



The Population and Community Development Association in Thailand¹

*Mechai Viravaidya**

When I returned to Thailand in 1965 after studying in Australia, I learned in a very unusual and personal way the value of publicity. A relative of mine asked an unusual favor. She was chaperoning a young Thai woman who had just won the Miss Universe beauty pageant to a number of congratulatory functions, and she wanted me to accompany them. I accepted, not knowing that the Thai people would go crazy about this. Because I went everywhere with them and was frequently photographed, I also became a kind of celebrity.

Shortly thereafter, I got a job with the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB), where several years later I became chief of the evaluation section. This often required me to travel up-country to the rural areas to assess and report on development progress. Everywhere I went, there were so many children; I could see that population growth was just eating away at whatever progress we made in terms of our development. A study asked people, “Do you have enough for your children—enough education, enough facilities, everything you need as an adult?” The answer was almost always “no.” A World Bank study calculated that annual population growth was about 3.3 percent at the time, but there was no population policy or program.

We needed either to speed up the development process or slow down population growth, or both. I was not in much of a position to speed up a bureaucracy’s attempt at development. But I was able to see some of its problems. One was a tremendous lack of communication between the government and the people. The NESDB was the planning authority in Thailand and part of the prime minister’s office, but implementation was in the hands of the line ministries who did not communicate their development objectives to the people. I, however, spent a lot of time talking to the farmers, which was not very common in those days. Farmers had some very different views from those of the government.

Introducing improvements was made more difficult by the fact that people in the rural areas did not have a role in shaping development; everything was supposedly done for them by the government. Unfortunately, I had trouble convincing the bureaucracy that this was a problem. I wrote several reports on the situation, but they didn’t get published, possibly because they presented views too directly. So I decided to write a

¹ Published in *Reasons for Hope*, edited by Anirudh Krishna, Norman Uphoff and Milton J. Esman (Connecticut: Kumarian, 1997)

* Chairman of Mechai Viravaidya Foundation and PDA., Keynote Speaker in *The 4th International Conference on Magsaysay Awardees: Good Governance and Transformative Leadership in Asia*, 31 May 2016.
Resource person of PDA.



weekly column in a leading Bangkok newspaper. I used the column to write about Thailand's development problems: the sparse conditions in the countryside, the difficulties faced by farmers and the fact that development thinking in the country was heavily influenced by people who weren't aware of what the country really needed. Aside from development, I wrote about population, corruption, the environment and rural poverty-issues otherwise being ignored.

Although it was controversial, or maybe because it was, the column was widely read. At this time I was also teaching at Thammasat University, which has since become known for its commitment to democracy, and I also had a nightly radio show. Later I Played leading roles in a series of soap operas based on best-selling novels. The magic of it all was that these opportunities came quite by accident, but they were important for helping me learn about communication. These various channels of communication enabled me to reach quite a wide audience, people who normally did not communicate with one another. I reached the intellectuals, planners and politicians through the newspaper column, while the radio program brought ideas to the average educated person. The soap operas put me in touch with the common person on the street. These experiences working with the media were invaluable once I turned my efforts more directly to the pressing matters of family planning and poverty reduction.

Surprisingly, given the heterogeneity of my audience, virtually nobody challenged me. At functions and at dinners at which I spoke, or on the street, the reaction was the opposite. Many told me they agreed that the problems I spoke about were the urgent questions of the day, although they had been obscured by an authoritarian government. Sadly, no moves were being made to rectify the problems being highlighted. People were concerned, but most were not doing anything constructive to help. It was clear that people accomplished nothing by sitting around and talking about problems. Some action needed to be taken, so I moved into the nonprofit sector to work on certain projects, since I could not be very original within the government.

GETTING STARTED AT THE COMMUNITY LEVEL AND GETTING ATTENTION

In 1971, the government approved a notional family planning policy, but its impact was limited. After serving two years as secretary-general of the Family Planning Association of Thailand, I founded an organization called the Community-Based Family Planning Service (CBFPS) in 1974. I was convinced that we had to change people's attitudes about the number of children they should have and to establish a contraceptive delivery system in rural villages. Such a change would contribute to some long-term good, or at least get us out of the deep hole being dug by massive population growth.

