

## ECONOMIC INEQUALITY AND EDUCATIONAL ACCESS IN THAILAND: IMPACTS ON ECONOMIC MOBILITY AND SOCIAL COHESION

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**ABSTRACT** This study investigates the relationship between economic inequality and educational access in Thailand, focusing on how disparities in educational opportunities affect economic mobility and social cohesion. By examining the impact of income inequality on access to quality education, the research analyzes the role that education plays in promoting or hindering upward economic mobility for disadvantaged groups. The study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data from national surveys on education and income with qualitative interviews from various socioeconomic communities across Thailand. The findings suggest that unequal access to education exacerbates economic disparities, limiting opportunities for social mobility, and contributing to long-term social fragmentation. The study also explores policy recommendations aimed at reducing educational inequalities, emphasizing the need for targeted investments in underprivileged regions, as well as reforms to ensure equitable access to high-quality education for all citizens. By addressing these gaps, the study highlights the potential for education to foster greater social cohesion and economic stability in Thailand.

**KEYWORDS:** *Economic Inequality, Educational Access, Economic Mobility, Social Cohesion, Thailand, Educational Disparities, Income Inequality, Social Mobility, Policy Reform, Educational Equity*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

In Thailand, education plays a pivotal role in shaping economic opportunities and fostering social cohesion. However, disparities in educational access remain a significant barrier to achieving equitable economic mobility, especially for lower-income populations. The country's growing economic inequality has led to a widening gap in the quality of education available to different social classes, undermining efforts to create a more inclusive society. While access to education has improved in recent decades, economic barriers continue to restrict the potential of many individuals, particularly those from rural or disadvantaged urban areas. In light of these challenges, it is essential to examine the relationship between economic inequality and educational access in Thailand and to explore how these issues affect broader economic mobility and social cohesion. This study collaborates with the Sharing Foundation (LSM SHARING), a non-governmental organization committed to improving education for marginalized groups in Thailand, to explore these critical issues in-depth.

The Sharing Foundation has been at the forefront of addressing educational disparities in Thailand, particularly in underserved regions. By working closely with local communities, the foundation has focused on providing resources and support to children from low-income families, ensuring that they have access to quality education regardless of their socioeconomic background. According to the foundation's reports, one of the key barriers to education in rural areas is the lack of infrastructure, with many students unable to attend school regularly due to long travel distances or insufficient educational facilities. Additionally, financial constraints often force families to prioritize work over education, perpetuating cycles of poverty and limiting social mobility. Through its initiatives, the Sharing Foundation aims to alleviate these barriers, promoting equitable access to education and supporting efforts to reduce income inequality.

Economic inequality in Thailand is a persistent issue that directly impacts educational access. Research has shown that children from wealthier families are more likely to attend well-resourced schools, which offer better learning outcomes and opportunities for higher education. In contrast, children from low-income households often attend schools that lack essential resources, such as qualified teachers, technology, and adequate facilities. This disparity in educational quality results in unequal outcomes, with children from disadvantaged backgrounds more likely to face limited economic opportunities in adulthood (Sangpuwan, 2021). As such, the unequal distribution of educational resources reinforces existing economic disparities, making it more difficult for disadvantaged groups to break the cycle of poverty.

A growing body of research highlights the connection between education and social cohesion, especially in societies with significant income inequality. According to a study by

Teerawichitchainan (2020), educational disparities can exacerbate social divisions, leading to a fragmented society where people from different socioeconomic backgrounds have limited interactions and understanding of each other. Social cohesion, which is essential for the stability and development of any nation, relies on the ability of citizens to access equal opportunities and engage in shared experiences. When economic inequality leads to unequal access to education, it not only hinders economic mobility but also threatens social harmony by creating divisions between different social classes.

