

Synthesis Report of the 3rd Thailand-Spain Forum on “Sustainability: Opportunities and Challenges”

Date: 5 June 2025 **Venue:** Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand, Bangkok

1. Introduction

The 3rd Thailand-Spain Forum, held under the theme “Sustainability: Opportunities and Challenges,” served as a vital Track 1.5 diplomatic platform to deepen bilateral cooperation between the two nations. The event, co-hosted by the Devawongse Varopakarn Institute of Foreign Affairs (DVIFA), the International Studies Centre (ISC), and Casa Asia, brought together high-level officials, academics, business leaders, and civil society representatives. The discussions underscored a shared commitment to addressing global challenges through sustainable and inclusive solutions, reinforcing the robust and growing 155-year relationship between Thailand and Spain.

This report synthesises the key insights from the forum's three main sessions, which covered climate change as a human security threat, the practical applications of a circular economy, and the indispensable role of community and youth in driving sustainable development.

Key Takeaways:

- **Shared Vision:** Both Thailand and Spain recognise sustainability as a cornerstone of future prosperity and security. The forum highlighted a strong alignment in national priorities, from Thailand's Bio-Circular-Green (BCG) Economy model to Spain's role in the European Green Deal.
- **Climate Change as a Human Security Imperative:** A central theme was the reframing of climate change from a purely environmental concern to a critical threat to human security, impacting water, food, health, energy, and physical habitation. This paradigm shift calls for urgent, integrated policy responses.
- **Circular Economy in Action:** The forum moved beyond theoretical concepts to showcase tangible examples of the circular economy. Both countries presented innovative, business-led solutions in construction, fashion, agriculture, and waste-to-energy, demonstrating that sustainability can drive economic opportunity and competitiveness.
- **Empowering Communities and Youth:** A consensus emerged that sustainable development must be a bottom-up process. Speakers emphasised the need to empower local communities and youth by providing them with accessible knowledge, genuine platforms for participation, and policies that address their unique challenges, from economic precarity to eco-anxiety.
- **Strengthened Bilateral Cooperation:** The forum successfully identified concrete areas for enhanced collaboration, including trade (spurred by the Thai-EU FTA, which is currently being negotiated), investment in green technologies, educational exchanges, and sharing best practices in sustainable governance and community engagement.

2. Session 1: Climate Change – A Human Security Dimension

This session established the critical tone of the forum by arguing that the consequences of climate change have evolved beyond environmental degradation into direct threats to human existence.

The discussion opened by articulating the threat through five interconnected security dimensions:

1. **Resource Security:** Drastic changes in rainfall patterns and glacial melt are creating global water insecurity.
2. **Food Security:** Droughts, floods, and rising temperatures disrupt agriculture and fisheries, threatening global food supplies.
3. **Energy Security:** The necessary transition away from fossil fuels presents challenges in scaling up renewable alternatives to meet current demand.
4. **Health Security:** Warmer climates are expanding the reach of tropical diseases such as dengue fever, while melting permafrost could release dormant viruses, bacteria, and fungi.
5. **Habitation Security:** Sea-level rise poses an existential threat to coastal populations, with projections showing large parts of Bangkok potentially submerged by 2100, leading to mass displacement and conflict.

Complementing this framework, a key critique raised was the ineffectiveness of high-level 'meta-policies', with a call for a **bottom-up approach**. This perspective stressed that solutions must be co-created with the communities most affected, such as farmers, and grounded in essential data and local knowledge.

The Thai strategic response, the **Bio-Circular-Green (BCG) Economy model**, was presented as a core strategy. This highlighted the crucial role of science, technology, and innovation—particularly in precision farming, genetic engineering, and synthetic biology—to enhance agricultural resilience and reduce emissions.

A practical urban case study from **Madrid's roadmap to climate neutrality by 2050** exemplified a systemic transformation that integrates citizen participation in the co-design of policies. The strategy focuses on making public spaces more resilient and ensuring that the benefits of green urban development are accessible to all, particularly lower-income communities.

3. Session 2: Circular Economy – Upcycling and Recycling

This session translated the abstract goal of sustainability into concrete economic strategies, demonstrating how circularity is being implemented in both Thailand and Spain.

Thailand's adoption of the circular economy was outlined, noting it is driven by both high climate risk and international trade requirements like the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM). The discussion showcased successful **firm-level initiatives**, including fabric-to-fabric recycling, zero-waste policies in the hotel sector, and innovative bio-based packaging. A key challenge identified was the need for better coordination and targeted policies to help SMEs overcome high costs and scale up their impact.