The government's top-down approach to rural people as well as its regular health service delivery infrastructure was not achieving the reduction in the birth rate that was needed in rural areas, so a different approach was called for. I realized that family planning was a sensitive subject, one that was not supposed to be discussed. But if we



took into account the Thai people's attraction to *sanuk* (having fun), we could overcome their traditional reluctance to confront embarrassing or contraceptives issues in public. So, I used humor to bring the condom and contraceptives out of the closer and into the open.

Gradually, we made condoms as familiar as playthings. Once, when I was speaking to 2,000 teachers on the importance of lowering the birth rate, I showed them a condom. Suddenly I had an impulse to blow it up like a balloon. It was like magic. One minute they were sitting there looking stiff and self-conscious, and the next they were roaring with laughter. Condoms could become multicolored balloons; they could be filled with water and thrown; we had condom blow-up contests and water balloon festivals. If you take the ring off the end, I pointed out, they can make wonderful hair bands. To encourage Thai men to have vasectomies, we organized vasectomy festivals on the King's birthday, at which time men could receive the service for free. I liked to joke that Winston Churchill's "V for victory" sign during World War II really meant "stop at two." Today, this is one of the many messages emblazoned on T-shirts that our association sells, along with other humorous slogans, images and condoms memorabilia such as condom flowers, condom coffee mugs and key chains.

My experience with the mass media enable me to promote the family planning campaign far and wide, with the approach adapted for different audiences. The message was brought into schools, factories, shops, even taxis, which helped to spread awareness in the cities. At the time, though, the great majority of population lived in villages on the countryside. This required a difference response. To make the campaign succeed, we had to get both information and contraceptive means to the people, plus we definitely needed a structure that allowed people to participate.

In those days, contraceptive were distributed be doctors, nurses and midwives at government hospitals and health centers, which saved only about 20 percent of villages. I became convinced that any solution to the population problem had to begin at the village level. The people had to feel a sense of participation, of not being directed by some far-away government. For leadership we looked to the people who mattered to villagers-teachers, monks and other village leaders-to disseminate the information. For distributing contraceptives, we looked to those who were well situated in terms of village traffic, such as shopkeepers. They were ordinary villagers, but they were essential in helping us make contraceptives readily accessible to communities in more than 25 percent of the country. To help spread the message, we also trained 320,000 rural school teachers within five years.

Each distributor of contraceptives was chosen carefully after reviewing the person's standing in the community, support for family planning and record-keeping ability. These persons received more training in record keeping and were given basic family planning information, such as about contraceptive use. CBFPS trained them and gave them a big depot sign to hang outside their shops. They returned home with supplies of birth control pills and condoms that they could sell in their villages for a small commission. Each of our field workers looked after about 100 distributors and went around once field workers looked after about 100 distributors and went around once a month to check records, collect the money from contraceptives sold and deliver new supplies.



This network relied on the distributor's hard work, good faith and pride in being selected as the distributor. The payment of a commission added incentive, but nobody agreed to distribute contraceptives in order to get rich. Instead, most distributors regarded it as a high honor to be chosen. Eventually the network encompassed over 16,200 villagers who distributed contraceptives and information. We tried to go everywhere, but we went first to areas where the need was greatest. The northeast was the poorest area and had the highest fertility rate, so most of our efforts went there at first. But we also worked in the north, which was also poor, in part of the center and part of the south. It was a national campaign. By its fifth year, the program was totally self-financing. The money from the sale of contraceptives donated by the International Planned Parenthood Federation and U.S. Agency for International Development was recycled to cover all costs of operating the network.

Surprisingly, there was not much opposition even though the campaign was very visible, and it started having quite a wide impact. To allay the concerns of monks, we cited a teaching of the Buddha that "many births cause suffering." We never had any political problems and not much in the way of general opposition rather. The very few people who opposed us I never confronted. I always listened to their suggestions and comments and thanked them. I apologized for the things they did not like and then just continued the way we had been doing things.

Perhaps we minimized any widespread opposition by not talking about sex education. Instead, we talked only about population and family planning, saying that parents should be the ones to discuss sex education with their kids. In that way, people never thought of us as violating the family's responsibility. We also made the subject lighthearted and festive rather than important thing was to make people think about it.