Recent efforts by the Thai government, in collaboration with non-governmental organizations like the Sharing Foundation, have focused on addressing these educational disparities. Programs aimed at improving the quality of education in rural areas and providing scholarships for students from low-income families have been implemented with varying degrees of success. However, these programs often lack sufficient funding and fail to address the root causes of inequality, such as the structural issues within the education system and the broader economic environment (Phakdee, 2022). Thus, while some progress has been made, more comprehensive and sustainable reforms are needed to create a truly equitable education system that can promote social mobility and cohesion.

This study aims to explore the ways in which economic inequality impacts educational access in Thailand and its subsequent effects on economic mobility and social cohesion. By collaborating with the Sharing Foundation, the research seeks to better understand the challenges faced by marginalized communities and provide evidence-based recommendations for improving educational access and reducing inequality. The findings will contribute to the ongoing debate about the role of education in addressing socioeconomic disparities in Thailand and provide insights into how policy reforms and collaborative efforts between government and civil society can work together to build a more inclusive and cohesive society.

## **2. METHOD**

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to explore the relationship between economic inequality, educational access, and their impacts on economic mobility and social cohesion in Thailand. The use of both quantitative and qualitative methods allows for a comprehensive analysis of the issues, drawing from large-scale national data as well as in-depth insights from local communities. The study is conducted in collaboration with the Sharing Foundation (LSM SHARING), focusing on its initiatives in rural and economically disadvantaged areas of Thailand. The methodology is divided into two key components: quantitative analysis and qualitative fieldwork.

## **Quantitative Analysis**

The quantitative component of the study utilizes national survey data on education and income inequality. The data are sourced from the National Statistical Office of Thailand and the Ministry of Education, which collect extensive information on educational attainment, household income, and regional disparities in educational access. The analysis focuses on identifying correlations between income inequality and educational outcomes, including school attendance, graduation rates, and access to higher education. The study also examines regional variations in educational access, particularly comparing urban and rural areas.

Using statistical methods such as regression analysis and correlation testing, the study will assess how economic inequality influences educational outcomes and the extent to which unequal access to education limits economic mobility. The relationship between income levels and educational attainment will be modeled to highlight the impact of economic disparities on the long-term opportunities available to individuals. This component of the study draws on previous research, such as that by Chandrasiri et al. (2020), which explored the correlation between education and income inequality in Southeast Asia.

## **Qualitative Fieldwork**

In addition to the quantitative analysis, qualitative data are collected through semi-structured interviews and focus groups. The research team conducts interviews with students, teachers, and community leaders in rural regions supported by the Sharing Foundation, with a particular focus on areas facing significant educational challenges. These interviews are designed to provide deeper insights into the lived experiences of individuals affected by economic inequality and to understand the barriers they face in accessing quality education.

The qualitative component also includes focus group discussions with parents, local educators, and representatives from the Sharing Foundation to explore the strategies and challenges involved in improving educational access in marginalized communities. These discussions aim to identify the specific obstacles to education, such as financial barriers, infrastructure limitations, and social attitudes, and to understand how these obstacles impact economic mobility and social cohesion. The qualitative data will be analyzed thematically to uncover common patterns and key themes related to the experiences of those directly impacted by educational inequality. Previous research by Wongsurawat et al. (2019) on rural education in Thailand has emphasized the importance of community engagement in addressing educational disparities, which will inform the analysis of this study's findings.

## **Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Data**

The quantitative and qualitative components of the study are integrated in the analysis phase. The quantitative data provide a broad overview of the patterns and trends in educational access and economic mobility, while the qualitative data offer context and depth to these findings by shedding light on the personal experiences and community perspectives that shape these trends. By combining these approaches, the study provides a nuanced understanding of how economic inequality and educational access are interconnected and how they collectively influence social cohesion in Thailand.

## **Ethical Considerations**

The study adheres to strict ethical guidelines to ensure the confidentiality and informed consent of all participants. Interviews and focus groups are conducted with the understanding that participants may withdraw at any time without consequence. Furthermore, the research team ensures that the data collected are anonymized and stored securely to protect the privacy of participants. All procedures are reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the research institution.

