

**Speaking of Health: Tracing Language, Culture and Citizenship in Health Care Outcomes among Highland Ethnic Minorities in Thailand.**

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Thailand appears well-positioned to achieve health goals with respect to its minority populations. Hospitals are operating in every district throughout the country, and health care centres are now pervasive even in the remote highlands. Data from the UNESCO Highland Peoples' Survey (2006) indicate that 60 per cent of minority children were born in hospitals. Given the high maternal and infant mortality rates in the highlands and the relatively high prevalence of HIV/AIDS among some minority groups, increased use of birthing services is encouraging as it pertains to potential improvements in access to pre- and post-natal care, survival rates of minority mothers and infants, access to vaccinations, and prevention of transmission of HIV between mother and child. However, extensive interviews with minority communities and health care providers in the highlands reveal a range of invisible barriers to attaining health care — especially quality health care — for ethnic minorities over the life-course.

While the geographical distance between village and health centres has been dramatically cut in recent years, linguistic and cultural distances between health care providers and ethnic minority villagers remain often extreme and prohibitive to highlanders who would otherwise seek medical care. Additionally, minorities in Thailand remain especially vulnerable to statelessness, which often compounds the various cultural and linguistic barriers to access and voluntary use of public health care. After outlining the barriers to health care for highland ethnic minorities, examples of how these barriers manifest with regards to a range of public health programmes are illustrated, and policy responses are proposed.