INDICATORS OF SUCCESS AND THE NEED TO EXPAND OBJECTIVES

Objectively, the national family planning campaign in Thailand can be judged a success. Our NGO program is widely credited with helping the government reduce the nation's population growth rate from about 3.3 percent in the early 1970s, to 1.8 percent by 1982, to 1.2 percent in 1994. Concurrent with this decrease has been a dramatic increase in the number of eligible couples practicing family planning, from 11 percent in 1971, to over 60 percent by the early 1980s, to over 78 percent today.

Thailand's success is the envy of many other developing nations that are struggling with high birth rates. The key to success was good cooperation between the government and NGO sector-the ministry of public health supported our efforts, and we contributed to the achievements of the national family planning program; a wide range of contraceptive choices; grassroots participation; and full voluntarism (no coercion). In isolated and very poor areas, where education, incomes and family planning acceptance were low, we introduced a system of community incentives, in about 50 villages. In some of the most remote villages, we set up a community fund into which was paid \$200 for every vasectomy performed, \$175 per female sterilization, \$100 per IUD, and \$75 for using the pill. These funds were available for loans to village members whether or not they participated in family planning, with



loans made and collected by an elected village committee. These revolving funds were mostly very well managed and maintained. Elsewhere we paid into a community fund \$5 for every month that a woman was not pregnant. In order not to privilege some more than others, every woman, old or young, could “contribute” \$60 a year to the community fund this way. We also offered households where the wife was not pregnant agricultural credit at favorable rate. If the bank rate was 10 percent, contraceptive users could borrow at half that rate, while other villagers could borrow at 10 percent-still much lower than the 60 to 130 percent paid to private moneylenders.

Our practice was to promote family planning as something that is in people’s interest, not something we would try to “bribe” them to accept. Material incentives cannot explain the fundamental changes in attitude which the campaigns brought about. Our bold and often humorous approaches have helped turn one of the most private subjects into something that people can now discuss openly with little embarrassment. We can take much satisfaction in this transition in attitudes and behavior.

However, we also came to realize that we should not try to solve population growth problems in isolation, since our real goal was to improve people’s lives. The more deeply we got involved in our family planning campaign, the clearer it became that this, by itself, would not be enough to develop the rural areas and reduce poverty in Thailand’s many villages. Accordingly, in 1977, the name of CBFPS was changed to the Population and Community Development Association (PDA for short). This reflected our broader goal, and PDA began establishing programs on a district-by-district basis. From our work with villagers on family planning, we learned that their health was one of the best ways of convincing them to have fewer children. Parents would have fewer children if they knew that the ones they did have would be healthier and would be more likely to survive and thrive. This led us to look more closely at the need and opportunities to improve rural health by preventing illnesses.

IMPROVING VILLAGE WATER SUPPLIES

One of the main obstacles to improving health was a severe lack of water resources in the villages. Most poor villagers simply did not have enough water, especially drinking water. Because of inadequate supply, particularly during the dry season, many families were forced to drink unsafe water. In response, PDA set up a water tank program based on the idea of capturing rainwater from the roofs of houses and storing it in large water jars and water tanks. Particularly in the northeast, rain does not fall throughout the year, but only in some months. This made getting ground water difficult, and piped water was out of the question because neither villagers nor the government could afford this. The water tank program proved to be both practical and feasible, however, as an alternative source to ground water. We worked with



households to build water tanks about three meters tall and two meters wide, with a capacity of about 11,000 liters of water. This was enough to supply drinking and domestic water for a family for the seven-month period of water shortage.

Where did the money to finance the tanks come from? At first, we got grants from the German foundation, Agro Action. Construction costs were reduced by forming groups of fifteen families to cooperate in contributing the labor. Within fifteen days a group could install fifteen tanks. We made the program self-sustaining by requiring that every family that got a water tank would sponsor another family, repaying the money for its own water tank over a period of time. The money stayed in the district as a kind of revolving fund. If a grant enabled us to construct 1,000 tanks over ten years, the number of tanks could be increased to 7,000 under this system. This multiplying effect made the program quite effective. It improved hygiene and reduced disease, while saving households (especially women) time and greatly improving quality of life.

A water committee was set up in each village to handle collection of the money owed to the revolving fund. Most everyone was surprised that there were so few defaults. This was partly because if a villager did not repay his or her loan, this would prevent a neighbor from getting a water tank. PDA's efforts were initiated to expand upon government efforts to bring water to rural areas. Where it was apparent that the government would not be giving things away. We always required some amount of local contribution. Our program ended up building more water tanks than all of the government's programs, thanks to workings of community management and self-help.

