economic development dimension achieves full capacity. The consequent influx of migrant labor, including the cross-border populations, will inevitably lead to an increase in the spread of communicable disease, especially in the area of factories or industrial estates. Of particular concern is the urgent need to achieve

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<sup>1</sup> Article 64 of the Emergency Decree on Foreign Workers Administration B.E. 2560 (2017) and as amended (Issue 2) B.E. 2561 (2018), states that foreigners who are nationals of countries bordering Thailand who enter the Kingdom with a transit card or other similar permit authorized by the Director-General may be permitted by the Registrar to work in the Kingdom temporarily for a period or according to the season and in the specified area

adequate coverage of disease prevention services, including expanded vaccination of vulnerable populations, especially children.

**Education of migrant children:** The designation of Mae Sot as a special economic zone may not have had a significant impact on the access to education for migrant children. However, there is likely to have been a positive indirect impact, such as the increase of external agencies which have come into the district to support education for migrant children, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that operate learning centers, and the Thai public school system itself which is now more open to enrolling non-Thais. However, most of the key informants admitted that the education of migrant children is still mostly provided by NGOs and not the regular Thai schools. The main obstacle is the language barrier for migrant children in public schools where the curriculum is only in Thai. To be enrolled in a Thai school, the migrant child must demonstrate basic Thai language competency. In the NGO-managed schools, the curriculum uses both Thai and English, and this enables the migrant children to become tri-lingual, which will be an advantage once they reach the working age.

The perspective of staff from the NGOs working in Mae Sot is that, if the policy for special economic zones is implemented as intended, then there should be a positive impact on quality of life across multiple dimensions, for residents and migrants alike. The mere fact of improved employment opportunity will boost the economy for the entire district. In the longer-term, the migrant children who receive a quality education will have better job opportunities, especially those youth who are multi-lingual.