This special country edition of Catalyst Asia (Thailand) is brought to you by Crown Property Bureau and SCG.

A HYBRID PROFILE OF SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Ultimately, profit determines the success and death of businesses. It is what drives efficiency and sustains an organisation.

A PEN FOR THE BLIND

It’s important to remember that when we design things, we are designing a whole ecosystem to drive itself without us. Only then are you really solving a problem.

"Parents were pulling kids out of school because they wanted the kids to work."

... p. 28

COVER STORY

Lighting Up Lives

"Parents were pulling kids out of school because they wanted the kids to work."

p. 28
ABOUT US

Catalyst Asia is a publication by the Institute for Societal Leadership at the Singapore Management University. It is a selection of feature stories, interview articles and opinion pieces about how leadership is being exercised around societal challenges in Asia. We hope that Catalyst Asia will inform, inspire and catalyse new ideas for change.

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EDITOR’S NOTE

At Catalyst Asia, we believe that real life is only captured at a particular moment in time. Everything you read here is accurate at the point in which it was recorded. We do not expect details to stay the same and we hope that they do not. On the cover, the ISL globe motif illuminates a featured picture but intentionally obscures certain parts to imply that the perspectives presented in Catalyst Asia are by no means a complete picture. We frame the story and offer a point of view. It is then up to you, the reader, to form your own understanding and imagine how the remaining pieces of the story could look like.

Perhaps you could help complete the story, or create a new life-changing one. Either way, we hope the stories you read here will not leave you the same. Continue to stay with us on this journey at isl.smu.edu.sg/catalystasia – our online platform that is updated monthly with inspiring insights on individuals and organisations that continue to do their part for the betterment of society.

Scan Here To Find Out More About ISL
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isl@smu.edu.sg
FOREWORD

Thailand is known as the Land of Smiles. Its people are welcoming, friendly, and have a lot of heart. So when we decided to do a Thai edition of Catalyst Asia, we knew we were going to hear (and get) a lot of stories that will pull at our heartstrings.

And that we did.

One of the goals of the Institute for Societal Leadership is to help people do good better, no matter where they are. We want to be the bridge for leaders to meet and learn from one another, and pass on that knowledge to future generations of societal leaders. We want them to continue the good work and make a difference for years on end, leaving a powerful impact and legacy on the communities they are helping.

Founder of forOldy, Oranuch Lerdkulladilok, is an example of that. She saw a problem within the elderly community and not only made it her mission to solve it, but also empowered the seniors she was helping to be self-sustainable. Singaporean Jason Goh of The New Light Foundation is also leaving his legacy behind in the village of Baan Nam Kem by providing its youths with education, so that they can have a brighter future.

Jason and Oranuch are just two of the people we have highlighted who excel at the art of doing good better. Whether they are natives of Thailand or foreigners wanting to help their fellow men, the societal leaders we have interviewed all share the same trait - the passion to improve the community around them, and the determination to succeed, no matter the odds.

We hope you will be inspired by their stories in our fifth edition of Catalyst Asia, and be invigorated by their ideas and tenacity. There are more stories on isl.smu.edu.sg/catalystasia and documentaries that we have produced on some of these leaders. Read them, watch them, share them.

Be inspired.

MARTIN TAN
Executive Director, Institute for Societal Leadership

GROW A FOREST IN YOUR MIND

Two Thai reforestation pioneers believe changing mindsets and thinking outside the box are crucial to battling global climate change.

When the Royal Forestry Department (RFD) mobilised reforestation efforts across the country during Thailand’s Golden Jubilee of the late King Bhumibol, it earmarked a 5000-rai plot of degraded land in a protected forest reserve at Khaao Paeng Ma in Na Bon Khathasima – near Khao Yai National Park – for regeneration.

The authority handed over the reins to Chokedee Poralokanon, more commonly known as “Uncle Choke”. 13 years on, he has transformed over 20,000 rai of denuded mountain into an oasis of greenery.

In fact, six years prior to the inception of the Khaao Paeng Ma project, this former forestry official turned reforestation advocate worked with local villagers to “change their minds”, as he puts it, about encroaching into forest reserves. Instead, he urged them to forest their own land, which will provide them with an array of benefits.

It took some convincing at first, but eventually the villagers bestowed on Uncle Choke their “local wisdom” on trees and plants that are integral to the project’s success.

He first planted a diverse forest on his own land, specialising in local species of plants and trees. It attracted various birds and bees, allowing him to harvest many different foods and herbal medicines.

“We have to believe in nature,” said Uncle Choke, explaining why he planted 30 local trees species on the degraded land.

“If you plant only one tree species, there will be nothing else to grow in its place if it gets attacked by disease. In nature, there are many

PHOTOS BY PHICHAK LIMPRASUT, CHOKEDEE PORALOKANON, NIKOM PUTTA, AND WEBACHA KREENWYER
different species working together. If one of the three species I planted died, there would still be 29 others. The local trees were here already, so we didn’t need to bring in other species. What we already had was enough.”

The initial phase of the project – doing the research and winning over the villagers – took six years. The actual reforestation work took a little more than twice that. The project was finally completed in 2007.

Although the forest does not belong to the villagers, Uncle Choke believes they have gained valuable knowledge that they can pass back into their own land. Perhaps the most incredible part of the project is that it has brought gaur – also known as Indian bison – back to the once denuded forest. The largest and mightiest of all bovines, more than 200 of these brawny creatures roam the reforested area. In addition to providing ecological benefits such as seed dispersion and fertilising the land with their droppings, the goats have also put the area on the map for ecotourism.

These positive effects did not just stay within the community. Other village leaders as well as organisations working on reforestation have also come to learn about the project.