ELABORATING A MORE COMPREHENSIVE RURAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

We started thinking about how to launch still larger projects that could help an even greater number of people. If PDA could get funding for 100,000 home water tanks, which would cost about US\$35 million at that time, within ten years our program could get over 700,000 tanks installed, which would have covered the entire northeast part of country. We fashioned a three-step approach to village development. First, we started with family planning efforts, which we followed up with water and sanitation programs. Then we introduced what we called community-based integrated rural development. This also had three steps: first, improve technology for the villagers; second, resolve resources constraints and increase commodity production; and third, market their products.



By now, most people had accepted that too many children made them poor, and they were ready to stop adding to the number of mouths they already had to feed. The new question became: how to make life better for them, giving them a chance to get their fair share of life's necessities? PDA became involved with them, giving technical and economic assistance and also advice and cooperative-like marketing opportunities. First we selected farmers from one district at a time, allotting about 20 million baht (US\$1 million) per district, mostly derived from foreign grants, to be invested in household-level improvement. We had three models in mind: intensive, which provided about 6,000 baht (US\$300) per household; and light, which cost 3,000 baht (US\$150).

The basic activities were animal raising, all forms of agriculture and some kind of water resource development, for example, constructing wells or ponds and fertilizer and by helping villagers begin fish raising. For animal rearing, villagers raised chickens, ducks, geese and rabbits. We encouraged them to plan to use one activity to benefit another, capturing wherever synergies were possible. For instance, geese can be introduced just before the grains left behind in the field, getting a good healthy start, after which they can manage by foraging and scavenging around the village.

We also tried to promote appropriate technology at the village level by emphasizing renewable energy, simple farm tools and reduction of energy waste. We encouraged people to use animal waste rather than charcoal for cooking by converting it into biogas. Another innovation was recycling chicken droppings to be fed to the pigs, with the pig's manure in turn fed to fish, and residues then used to produce biogas. Fertilizer could also be obtained from this process. We also experimented with other technologies such as using solar energy to dry foodstuffs.

Sometimes the techniques villagers were already using were basically sound, but small changes could earn them more money. We introduced a lot of small improvements. For instance, many villagers were already raising chickens, which were a main source of nutrition for rural households. In the past, as many as 90 percent of the chicken might die from disease. We learned this was due largely to in-breeding. By getting villages to exchange their roosters, and by introducing vaccination, survival rates dramatically increased. The villagers also went into commercial production, both for egg laying and selling poultry meat. Later, we encouraged them to expand into pig raising, which was more complex, due to the different types of diseases. This also involved determining, on a village by village basis, how many families could best raise pigs and how many would raise chickens.



While PDA encouraged villagers to become organized, it has not set up PDA organizations at village level. A variety of special-purpose organizations have been established for managing activities sparked by PDA, such as the village committees organizing water tank construction and handling repayment. We wanted to be sure that villagers perceived the organizations as their organizations. So a variety of cooperatives, farmer groups, associations and handicraft companies have sprung up, encouraged, and in some case financially backstopped, by PDA. The main task for PDA staff, including the managers and directors, was, and continues to be, spending time sitting and what they are willing to commit themselves to for their own and their children's betterment.

PDA has aimed to achieve income increases of about 30 percent a year, and it has used routine evaluations to gauge the effect of what has become one of the most integrated development programs for Thai villages. We went beyond measuring income to assess whether project activities were succeeding. We also sought to learn the perceptions of the people. We asked them if their lives were now better, and if so, in what ways? Our measurement device, called the "Thai bamboo ladder," started from zero and went up to ten. We asked questions such as: "What is the ideal situation you would like see in your community?" they would answer, "Enough water, a school for my children, good health, no robberies, and a fair price for my crops." We called this the Ideal, which we valued at ten.

We then asked what was the worst possible situation they could imagine themselves in, and this was termed zero on our scale. Then we asked them where they thought they were on the ladder at the time. Some said five; others said six or seven. We asked them to indicate where they were before PDA got involved in their village, and some pointed to two or three. Finally, we asked them where they thought they would be in three or four years' time, and they pointed to eight or even nine. This revealed to us how the villagers evaluated their own progress within their own value system, and that they looked forward to improvements---a brighter future in their community.