From the Spanish private sector, the infrastructure sector's immense environmental footprint was highlighted, along with two core strategies to mitigate it: **eco-design** and **industrial symbiosis**. Compelling examples were provided, such as using construction waste to build motorways and end-of-life tyres to produce asphalt. The presentation culminated in innovative upcycling projects, including transforming decommissioned wind turbine blades into soles for trainers and even surfboards, demonstrating creative, market-driven circularity.

The focus then shifted to the textile industry, one of the world's most resource-intensive sectors. It was argued that the solution lies in fostering a **regenerative culture** that counters the 'take-make-dispose' model. This involves building communities of practice through initiatives like clothes swaps and connecting urban consumers with rural artisans, an approach that not only reduces waste but also restores the human connection to production and empowers local economies.

Finally, a long-standing success story in Thailand was presented: the use of agricultural waste and animal manure to produce biogas for electricity generation. This served as an example of a mature, effective circular economy model that has been operational for decades, turning waste into a valuable energy resource.

4. Session 3: The Future of Sustainable Development – The Role of Community and Youth

The final session explored the social dimensions of sustainability, emphasising that lasting change must be driven by an engaged and empowered populace.

One discussion focused on the challenges of mobilising local communities in Thailand on the abstract concept of 'net-zero'. It was found that without direct economic incentives, the most effective driver for change was appealing to **morality and local values**. Pilot projects successfully used this approach to foster a sense of ownership and action, demonstrating that community-led initiatives, facilitated but not dictated by experts, can be highly effective.

The **situation facing Spanish youth** was also described: they are highly educated and environmentally conscious but some of them are burdened by economic precarity, housing insecurity, and mental health challenges. This has led to a disconnect from traditional politics, with youth instead channelling their energy into grassroots movements and digital activism. Their demand is for genuine inclusion and policies that create a world that 'cares for them'.

This call for **meaningful inclusivity** was echoed with a perspective from Thailand, connecting youth trends (AI, crypto) to rising energy demand and positioning young people as key stakeholders whose insights are vital for accurate policy planning. The discussion cautioned against 'youth washing' and argued that including diverse perspectives from the outset makes policy more effective, reduces redundancies, and accelerates a just transition.

A practical tool for empowerment through communication was also offered through the 'Esfera Climática' project in Spain. This network actively promotes female scientific experts in the media. By training scientists and tailoring climate messages for diverse audiences, including local and conservative media, the project aims to broaden the public conversation and ensure it is informed by credible, diverse voices.

5. Exhibition Booths: Showcasing Sustainable Innovation

Complementing the discussions, an exhibition showcased practical applications of sustainability from Thai-based organisations, providing tangible examples of the circular economy in action.

Wat Chak Daeng's "Transforming Waste into Merit" Project demonstrated a unique fusion of community action, religious practice, and environmentalism. The project collects PET plastic bottles and upcycles them into fibres to produce monk robes, turning everyday waste into items of spiritual value and generating community income.

RX Group's "Blister Packs for the Planet" Project highlighted a corporate social responsibility initiative focused on a hard-to-recycle item: aluminium medicine blister packs. By establishing a nationwide collection network, the project upcycles this waste into useful products, aiming for a significant reduction in carbon emissions.

CHAAUM Studio represented the social enterprise sector, creatively repurposing industrial waste such as cement bags and vinyl banners into stylish fashion and lifestyle products. This model supports local artisans and promotes resource efficiency through unique, thoughtfully designed items.

HORMESA (Thailand) Co., Ltd showcased high-tech industrial solutions for the circular economy. Specialising in technology for recycling non-ferrous metals, the company champions aluminium as an endlessly recyclable "metal of the future," aligning industrial processes with sustainability principles to minimise waste and environmental impact.

6. Conclusion

The 3rd Thailand-Spain Forum demonstrated the depth and breadth of the two countries' shared commitment to sustainability. The dialogue moved from high-level policy to on-the-ground action, revealing a common understanding that the path forward requires an integrated approach that balances environmental imperatives, economic innovation, and social justice. By framing climate change as a human security issue, showcasing viable circular economy models, and championing the role of communities and youth, the forum has laid a strong foundation for future collaboration. As a Track 1.5 platform, it continues to be an invaluable mechanism for building the multi-stakeholder partnerships needed to navigate the complex challenges of the 21st century.