These days, the 61-year-old retiree focuses on educating visitors and enjoying the natural splendour of Suan Laong Choke, the 100+ acre plot of land he spent 24 years moulding into a learning centre for agroforestry. Thousands of students from primary and secondary schools, as well as universities – particularly those located in northeastern Thailand – have dropped by to learn about the philosophy of agroforestry and how to apply it to their daily lives.

Says Uncle Choke, who was given the “Philosopher of the Land: Reforestation” award:

“What I got from bringing back a healthy ecosystem to this land is happiness. I enjoy a better life here every day.”

GROWING BANANA TREES TO SAVE THE WORLD

Meanwhile, up in the northern highlands, Chiang Mai-born Nikom Putta believes in the benefits of bananas.

While helping Uncle Choke on the Khao Paeng Ma Reforestation Project, he noticed that banana trees grew naturally around the base of the area’s mountains, where their thick canopy and ability to retain moisture served as a barrier against forest fires.

“Because the banana trees are heavy with moisture, the fire only burns the grass around them. Then it fizzles out before it can reach the forest,” he explained.

Nikom also discovered that for reforestation efforts to work, moisture must be returned to these dry and barren areas. “In Thailand, we believe that if there are bananas, we can survive,” he pointed out. “Bananas can be used for cooking. The leaves can be used as plates or to wrap-up different foods. Even the flower inside can be used for food or given to pigs.”

When he returned to his childhood home of Chiang Dao 10 years ago, the political science student thought of banana trees again. So he initiated a project called “Plant Banana Trees to Save the World” to conserve the last watershed area of northern Thailand.

Nikom started spreading the word, particularly among young students, about the beneficial aspect of banana trees, like protecting rivers from soil erosion.

Part of the project required him to plant banana tree plots on his own property as demonstration sites, which became the centerpieces of his meetings and discussions with villagers from Doi Luang Chiang Dao. Most of the local hill tribes were planting corn, which tend to dry out the land and cause haze during harvesting season in late February and March. Nikom advised them to plant banana trees instead to keep the soil moist and fertile.

His work has helped to maintain fresh water sources in the area and as far away as Bangkok. By maintaining the forest watersheds of the northern highlands, the project has been beneficial for the Ping River, a tributary of the Chao Phraya River that connects Chiang Mai with Bangkok. Without the watersheds in the north, Bangkok would not have access to so much clean water.

At present, all 80 villages in and around Doi Luang Chiang Dao have sown plots of banana trees.

On average, they plant between 400 and 500 new trees each year. The seeds have now been dispersed all over the area by wild boars, bears, squirrels, birds and bats, so the project has borne even more fruit.

Ever the evangelist, Nikom continues to disseminate the seeds of his knowledge throughout the kingdom, sometimes in unusual ways. A few years ago, he spent three months walking the entire length of the Ping River, stopping along the way to teach people about the positive aspects of planting his favourite multipurpose tree. ↑
THE VOLUNTEER BANK

What do you do when your country is hit by one of the worst disasters in half a century? For biology graduate and contemplative facilitator Teerat Pinyapanpoom, the answer was to team up with his mentors and classmates from Mahidol University to revolutionise the art and science of volunteering – for good.

RIGHT PLACE, RIGHT TIME

With the support of the Thai Health Promotion Foundation, JitArsa Bank – known as Thanalan JitArsa in Thai, which means ‘bank of volunteer spirit’ and ‘source of hope’ – officially opened for business in 2012. This is less than a year after the catastrophic floods that hit 66 provinces and affected over 13 million people.

Teerat, who is now 29, recalled that in many ways, timing played an important role in shaping the blueprint for what would become the country’s much-needed upgrade of the volunteer ecosystem.

“During the great flood of 2011, relief efforts were significantly undermined by disorganisation on the ground and online. For example, the only way for most people to search and apply for volunteer opportunities was to make calls or visit individual Facebook pages and websites. On the other hand, as they used Facebook to help spread the word, many unknowingly shared old announcements, resulting in problems of over and under supply,” explained Teerat.

But it was not just the negatives that gave the six co-founders – mostly enthusiasts and specialists in contemplative education and transformative learning – the impetus to start “Thailand’s first-ever store for volunteering”, which offered services like time bank, orientation and training, as well as volunteer management.

“I still get goosebumps just by talking about it now,” said Teerat of the unprecedented level of volunteer spirit that remained palpable throughout the crisis. “People were pouring in from all directions. Even the flood victims came to help out. It was an awe-inspiring moment.”

TIME BANK WITH A THAI TWIST

Still, amid all the noise and distractions of modern life, it took a few months for JitArsa Bank to find its footing. Now into its fifth year, the time bank – which has features like personalised job matching and multi-platform notification – has become the go-to place for newbies and enthusiasts aged between seven and 71. But women in their late twenties make up the majority of its user base.

For now, the platform adds more than 40 new members a day and is home to over 160 groups and organisations.

“One fascinating trend we continue to see is that quite a number of our members have become regular volunteers with particular organisations or quit their jobs to join them full-time,” noted Teerat.

SPIRITUAL GATEWAY

But more than a “digital disruptor”, a “matchmaker” or a “data miner”, JitArsa Bank strives to be a solution to cultivate a society that is healthy inside and out through contemplative volunteering.

According to Teerat, the act of volunteering – when done “properly” – can be a spiritually transformative experience that increases one’s understanding of, and compassion for, self and others. The first step to creating this is to change one’s perception of volunteers from “do-gooders” or “cheap labour” to “participants” and “learners”.

“To join our ecosystem, the organisation has to meet three main criteria. First, it has to be able to provide proof of existence. Second, its work has to, in one way or another, contribute to social good. Third, the staff must be open to work with us to integrate the spiritual health component into the jobs they wish to list on the time bank,” pointed out Teerat.