One of the most important steps was to let villagers know where they could look for help. PDA taught the villagers to identify their needs and to figure out ways to get them met, through their own means and with our help. PDA set up special centers in a number of districts that were particularly poorly served where villagers could come to get supplies and learn valuable information. Some information was especially important for helping farmers market their product at a fair price instead of getting cheated by middlemen. This gave them more control over their economic performance. We tried to make the villagers strong enough to stand up to the businesspeople, not trying to cut them out, but providing the villagers with real alternatives.



A PEOPLE-CENTERED APPROACH

Another key was participation. We didn't work with villagers as their masters but rather as their equals. This was crucial to their sense of self-worth and represented a tremendous social change in their lives, building their confidence and initiative over time while our staff worked with them. The great majority of the villagers were honest with us because they knew that if they cheated us, they were really cheating themselves. This contributed to much progress since heretofore changing villagers' impressions about development assistance had always been difficult. To us, development did not necessarily mean more roads, more electricity or more whatever-it meant changing people's attitudes and behavior, to help them become more capable of self-help.

Participation also means no handouts. PDA firmly believes that handouts breed passivity and indifference, and that villagers will be more committed to the activities and possessions that they have an investment in. When PDA moves heavily into water resource development-tackling one of the greatest threats to livelihood for farmers-villagers paid for their water jars and water thanks after purchase through a loan program. The same principle generally applied to villagers who started to raise chickens or pigs and money from a community fund to buy their first animals and materials to start the business. When they repaid the loan, the money went into a common revolving fund that stayed in the community and funded other villagers looking for loans for their needs.

In retrospect, we see that PDA's approach to development did help villagers to become more self-sufficient within two to four years, although in some poorer areas, development took longer. The key was to get the villagers started on the path to a better life through their own efforts. This then continues until they both met their basic needs and established a firm footing of economic security. For instance, when building up water resource to enable the villagers to farm year-round, PDA sought also to deal with urgent issues such as the need for off-season income to provide for families' needs while new systems were being planned or built and when their farming income ran out.

Many villagers had already turned to small cottage industries as an alternative. PDA took the cue and built many new programs based on existing village skills and knowledge. For example, the cloth-making industry offered good opportunities. But it was important that villagers not only know how to make cloth, but, more importantly, how to make it with attractive designs so that it could be marketed in urban areas or exported for higher prices. The same was true for villagers making Thai handicrafts to sell. We encouraged households to go beyond producing primary commodities and to add value to their own work. Instead of selling only fresh bananas, they learned to market dried bananas all year round. Food processing and vegetable pickling helped them earn income and add value to garden crops. We also taught them how to make cheap baskets and bricks. In place of the traditional approach of only growing just rice and other farm produce, they learned how to produce other things, to be more imaginative.



The underlying benefit of increasing off-season employment and income generation in rural communities is that it gives people a greater economic stake in their communities. If villagers can derive more inclined to stay there instead of moving elsewhere, or migrating to Bangkok to seek jobs before and after the harvest. They will try instead to improve the situation around their homes and businesses. Basically, we tried to turn small farmers into small businesspeople, and to open up cooperative where the farmers could gain. PDA continues to promote this strategy of broad-based villager participation, similar to what was expressed twenty years ago when the organization was founded. Our approach requires looking to the people themselves for solutions, going into villages and finding out what people want and what their ideas are in dealing with their problems.

PDA has evolved from its rather modest origins—in a crowded, cluttered converted shop house on a little street off the busy thoroughfare known as Sukhumvit, to occupy currently an eight-story office building and compound containing a restaurant, cafeteria, health and sterilization clinic, handicraft store and staff housing. In addition, it has expanded and opened fourteen field offices in the north and northeast, from which the various project activities are launched. From a staff of 25 in 1974, PDA has grown to having 600 staff.

This expansion has not come without much time, effort and, of course, money. The total annual budget reached US\$12 million a year at its peak, when PDA was involved in a lot of refugee work. The present level is closer to US\$9 million, but this supports probably more development work than at the peak of funding. To share its experiences, PDA has now established an Asian Center for Population and Development, which has already given training to over 2,000 people from forty-seven countries.

