
Blazing a trail towards poverty alleviation in Thailand



By Karen Cho

Sex education is a topic that is usually broached with caution. But one non-governmental organisation in Thailand has opted to not skirt around the issue but tackle it head on.

Because the concept of family planning was virtually non-existent in Thailand in the early 1970s, with some seven children per household, the Population and Community Development Association (PDA) saw an urgent need to step in and complement the efforts of the Thai government to promote family planning throughout the country.

Mechai Viravaidya, PDA's chairman, founded the organisation in 1974. He was considered to be somewhat of a maverick and was mocked because of what he was saying publically at that time, some 35 years ago.



“When you translate ‘condoms’ into Thai, it has a funny meaning. Also our slogan ‘the more children you have, the poorer you become’, when you translate that into Thai, it also has a funny and catchy tone,” says **Apapan Kulapongse**, a project manager at PDA.

“There was a lot of resistance toward this programme, but we kept it very creative, and friendly enough to the audience, and in the end it was well received in general,” she adds. That same slogan has become a household name now.

Less is more

PDA’s creative tactics included a microcredit programme targeted at mothers. Instead of encouraging mothers to have another child, they were told they each would win a pig if they refrained from getting pregnant. They listened, and not only got their pig, but raised the animals for six months and even managed to sell them for a profit.

“So the message was: ‘the more children you have, the poorer you become.’ We try to get them to focus their time and energy on income generation rather than having children,” says Kulapongse.

She says the average number of children per household has since fallen to 1.2 from seven. “It’s a huge achievement of Thailand overall, including PDA – the population growth rate has decreased from 3.3 to 0.3 per cent.”

Safe sex

PDA then moved to HIV/AIDS prevention and education in the mid-1980s, with villagers handing out condoms and oral contraceptives to areas of rural Thailand where access to birth control methods were scarce.

Kulapongse says the organisation has been carrying out education campaigns aimed at children and young people in these rural areas. “We get them familiar with condoms and they tell their parents about condoms. Now these children – 35 years later, they are in their 40s – they now have their own families so we don’t have to repeat the process.”

After the success of its family planning and HIV/AIDS awareness programmes, PDA decided to turn its attention to poverty alleviation in rural

Thailand as it realised that poverty was the root cause of many social problems, even the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

The people's bank

Operating on the belief that local people are best suited to shape and sustain their own development, PDA set up the Village Development Bank, part of a development initiative to eradicate poverty. It provides microcredit financing, which would be otherwise unavailable, to villages to start their own enterprises.

“We believe that the poor are still poor because they lack two things: access to credit and business, and life skills training. The Village Development Bank gives villagers access to microloans with affordable interest rates. We also give them skills to run the fund, distribute loans and do bookkeeping. After that, we also encourage them to use the profits from this microcredit fund towards development activities for their own village, so it's very sustainable and it works,” says Kulapongse.



She adds that this kind of model has been developed against a backdrop of PDA's experience in rural development stretching more than 25 years. It is a long-term process and requires a lot of participation from villagers to ensure the bottom-up approach, but definitely yields positive and concrete results, she says. In tsunami-affected areas, for example, "not only did the fund grow, but the mindset and attitude of the villagers changed too. With consistent monitoring and skills enhancement, it changed the role of women and youth in that area."

Another move by the PDA is its Positive Partnership Project. Targeted at people living with HIV/AIDS, it aligns PDA's goals of income generation and HIV/AIDS awareness.

"To be eligible for the loan, you have to pair up with an HIV-negative person. You receive business training, get a loan, start some income-generating activity and repay the loan, and you get on with your life. The main idea behind this is to reduce stigmatisation and victimisation. We can see that these people can generate income and are still useful like you and me," says Kulapongse.

Today, PDA's programmes cover more than one third of the country. It employs more than 800 staff, works with 12,000 volunteers, and has 18 regional development centres across Thailand.

Although it has cemented its position as one of Thailand's largest and most diversified NGOs, Kulapongse says the organisation will have to try even harder to maintain its leadership position in rural development.

*Apapan Kulapongse participated in **INSEAD's Social Entrepreneurship Programme** at the school's Asia campus in Singapore earlier this year.*

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