The last criteria means that each volunteer work should be designed and run in a way that helps facilitate self-reflection and the development of self-awareness and self-knowledge. “What we usually recommend is a short reflection session at the end of the activity,” he added.

This, however, still, requires tact and finesse. So, as part of its orientation and training service, JitArsa Bank provides year-round facilitator and “training the trainer” courses to equip host organisations with the skills necessary to nurture the volunteers’ spiritual growth and transformation.

GOING DEEP

In addition, JitArsa Bank holds a Volunteer Dialogue workshop every month, where for three hours, participants do different face-to-face exercises. This is to help them develop a capacity for empathic presence, gain insight and learn to really listen to others without judgment or criticism.

Activity coordinator Chotsak Kijpornyongpan, 27, explained that “right from the start, we knew that we wanted to help people to get to know themselves, find inner happiness and transform from within.”

Just imagine how much fewer problems there would be if we just slowed down and listened to each other before rushing to judgment.”

Undergraduate Toey has attended the workshop at least eight times. Like many of his peers who take out government loans to pay for school, the 21-year-old is required to complete 36 hours of volunteer work each academic year to maintain his eligibility.

“My friends? They’re still sticking to our old strategy of choosing the gigs based on the hours. But I don’t, not anymore.”

Toey added that her “little project” was, in fact, an enlightened being who forgoes nirvana and "trims the mind of all impurities" all the time.
A LABOUR OF LOVE

In more ways than one, it could not be more fitting that social enterprise Poakpintokao was “born” on Valentine’s Day, as love is the thread that runs through everything that it does. But like many good love stories, Poakpintokao’s started with a tragedy.

HEARTBREAKING

In February 2014, more than 10 debt-ridden farmers in Thailand committed suicide in a single week. They were among nearly 900,000 farmers who had gone unpaid for months, as then prime minister Yingluck Shinawatra’s administration struggled to find buyers for its 18 million tonnes of overpriced rice that would leave the taxpayers with a hefty bill of 536 billion baht.

The subsidy programme implemented between 2011 and 2013, which promised to buy every grain of rice from farmers at up to 50 per cent above the market rate, is neither the first nor the last of such shortsighted government intervention. But it is by far the most damaging. “In that moment, I knew I had to do something,” life coach Ronchat Patasonsi Buncharoen said.

So she assembled a team of twelve “kindred spirits” she had met through volunteering to start what would become their first foray into the rice world.

“The model we used was inspired by a farm-to-school programme. Our friend, Nopneera Rugsasook, has a daughter who attends an alternative school. Every year, it takes students to this rice field to learn how to grow rice. After harvest, the crop is sold directly to the parents. That farmer was the only one in her area who wasn’t affected by the scheme that year.”

Throughout 2014, the co-founders focused on tinkering with the model, vetting and building a strong base of “grooms”, “brides” and volunteers, as well as promoting the project.

“We owe a lot to the media and our celebrity “brides” who help spread the word. Earlier this year, one of them wrote about us in her bestselling book. Since then, our enrollment has gone from around 10 new brides a week to 40,” said Pradhana Chariyavilaskul – the thirteenth “sister” who joined the team after hearing about Poakpintokao through a mutual acquaintance.

As you may have already guessed, the “brides” here refer to urban consumers while the “grooms” are the farmers with whom they are matched with for an entire year. Meanwhile, Poakpintokao itself is your old-school matchmaker.

“Our is not a trading platform,” said Panwadee Thareechit, who, like most of the co-founders/matchmakers, works in branding. “The intention here is to bridge the rural-urban divide. This means that on the brides’ side, our job is to help them understand the challenges of organic farming. The line I always use to illustrate this...
point is: Even a single weed has to be removed by hand.”

Similarly, the grooms – most used to selling their crops all at once to millers after harvest – had to adjust to their new role and responsibilities. “Besides monthly deliveries, they have to use social media to post daily updates on the farm activities, learn how to use Microsoft Excel to manage inventory, and uphold strict organic standards,” said Romschat.

Co-developed by rice experts, the co-founders and the grooms, Pookpintakao’s organic standards are based on the Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) – an affordable method of organic guarantee for small-scale farmers.

FAMILY

Currently, there are about 4,000 individual brides, 35 corporate brides and 49 farmer groups that consist of thousands of farmers across 27 provinces. The project also has 40 volunteers who help with setting, matchmaking and external evaluation visits conducted jointly with the grooms and the core team.

On a daily basis, thousands of messages and photos are exchanged among the brides and the grooms in chat groups created for them to stay in touch and deepen ties.

This has led to many heartwarming stories such as a joint donation of 5,000 tonnes of rice to Nepal earthquake victims, a baby’s first rice experience, and the Noah’s Ark plan – a standing invitation for flood refugees up north.

Meanwhile, a separate chat group for the grooms serves as a support community and virtual meeting room. Apichart Rajanarit, the 2016 Groom Committee President, said that one of the projects they worked on was developing a Rice Route e-book – in partnership with the Tourism Authority of Thailand – to help locals and foreigners discover the wonders of Thai rice.

In the last five years, Apichart, his wife Uttaraporn, and their 15-year-old son Phusin have been organising similar activities for kids. “It started with visits from our son’s friends and their parents. As it went on, we felt that we could turn it into a learning opportunity for other kids to experience nature and get the local community involved.”

TOXIC

Apichart’s rice field, Na Tip Kasem (roughly translated to mean goddess’s blissful home) is in Ayutthaya province, a former capital and one of the largest rice-producing areas in Thailand. But his eight-acre (about 3.16 acres) plot of land is surrounded by non-organic fields – an inevitable reality in a country that is the fifth biggest consumer of agricultural chemicals. “I’m hoping that through working with other farmers and showing them that it is possible to do this, I’ll create a domino effect,” said Apichart.