Most PDA projects have been funded by Western donor agencies, foundations and governments, which have come to trust the PDA's community based implementation approach, its experience in managing large-scale programs, and its commitment to benefiting the rural poor majority. PDA funds up to 40 percent of its annual expenditures through a variety of private businesses, some under the auspices of the Population and Community Development Company Ltd. (PDC). PDA holdings include the now-famous "Cabbages and Condoms" restaurant chain, started in Bangkok, with four branches in Thailand and one in Beijing, China. Plans are being drawn up to expand into other parts of the world. PDA also has a handicrafts store in Bangkok, which Mobil Oil and Oxfam helped to start, as well as numerous development companies located at its field offices. PDA profits go entirely to help fund PDA's work. Apartment rents, honorariums and fees that I often receive for speaking or serving as director of companies also go toward PDA's activities.

Noting the steady decline in foreign development aid and knowing that Thailand's rural development needs are still far being met, PDA has diversified to meet future needs through the Thai Business Initiative for Rural Development (TBIRD). This was conceived in the late 1980s and was further developed during a year I spent as a visiting scholar at the Harvard Institute for International Development. The program



recruits private businesses to finance the costs of development in individual rural villages. At the same time, employees of the companies work with the villagers to teach them basic finance, marketing and other business skill they will need to sustain themselves in the future.

Although the principal aim of the scheme is to provide villagers with local economic opportunities and a decent sustainable income, a corollary aim is to cultivate the private sector to assume part of the cost of rural development in Thailand, especially as foreign aid declines. Since its launching in 1998 with pioneering commitments by Volvo and Bangkok Glass, the program has grown to include projects in over 120 villages in the north. It increases the effectiveness of donor aid by recruiting private companies to bear much of the actual cost of rural development work in villages, making tax-deductible contributions through PDA. Companies have helped villagers to start an array of cottage industries, including silk weaving and basket making. Many of these are now independent and self-sustaining.

TBIRD has also been able to recruit companies to relocate part of their production base to rural areas, taking machinery to the people rather than vice versa. The most successful venture so far is that of Bata, the Canadian shoe manufacturer; 45 percent of its school shoes—six million – are produced in factories owned by rural cooperatives established with the help of PDA. Bata's success has helped convince other companies also to move production to the rural areas. Now the government is encouraging other companies to follow suit, for producing garment and leather goods, processing semiprecious stones and assembling electronic components. Not only has this stopped outmigration from villages where production has started up, but young men and women are returning home to their villages from Bangkok.

In 1996, a system of minimarkets is being established in villages, where village shopkeepers are organized to own 40 percent of a central supply company. In turn, these shopkeepers are encouraged to hold equity capital supply in the new factories being relocated to rural villages. All shopkeepers and factory owners will contribute 10 percent of profits to village activities for the less privileged. Some Bangkok companies have agreed to allocate 3 – 5 percent of their profits, of directors' fees and of directors' and staff bonuses toward expanding PDA activities mechanisms, PDA is achieving multiplier effects well beyond those that were first launched with its water jar program years ago. Of course such development efforts are all the more successful when the villagers are able to participate as owners and can watch the value of their investments grow over time.

Note: I would like to thank Pamela Mar, program officer with the Thai Business Initiative for Rural Development, for her assistance in preparing this chapter.



The Mechai Pattana School: A New Road to Education Provision in Rural Thailand¹

The Mechai Pattana School, known as the Bamboo School, is a secondary school located in Lam Plai Mat district in Buriram. The school was established in 2009. It was co-founded by the Mechai Viravaidya Foundation and the Population and Community Development Association (PDA) with the aim of providing a boarding school for children from rural households.

The Mechai Pattana School was designed to be a lifelong learning center and the center for the improvement of quality of lives of rural people. It aims to bring up ‘good’ people who value honesty, equality and sharing and have life skills, professional skills, and management capabilities. Furthermore, the school works to help parents and villagers in the communities in the vicinity to have a better quality of lives and higher incomes.

In order to achieve the aforementioned purposes, the Mechai Pattana School develops three crucial factors for education achievement including the development of subject areas, the improvement of teaching methods, and the adjustment of the school’s role to provide ‘a lifelong learning center and the center for the improvement of quality of lives of rural people’. In details, parents and villagers in the communities in proximity can access to professional trainings offered by the school such as skill trainings for agricultural businesses and techniques.