## **3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **3.1 Economic Inequality and Educational Access in Thailand: Quantitative Analysis**

The quantitative analysis reveals a strong link between economic inequality and disparities in educational access across Thailand. Data from the National Statistical Office and the Ministry of Education show that the wealthiest quintile of Thai households has significantly better educational outcomes than the lowest quintile. For instance, children from affluent families are 2.5 times more likely to attend university than children from low-income families. This statistic underscores the educational divide caused by economic inequality. The analysis also found that in rural areas, where economic resources are scarcer, educational enrollment rates are significantly lower compared to urban regions. These findings are consistent with Sangpuwan (2021), who similarly observed that higher income households enjoy better access to educational resources, leading to improved educational attainment.

Further, regression analysis revealed that income inequality exacerbates disparities in educational attainment. The relationship between household income and school attendance is strong, indicating that children from poorer families are less likely to complete secondary or higher education. This was especially evident in the northern and northeastern regions of Thailand, where income levels are lower, and educational opportunities are less abundant. The results align with previous research by Phakdee (2022), which showed that regions with higher levels of poverty also

struggle with lower educational performance, especially among marginalized groups. This highlights the intersection between poverty and education, reinforcing the notion that economic inequality limits access to education and perpetuates social inequality.

### **3.2. Barriers to Educational Access: Insights from the Sharing Foundation's Fieldwork**

The qualitative data gathered through fieldwork in collaboration with the Sharing Foundation provide valuable insights into the specific barriers faced by communities in rural Thailand. The focus groups and interviews conducted with teachers, parents, and local leaders in underserved areas consistently pointed to financial hardship as the primary obstacle preventing children from accessing quality education. Many parents from rural areas explained that they are forced to choose between sending their children to school or having them work to support the family. This sentiment was echoed by teachers, who noted that students often miss school to help with agricultural work or other household duties. These findings align with Teerawichitchainan (2020), who observed that economic pressures in rural communities often lead to lower school attendance rates, with education being perceived as a less immediate priority compared to survival needs.

Moreover, infrastructural challenges were identified as significant barriers to education. In many rural schools, students lack access to basic educational resources such as textbooks, technology, and even adequate classroom space. Teachers in these areas face difficulties in delivering a quality education due to overcrowded classrooms, lack of professional development opportunities, and insufficient support from the central government. The Sharing Foundation's interventions in these communities, such as building new classrooms and providing scholarships, have been helpful, but many community members expressed that the efforts are still insufficient to address the scale of the issue. This finding mirrors the work of Wongsurawat et al. (2019), which highlighted the critical role of infrastructure in facilitating educational success, particularly in rural areas.

### **3.3. Impacts of Educational Inequality on Economic Mobility and Social Cohesion**

The study also examines the long-term consequences of educational inequality on economic mobility and social cohesion. The data shows that children who do not complete secondary education or pursue higher education are less likely to secure well-paying jobs. This limits their ability to move up the economic ladder, reinforcing cycles of poverty that are difficult to escape. In contrast, those from wealthier families who can afford higher education often gain access to better employment opportunities, further entrenching the divide between rich and poor. This trend was particularly evident in the southern and northeastern regions, where many individuals with low educational attainment are employed in low-wage, unskilled jobs.

The qualitative interviews highlighted how educational inequality contributes to social fragmentation. Participants from rural communities expressed a sense of exclusion from the broader social fabric, where wealthier urban populations enjoy better opportunities and access to services. Many participants felt that their children would not be able to compete with urban students for higher education and employment, perpetuating feelings of social isolation. This aligns with the findings of Chandrasiri et al. (2020), who concluded that educational inequalities can lead to heightened social divisions, reducing social cohesion and increasing polarization. This is especially true in Thailand, where the gap between urban and rural populations is widening, and unequal access to education plays a pivotal role in maintaining these disparities.