Since the Green Revolution in 1966, using farm chemicals has become the new normal for Thai farmers, slowly turning the profession into one of the most dangerous, lowest-paying and unsustainable jobs around.

“It was a big shock to us to learn how much chemicals are involved in rice farming,” the group’s “big sister” figure, Chantana Chaowichitra, said. “While a farmer was walking me through all the steps, only one word popped into my head – death by installment. This is the reason why we choose to work with organic rice farmers only and use our Facebook page to educate consumers about this little known fact.”

LEGACY

In February last year, Pookpintakao’s model was integrated into the Ministry of Commerce’s long-term plan to develop the domestic organic rice market. This followed the success of Amnat Charoen Pookpintakao, the first province to embrace this new kind of direct marketing. The team’s next destinations are Nakhon Nayok and Nakhon Sawan provinces.
THE ART OF HELPING OTHERS

From being hugged by strangers in the ladies’ room to being likened to Bodhisattva – an enlightened being who forgives nirvana to save others in Mahayana Buddhism – encounters like these remind Ireal of the “unexpected” values of Art for Cancer, a nonprofit she started on Facebook that has brought so much light and colour into the “breast world”, and come to be a source of strength and emotional support for people with or without cancer.

YOUNG BLOOD

In the last decade, new incidents of breast cancer in Thailand has risen rapidly – from thousands of cases a year to around 12,000 – largely due to increasing environmental pollution and changing lifestyle. Yet, public awareness of the most common cancer found in the country remains low. The widespread misunderstanding, most notably that it is a death sentence, also does not help.

But this might be one of the reasons why the 33-year-old fine arts graduate has emerged as an “accidental” advocate and role model for cancer patients in the last five years.

“To be honest, it only occurred to me later that by being out there, sharing my story and talking about my own experience and work, it can give people hope to keep on fighting and inspire them to action,” said Ireal, who added that her “little project” was, in fact, a spur of the moment decision.

“Cancer taught me about living with uncertainty but those hospital visits were an education about life. It helped me see that there are people out there who have it much harder than me and it got me thinking about what I could do in my own capacity to help others,” muses Ireal.

“EYE OPENER

Still, Art for Cancer, which, to date, has raised more than eight million baht – mainly through auctioning donated works of art and selling inspirational T-shirts Ireal herself designs – might not have existed, had it not been for her decision to seek treatment at Siriraj Hospital. Founded in 1888, it is not only the oldest and largest hospital in Thailand but one of the busiest as well. In 2014 alone, it had nearly 2.5 million outpatient visits.

“I chose to go there because the doctor is a top specialist in his field,” said Ireal, who had learnt in August 2011 that she had stage-two breast cancer, which had already spread to her axillary lymph nodes. She was one week away from starting graduate school in England. “I also didn’t want to burden my family, in case my treatment had to be dropped out.”

Ever since the rollout of the universal healthcare system in 2002, state hospitals have been facing an unprecedented high demand. This is especially the case with top-ranked medical facilities in Bangkok, where patients come from all over the country to get the treatment they need.

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“BEATING HEARTS

However, the first few months after the launch of Art for Cancer in 2012 were very quiet, as Thailand had just witnessed its worst flood in half a century. Ireal’s family’s cosmetic business took a bit hit, along with her chemotherapy treatment, which had to be continued in Khon Kaen, one of the few provinces that were spared. But none of these discouraged Ireal from pursuing her one-woman mission or investing her own money to produce the first batch of Cancel Cancer and Can Survive T-shirts.

“At first, I sold my own paintings and got people I knew from Silpakorn University to donate their works. The T-shirts came a bit later, after I discovered that they’re more accessible to people, cost-wise. They’re also a good conversation starter, like the one I’m wearing today.”

The special edition couple T-shirt she was wearing is a collaboration between Art for Cancer as well as singer Thitima Suttasunthorn and her daughter. “One thing I’ve learned about cancer is that it’s different, whether you are a patient or not. Your loved ones suffer as much or maybe more. So when we were thinking about the design, I asked both of them to sum up the experience of fighting and beating cancer twice in a few words. For Thitima, it was the sud ku (what matters is your heart) and her daughter, you can beat it.”

“It’s a very good project in my opinion,” said actress Warapun Nguitragool, a fellow breast cancer survivor and another long-time supporter who Ireal regularly teams up with for fund and awareness-raising events.

“HELPING HANDS

In addition to Siriraj Hospital, all proceeds raised through Art for Cancer go to two other foundations within Ramathibodi Hospital and the National Cancer Institute of Thailand.

Although all Thai citizens are entitled to free treatment, there are around five to 10 percent of patients who may need additional financial assistance for certain drugs that are not covered by their health schemes. The hospitals also use the funds to organise cancer awareness and training activities for the general public as well as their staff.

“I believe Art for Cancer is one of the first projects in the country that is created by a patient,” said Dr Porncha O-Chanakorn, head of the breast cancer team at Siriraj.
Hospital and administrator of Siriraj Art for Cancer Fund, “And more than helping people in need, I feel that the project inspires change. I still remember how moved the participants were the first year when Ireal came to talk at our annual “Learn About Breast Cancer” event.”

He added that even though there are no proven ways to prevent cancer, “it is treatable with early detection and appropriate treatment.”

The latest 10-year survival rate for breast cancer at Siriraj Hospital is 85 percent, pointed out Dr Pornchai.

NEW VOICES

While Art for Cancer has far exceeded any expectations its founder could have had, the financial challenge of running a nonprofit made Ireal start a social enterprise called Art for Others. This is not only to support Art for Cancer but also to get more artists and creative professionals involved in a cause they care about.

“I know that not everyone feels strongly about cancer. I didn’t, until I had it myself. In a way, from doing Art for Cancer, I’ve come to appreciate art as something more than an artistic expression. It’s a medium that can reach out to people of all ages and gender as well as bring people together to drive change in society.”

