

Innovation and participation for healthy public policy: the first National Health Assembly in Thailand

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Abstract

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Aim This paper aims to describe and disseminate the process and initial outcomes of the first National Health Assembly (NHA) in Thailand, as an innovative example of health policy making.

Setting The first NHA, held in December 2008 in Bangkok, brought together over 1500 people from government agencies, academia, civil society, health professionals and the private sector to discuss key health issues and produce resolutions to guide policy making. It adapted the approach used at the World Health Assembly of the World Health Organization.

Method Findings are derived from a literature review, document analysis, and the views and experiences of the authors, two of whom contributed to the organization of the NHA and two of whom were invited external observers.

Results Fourteen agenda items were discussed and resolutions passed. Potential early impacts on policy making have included an increase in the 2010 public budget for Thailand's universal health coverage scheme as total public expenditure has decreased; cabinet endorsement of proposed Strategies for Universal Access to Medicines for Thai People; and establishment of National Commissions on Health Impact Assessment and Trade and Health.

Discussion The NHA was successful in bringing together various actors and sectors involved in the social production of health, including groups often marginalized in policy making. It provides an innovative model of how governments may be able to increase public participation and intersectoral collaboration that could be adapted in other contexts. Significant challenges remain in ensuring full participation of interested groups and in implementing, and monitoring the impact of, the resolutions passed.