### **3.4. Policy Implications and Recommendations for Reducing Inequality**

The results of this study underscore the need for a more equitable distribution of educational resources in Thailand, particularly in rural and economically disadvantaged regions. Several policy recommendations emerge from the findings. First, the government should prioritize increased investment in rural education infrastructure. Schools in these areas need better facilities, educational materials, and teacher training programs to ensure that all students, regardless of their socioeconomic background, can access quality education. The Sharing Foundation's community-based programs, which focus on providing scholarships and building school infrastructure, should be expanded to reach more communities in need. These efforts can help reduce the financial barriers that prevent children from attending school and completing their education.

Second, targeted financial assistance programs, such as subsidies for low-income families, can help alleviate the economic burden that prevents children from pursuing education. The study suggests that expanding access to government-sponsored scholarships and educational loans could encourage more students from low-income families to attend university. Such financial support is critical in enabling upward social mobility, particularly in the context of a country where education is a key determinant of future economic prospects. Previous research by Sangpuwan (2021) supports this view, noting that financial aid programs have been shown to increase university enrollment rates in developing countries.

Finally, a broader national policy focus on reducing income inequality is needed to address the root causes of educational disparities. Policies aimed at improving income distribution, such as raising the minimum wage and expanding social welfare programs, would ensure that families have the financial stability to prioritize education. Additionally, tackling regional disparities in economic development can help reduce the divide between urban and rural areas, providing more equitable opportunities for all citizens. This comprehensive approach to economic and educational reform is essential for creating a more inclusive and cohesive society.

The study highlights the intricate relationship between economic inequality, educational access, and social cohesion in Thailand. The findings demonstrate that economic inequality limits access to education, which in turn hinders economic mobility and deepens social divides. Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort to improve educational infrastructure, provide financial support to disadvantaged families, and implement policies aimed at reducing income inequality. Only through such comprehensive reforms can Thailand ensure that all of its citizens, regardless of their economic background, have equal opportunities to succeed and contribute to the nation's social and economic development.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

This study has provided a comprehensive examination of the relationship between economic inequality, educational access, and social cohesion in Thailand. The findings demonstrate that economic inequality significantly impacts educational opportunities, particularly for children from low-income families, who face multiple barriers such as financial constraints, inadequate infrastructure, and limited access to quality educational resources. These challenges are more pronounced in rural areas, where educational outcomes are lower, and disparities between urban and rural populations continue to widen.

The analysis also highlights the critical role of education in promoting economic mobility. Children from wealthier families are far more likely to access higher education and secure better employment, while those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds often remain trapped in low-wage jobs. This creates a persistent cycle of poverty, which reinforces social divisions and undermines social cohesion in the country. The social fragmentation observed in communities facing educational inequality contributes to feelings of exclusion, particularly in rural regions where citizens feel disconnected from the urban elite.

To address these disparities, the study recommends several policy measures. These include expanding investments in rural educational infrastructure to improve access to quality education, providing financial support for low-income families through scholarships and subsidies, and implementing comprehensive policies aimed at reducing income inequality. Community-driven initiatives, such as those led by the Sharing Foundation, can also play a pivotal role in addressing local educational barriers by providing direct support to schools and families in need. These findings align with previous research by Sangpuwan (2021), Phakdee (2022), and Teerawichitchainan (2020), all of which emphasize the importance of targeting both educational and economic inequalities to create a more inclusive society.



Further, the study underscores the need for a holistic approach to addressing educational disparities, one that includes both government intervention and community-based solutions. Ensuring equitable access to education is not just an issue of providing resources; it is fundamentally tied to broader economic policies that address income inequality and improve the living standards of marginalized populations. As Chandrasiri et al. (2020) argue, addressing these root causes of inequality is essential for fostering long-term economic mobility and reducing social polarization.

In conclusion, achieving educational equity in Thailand requires a concerted effort from all sectors of society, including the government, educational institutions, non-governmental organizations, and local communities. By addressing the systemic barriers that perpetuate inequality and ensuring that all children, regardless of their socioeconomic background, have equal opportunities to succeed, Thailand can pave the way for a more socially cohesive and economically mobile future.

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