So far, Ireal has partnered with local brands and artists to try out different activities such as workshops, therapy sessions and art installations. “You know, I have cancer to thank for all of this. It’s the best thing that has ever happened to me.”

“Old and poor” is a tough sell, even in the nonprofit world, and nobody knows this better than forOldy founder Oranuch Lerdkiudilok. For years, the former development worker had unsuccessfully tried to find a home for her informal care project that aimed to empower seniors and their communities to look after themselves. It was, and still is, a practical solution to tackle the silver tsunami that has already arrived in the Land of Smiles, where birth rates have dropped to near zero and more than a third of the entire senior population – or about 3.3 million people aged 60 or older – now live below the poverty line*.

“The truth is, many people feel that it’s a fruitless endeavour. Why bother? They’ll die soon anyway,” said the 54-year-old, who started her social enterprise four years ago, using donations from family and friends, as well as seed funding of 50,000 baht, which she had won in a pitching competition. forOldy’s motto is “Recover comfortably when ill, age gracefully and with dignity, and when the time comes, die a peaceful death.”

LEARNING NEW TRICKS

It was one Monday morning in March when the “sisters”, “aunties” and “grannies” started to show up at the community centre where forOldy is situated, effectively injecting life into the concrete building. But today, as I interviewed Oranuch, the ladies had come to learn how to make owl fabric keychains, the latest addition to forOldy’s growing handmade product line that includes bags, coin purses and owl-shaped charcoal odor absorbers.

The stuffed owl bodies in gold and yellow will then be neatly put into a bag and passed along to another community, who would sew the eyes and attach the split rings and chains to the owls. By the end of the month, 200 pieces would be made and sold to students who had placed the first order and a couple of hundred baht given to each member for their work.

“A group of university students helped design the keychain for us. They said that ours weren’t cute enough,” Oranuch said good-naturedly.

“I still have a lot to learn when it comes to product development and marketing, to boost our income and theirs,” she added, as an elderly woman walked past us dragging a cart full of leftover cement to a dumpsite. She had attended the workshop to learn how to make the keychains, but left after her neighbour called and offered 100 baht for the job.

*By law, older people who are unable to work and earn must get a home visit form that will be compiled and sent to the “sisters”, “aunties” and “grannies” started, die a peaceful death.”

“In a regular village fund, a set amount of money is collected from each community member at all. But through monthly savings, it is a practical solution to tackle the silver tsunami that has already arrived in the Land of Smiles, where birth rates have dropped to near zero and more than a third of the entire senior population – or about 3.3 million people aged 60 or older – now live below the poverty line*.

The silver tsunami is a tough sell, even in the nonprofit world, and nobody knows this better than forOldy founder Oranuch Lerdkiudilok. For years, the former development worker had unsuccessfully tried to find a home for her informal care project that aimed to empower seniors and their communities to look after themselves. It was, and still is, a practical solution to tackle the silver tsunami that has already arrived in the Land of Smiles, where birth rates have dropped to near zero and more than a third of the entire senior population – or about 3.3 million people aged 60 or older – now live below the poverty line*.

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“I still have a lot to learn when it comes to product development and marketing, to boost our income and theirs,” she added, as an elderly woman walked past us dragging a cart full of leftover cement to a dumpsite. She had attended the workshop to learn how to make the keychains, but left after her neighbour called and offered 100 baht for the job.
forOldy operates out of Phun Sap in Sai Mai district, one of the six low-income communities in Bangkok. It is home to about 220 families, most of whom were resettled here in 2011 from under a bridge next to where the Wat Saman Nari train station will be.

“We’ve known Oranuch for a very long time, since she was still with YMCA,” said Somri Trisanto, 64. “Many people come to our community,” she continued, “but Oranuch has lit a spark in our dimmed lives. I really feel that we’re going in the right direction.”

Somri earns a few hundred baht a week from doing other people’s laundry and selling trash, and shares a home with her youngest son, a cosmetic production worker. She is also one of the six home care volunteers in her community, and regularly visits her fellow seniors at home, either to chat or lend a sympathetic ear. Somri also checks if they need any help with chores, food, medical equipment and supplies, as well as visits to the doctor.

“If it’s an emergency, we’d call Oranuch right away, but if not, we would just sit it down in a home visit form that will be compiled and sent to Oranuch at the end of every month,” explained Somri, whose dedication to her community has made her a bit of a local celebrity, with other interest groups trying to poach her. “I do what I can to help out but forOldy comes first because it’s the only project for seniors like us.”
DEATH FUNDS AND MORE

Every month, forOldy members contribute 20 baht to the Oranuch Boonlert fund, a reworked village funeral fund that can be found in most Thai communities.

“In a regular village fund, a set amount of money is collected from each community member whenever someone dies. It can be a huge burden, if, for example, three people died in the same month. When that happens, the last family may not get anything at all. But through monthly savings, our members can be rest assured that their deaths won’t push anyone into debt. They also get to catch up with each other at least once a month,” said Oranuch, who spent a year in 2005 studying management and development of social services for senior citizens in the Philippines and Malaysia, as part of the Asian Public Intellectuals Fellowship Programme.

To fund the activities and keep forOldy afloat, Oranuch relies on donations, corporate sponsorships and income from selling the handmade products. Income also comes in via Khan To Khan Yai (or grandpa and grandma shop), forOldy’s first business arm that offers both rental and sales services of second-hand medical equipment at affordable prices. In addition to donated items, the shop uses crowdfunding sites to procure more expensive items that are in great demand but rare to come by, such as oxygen concentrators.