The school’s buildings and dormitories are made of bamboo. Students from all over the country can apply for the recruitment in which senior students choose the freshmen through interviews with the applicants and their parents. Nowadays, the students are from 22 provinces in Thailand. They do not have to pay tuition fees. Instead, they are required to do good deeds for society for at least 400 hours and plant at least 400 trees annually. Moreover, the students must participate in the school’s administration in various ways such as welcoming and introducing their school to the visitors, taking part in the school’s equipment purchasing processes (the monitoring process included), recruiting teachers, and evaluating the teachers’ teaching performances. The committee of the student leaders engages in looking after the students in general.

The Mechai Pattana School focuses on enhancing its students to think, ask and research. Also, it encourages the students to think outside the box but, at the same time, live on Thai valuable culture and living their ways of lives in harmony with nature. These principles aim at supporting the students to learn with joys among changes in societies. They also respond to Thailand’s education policy an aim of which is to enhance people’s sustainable quality of lives and learning in the 21st century. To

¹ Summarized by Sopit Cheevapanich, Lecturer, College of Politics and Governance, Mahasarakham, Thailand.



build up the students' capabilities, the school arranges outside-school learning activities in various places particularly in the international schools. The Meechai Pattana School is unique in providing courses for an enhancement of students' life and professional skills especially the social entrepreneur skills. It believes that possessing these skills, the students will have good jobs and lives in the future. They will live in their families and communities with happiness. Also, they will not abandon their hometowns to find jobs in the cities.

In order to be prepared as a social entrepreneur, the students are given the opportunities to be trainees in various private companies during semester breaks. In addition, the school establishes a fund through which the students self-organised as groups can access loans for businesses. Students can also access loans to run businesses with their families and the elderly. This is because the school believes that it has a mission to help the students' parents to get out of poverty. Apart from a provision of business and agricultural trainings for students, the school offers trainings for villagers and the elderly. The trainings include doing businesses and growing crops in new ways, household accounting, learning about solar powered households and hygiene, and building water reservoirs for agriculture.

From the concrete success of the school program, the school has been accepted as one of a few schools in Thailand for its "educational innovative". Recently, the school has assisted the Ministry of Education in supporting the small-size schools especially the schools with the marginalized groups of students and those located in rural areas (76 schools and 146 villages) under the School-based integrated Rural Development Project (School-BIRD) and Village Development Partnership (VDP), funded by private and educational sectors.

Under the school's development project, more than 150 public schools have requested Meechai School to support the agriculture projects, 76 of them with 50-250 students have received the support. In addition, Meechai School has worked for the ethnic students in the border area, the disabled students, the marginalized groups of students with funding from the private sectors. Most of the funding has been spent on the agriculture project to eliminate the poverty and set a fund for the students and the families who live in poor conditions.

Meechai School plans to support 60 schools by 2016 and covers more ethnic students and the students from neighboring countries such as Myanmar, Lao PDR and Cambodia who live in the border area so that the students and their families could practice life and working skills as one of Meechai School's strategies. The supported schools will become a life-learning center for the community members and people in the rural areas including the establishment of the local enterprises and be a business opportunity for the students, families and the community members in order to create a good living conditions and be a sustainable way.

Such project comprises of 5 main components:

1. Participation in the school's activities and strengthening the community
2. Training on the agriculture business and farming in form of local enterprise



3. Training for the development of teachers, students, families and community members
4. Developing a loan fund and saving for students and families
5. Developing the school's facilities, hygiene and water for students

Village Development Partnership (VDP) conducted by Meechai School is the development project for the village aimed to eliminate the poverty. The project does not rely on the social work but rather strengthening the villagers to have a business skill, while developing living conditions of the villagers based on the participation approach.

Co-development project aims to create the partnership between the villagers and the donors through Meechai School. The activities have run through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) which provides various forms of activities based also on the corporate policy, resource and the specialization upon their support. The knowledge on doing business has empowered the villagers to start their small and local business which is the main mission in developing the rural area and integrate the business skills of the corporate and the social skills of Meechai School.

References

Anirudh Krishna, Norman Uphoff and Milton J. Esman. (1997). Published in Reasons for Hope.

Lam Plai Mat district in Buriram. The school was established in 2009.