“For families who may need any equipment for long-term use but can’t afford to rent or buy, we try our best to find donors for them. But in any case, our members in the six communities will have first priority. They have put their trust in me and have been with us from the very beginning. This is my pledge to them.”

In the last five years or so, Oranuch has been working as part of a joint network that includes, among others, Older People’s Network, Informal Workers’ Network, Four Regions Slum Network, the People’s Health Systems Movement and the Community Welfare Network, to push for the passage of the Old Age Pensions Act.

“What our country has right now is the Old Age Allowance Programme that provides 600 to 900 baht living allowances per month to seniors. To be honest, this barely covers the travel costs for one hospital visit. The new bill, funded by VAT revenue, will provide a basic and livable monthly income for all people aged 65 and older, calculated based on the current poverty line. This will ensure that no one falls through the cracks just because, for instance, they fail to apply in time, and keep the programme from being used as a tool for political gains. If we can achieve this, I’d be the happiest person on earth.”

“In 2015, the poverty line was set at 2,644 baht a month nationwide and 3,122 baht in Bangkok.”

FIT FOR LIFE

Your job may only be just a part of your life. But it does make a world of difference if you can find one that fits.

“The common problem for many Thai students is that, all too often, careers are relegated to the background until they have made it into university,” said 30-year-old a-chieve co-founder Niran Jitraneechan.

Founded in 2011, the self-discovery and career guidance social enterprise is the brainchild of four economics graduates, who have been friends since freshman year. It is also currently one of the very few organisations that are exclusively dedicated to helping five million secondary school students nationwide find their own path towards a fulfilling career and life.

Unlike many other countries, career guidance is not part of Thailand’s educational curriculum. So, even though schools are required to offer weekly lessons on guidance, the lack of policy guidelines, tools and training for teachers means that what usually goes on during the 50-minute class has very little to do with preparing students for life after school.

**CAREER GUIDANCE**

It is no surprise then when earlier this year, thousands of teenagers and parents from across the country swarmed a convention park located on the outskirts of Bangkok, where a-chieve has been holding Job Shadow – its annual career exploration fair – since 2014.

To many students, this represents their one and only chance to meet and interact with over 70 industry professionals from all walks of life, and learn more about the careers they are interested in as well as those they may know little of.

“I’m really hoping to get some answers today,” said one of the high school seniors on the exhibition floor, who told me she planned to study liberal arts next year, but “still have no idea what kind of jobs I could get with the degree.”

Several activities held at the fair include FuFuFunFest – a 15-day programme consisting of a three-day self-actualisation workshop, a 10-day job shadowing/internship and a two-day exit workshop. Other more intimate and in-depth activities help students assess their aptitude, interests, skills, values and lifestyle preferences, as well as gain realistic insights into their dream careers and industries.

Talk Chid and Open World, for example, are informational interviews, with the former focusing on one specific profession and the latter, an entire career field.

“In the past, we tried to secure funding to organise career days for students, as part of a children’s TV programme that we did, but it didn’t pan out,” Duangkhae Buaprakhon said. The award-winning documentary producer and managing director at MaeMakayan-D was one of the first people to take a chance on a-chieve when approached by Niran six years ago.
“As someone who didn’t get to study what I wanted because of parental expectations, I recognize how beneficial this project can be, especially in bridging the gap between parents and children.

It’d be magical if, one day, a-chieve’s work could be properly incorporated into our education system.”

A-CHIEVING RESULTS

Still, a-chieve – which, when pronounced in Thai means occupation – is not all about jobs. It is also about human connection and community. Up until her second year of high school, when Rirrada Pornsombutsatien took part in a-chieve’s very first job fair in 2011, the 23-year-old had never met anyone like herself before – someone who is an avid reader, a movie buff and an aspiring filmmaker.

“Even as a film major in university, I still couldn’t find a single classmate with similar tastes and interests. In a way, I think because of its specificity, a-chieve’s activities tend to attract kids who are driven and passionate about life. Consequently, this creates a very supportive environment for personal and collective growth that is hard to find in school and elsewhere.”

Rirrada graduated from university in 2016. Her thesis was a short film that received honourable mention at the 20th Thai Short Film & Video Festival. She now works as a freelance make-up artist/producer/casting director/actress, and is in the process of developing her next personal documentary.

In the early years, a-chieve used the money raised from different funders and businesses to develop and pilot each programme and activity, but started charging fees ranging between a few hundred and 5,500 baht for Job Shadow in the last couple of years. The first few times, attendance at the event fell by half.

“It’s one of the biggest challenges for us,” said Narin, of the pricing dilemma. “About 40 percent of our participants come from provinces outside of Bangkok. This means they already have higher costs to begin with. One of the ideas we have been toying with is to create an a-chieve team in every region. This way, we can expand our reach and impact, and students can explore location-based industries and careers that would allow them to stay closer to home, if that’s what they want.”

Also in the pipeline is the development of better online resources like detailed career information, video interviews with industry professionals, and recorded sessions of the programmes and activities, along with a set of teaching tools for teachers to ensure that students would receive better education and career counselling in schools.

“To be honest, when we started out, I thought that it would take us about ten years – give or take – to set everything up. Now, we’ll probably need at least another decade, but I’m still hopeful. If we can fix this age-old problem, I really believe our kids will surely grow into happier, more productive and fulfilled adults, who, in their own way, will help make our society a better one. It’s this dream that keeps us going.”
“Wow, this is the most crowded my pickup truck has ever been,” Supat Hassanwonakit commented good-naturedly as two more people hopped into the backseat of his five-seater. The Chana environmentalist squad was on their way to Thapha district, a tiny coastal town that is home to the pristine Salom Beach and the main battleground for the future of Songkhla province.

“The ones three in the back are the real deal, the real non-governmental individuals,” the 46-year-old Chana Hospital administrator said. “Me, I get my paycheck from the government. Still, we all have our roles to play and what’s happening in Thapha is an exact repeat of Chana. Only this time around, it may be much, much worse.”

UNDER ATTACK

Even though the word “industrial estate” has never been used by past and present governments in any of the official documents made public, people in Thailand’s southern border provinces have long suspected that there is more to the onslaught of proposed state development projects in and around Songkhla province that began in the late 1990s.

From a double-track railway to gas and coal-fired power stations, as well as deep-sea ports together with several other infrastructure and heavy industrial projects, “the evidence just keeps piling up that there is an overarching plan to turn Songkhla province – a commercial and transport hub in the south – into the next Map Ta Phut,” said Supat, who has published many articles on the subject, including a book titled “Songkhla-Satun Towards Heavy Industrial Cities – Undisclosed Information.” It was an accumulation of disparate pieces of information from the environmental impact assessment reports and public-hearing materials.

Located in east Thailand’s Rayong province, Map Ta Phut was established in 1989. It remains the largest industrial estate and one of the worst polluted cities in the country. “For this very reason, the battle was fought in Thapha isn’t just to stop the construction of the 2,200-megawatt coal-fired power plant, but to defend our hometown and the right of the people in the south to choose our own future.”

POWER STRUGGLE

Consisting of a 2,200-megawatt power plant and a three-kilometre coal loading dock, the Thapha coal-fired power plant was announced in late 2014. It is one of the time “clean coal” power stations proposed in the Thailand Power Development Plan 2015-2036, and one of the three that the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) plans to build in the southern border provinces of Krabi, Pattani and Songkhla.

“Why do we need an additional 4,000 megawatts when Chana Power Plant can serve half of the southern region’s electricity consumption?” asked the vice-president of the Rural Doctors Society, who is also a co-founder of Deep South Watch and the secretary of the Deep South Relief and Reconciliation Foundation.

Rolling down his window, Supat greeted a group of soldiers manning a makeshift military checkpoint, set up a few kilometres from where two community gatherings were being held – one by the anti-coal villagers and another by EGAT.

“These are new, the pink flags. Last time, there were only green flags that belong to the anti-coal villagers. EGAT has been getting more aggressive lately. Whenever the villagers organise an activity, it would organise one as well, like today’s community visit by the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC). They’re here to follow up on the complaint hand delivered by the villagers.”

MEDICAL MAVERICK

Eldest son of a shoe seller in Hat Yai – the country’s fourth largest city – Supat told me he had been in “very plain and studious kid” who turned “weird” after stumbling into the Volunteer Work Camp for Students Club during his first year of medical school at Chulalongkorn University. One of the only four students in his year who were not from Bangkok, Supat returned to Songkhla province after graduating in 1994 and became the hospital administrator at Saba Yai Hospital, and one of the two doctors available in the 40-kilometre radius.

“The one condition I’ve reached after all these years is that you can’t change the world in meeting rooms or academic forums. Real change starts in a place like this, helping the villagers learn how to effectively organise themselves. Like in Chana, the plants turned out “less worse”, because we fought hard. The operators knew they couldn’t cut any corners. Even now, the community remains united and keeps a close watch.”

Called by one of the presenters to help explain about health hazards, the petite doctor quickly made his way from the back and started talking about the chronic low dose exposure in Chana, district, where the Thai-Malaysian gas pipeline and separation project as well as a natural gas power plant have been in operation since 2007 and 2008, respectively.

“Doc’s great,” said Ocehat, a 63-year-old construction worker who rode his motorcycle for almost an hour from Chana district. “I’m here to support my brothers and sisters in Thapha. Since Doc had moved to Chana in 1999, he has always been with the community, helping us like this. To have someone like him on our side, it gives us the strength.”

SOLIDARITY

“It’s our job to tell the world that we’re here and still fighting. Don’t just leave it to your social media team. When you tap a rubber tree, catch a fish or make a local dish, take a photo and post it on Facebook. Show the world how abundant Thapha is. Even fishermen don’t need boats because our sea is full of fish,” stressed Supat.

“People like to think that I’m being selfless,” Supat told me after I asked him about his arrest during a peaceful march to Bangkok to call for energy reform. He and 10 other people agreed to “take one for the team” and were held in a military camp for four days in August 2014.

“The truth is, no one can last long being a martyr. I do what I do because it makes me happy.”

Besides, I got to meet many weird and wonderful friends. It has become my life and I’m pretty sure I’d die of boredom if I had to live any other way.”
PLANTING BIG TREES IN EVERYBODY’S HEARTS

One of the things that became clear during my conversation with Big Trees co-founders, Anunta Intra-aksorn, 43, and Jakkaphan Thusadornarika, 37, was that tree hugger or not, anyone can be part of their organisation.

“At its heart, Big Trees is a collaboration. We want it to be a co-creation platform that engages and empowers people to drive social change,” said Anunta.

A NEW TRIBE
Founded by 10 young professionals – most of whom are designers, architects and lawyers – Big Trees burst onto the scene seven years ago with a viral campaign that raised more than one million baht to save century-old trees in the heart of Bangkok. That bid, however, came to an abrupt end mid-negotiation, when the residents woke up to the sound of bulldozers – on Thai Environmental Day, no less. A luxury shopping mall now stands where the trees used to be.

“At the time, I was working in knowledge management at the Thailand Creative & Design Centre. It gave me a lot of opportunities to meet very diverse groups of people who were interested in, among other things, urban ways of life and public spaces. Several of those people became Big Trees co-founders,” said Anunta.

“We noticed that people’s love for the environment starts at a young age. If we can get them involved early on, they are more likely to continue thinking about it in the future,” said Jakkaphan.

It was a big wake-up call for me to learn that one day, those trees were gone. And even though we had failed, their ‘last breath’ had given life to our group and continues to bring people like us together to do what we can for society,” said Anunta.

Indeed, Big Trees has grown into a force to be reckoned with. On its Facebook page alone, the group has over 143,000 likes and avid supporters of all ages, including celebrities, business people and decision makers.

“People have come to us now with more ideas and proposals,” said Jakkaphan.

CHANGING THE LANDSCAPE
The huge support Big Trees has garnered is mostly due to its savvy and creative use of social media to inform, engage and mobilise the online community, translating their participation into offline action.

One example was the Bangkok Big Trees project, which came with an invitation that said: “Let’s find the biggest, tallest, most beautiful and most important trees in Bangkok.”

The project soon took on a life of its own and inspired a nationwide search, bike tours, a 12-episode TV programme and a photo book.

“Many Thais still see the responsibility of looking after the city or the environment as not their own but that of state agencies or people in certain professions. What Big Trees tries to do is to create new spaces and opportunities for people to take action.”

I like to think of our activities as a ‘tasting menu’ that helps to open up people’s palates to discovering different ways we all can do our part,” said Jakkaphan, who teaches civic duty, music and creative communication at Thammasat University.

“The one thing I’ve noticed over the years is that the condition and population of big trees in the country says a lot about the attitude and quality of its people. After all, we breathe the same air and whenever trees grow, we benefit from the air they release.”

Big Trees have since expanded its “offerings” to include arborist training, bike tours, community-led eco-tourism and conservation campaigns, attracting all types of clientele, ranging from families to corporations to civil society organisations.

The hospitals also use the funds to organise cancer awareness and training activities for the general public as well as their staff. The hospitals also use the funds to organise cancer awareness and training activities for the general public as well as their staff. The hospitals also use the funds to organise cancer awareness and training activities for the general public as well as their staff. The hospitals also use the funds to organise cancer awareness and training activities for the general public as well as their staff. The hospitals also use the funds to organise cancer awareness and training activities for the general public as well as their staff. The hospitals also use the funds to organise cancer awareness and training activities for the general public as well as their staff. The hospitals also use the funds to organise cancer awareness and training activities for the general public as well as their staff. The hospitals also use the funds to organise cancer awareness and training activities for the general public as well as their staff.

“People will ask you: ‘What’s the point of planting trees if only the oldest and largest hospital in Thailand but one of the busiest as well. In 2014 alone, it had nearly 2.5 million visitors.”

“There is a real sense of purpose when you look after the city or the environment,” said Jakkaphan.

EYE OPENER
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PRUNED TO DEATH
Putting an end to tree-topping is also high on the group’s list of priorities. Though the practice is considered to be the most harmful pruning method, it remains widely used across the country. By removing the whole treecap, the trees’ structure and roots are severely weakened. This essentially dooms them to a life of poor health and premature death, and makes them a threat to public safety.

“It’s a vicious cycle. When trees are topped, they are forced to sprout from latent buds. This creates more work for those caring for the trees as they have to be trimmed and pruned much more often. And when they break or topple over, we make them the scapegoat for our lack of knowledge and mismanagement,” said Anunta.

Interestingly, there is another reason for the ubiquitous practice of tree-topping in Thailand. Anunta explained further: “One thing that we have learned from talking to the workers and agencies who are responsible for tree management and maintenance is that their performance is measured by the quantity and weight of tree trimmings. It’s an ill-conceived and myopic policy and shows how little thought has been put into managing our environment.”

BIG TREES AND CO
Having studied at the Urban Tree Care School – a partnership between Big Trees, Chulalongkorn University’s Faculty of Architecture and Somdet Chao Praya Institute of Psychiatry to address a serious shortage of trained arborists in Thailand – Anunta quit her job at a digital media channel to work full-time as an activist and campaign organiser.

Last year, under a newly formed Thailand Urban Tree Network, Big Trees – along with 55 other groups and organisations – rolled out #TreesInspector to turn netizens into active advocates. By uploading pictures on Facebook with the #TreesInspector hashtag and GPS coordinates of mistrusted trees, social media users are not only helping to care for the environment but also building a crowd-sourced database of trees in peril, and calling for a much-needed policy and regulatory change in environmental management in Thailand.

“#TreesInspector is a big step forward. It’s an upgrade from what we did in the past. Normally, when we receive tips about trees that are under threat, we would reach out to the owners or coordinate between stakeholders to find a solution. With #TreesInspector, we’re shifting into a more systematic approach while also getting Internet users to take action, instead of just complaining,” said Jakkaphan.

And so far, they have stepped up to the plate. In June last year, representatives from state agencies and other stakeholders met to discuss ways to improve tree management and maintenance across the country, leading to an increase in the number of arborists. Finally, the trees in Thailand are getting their much-deserved tender loving care.
Organic Rice Revolution

Chaiyaporn Promphan is a rare breed among Thai farmers. While most of his counterparts struggle with heavy household debt and poverty, Chaiyaporn successfully transitioned to organic production of rice and is now known nationwide as the “millionaire farmer.” He pioneered organic rice farming in Thailand and is an inspirational example of the economic opportunities awaiting every maverick farmer.

Like many struggling rice farmers, Chaiyaporn is no stranger to hard work that yielded few rewards. He grew up in Suphanburi, the rice belt of Thailand, but his family never saw much profit, despite toiling all year round and heavily investing in much-touted chemicals.

A survey by the National Statistics Office found almost 80 percent of farmers are heavily in debt. Up to 60 percent of them, especially those in the northern and central regions, work on rented land. According to the National Economic and Social Advisory Council, about 90 percent of farmers have an average acreage of only one rai (about 0.16 hectares) per person, while approximately 1.5 million farmers are either without land or don’t have enough to grow crops and earn a decent living to feed their family.

But Chaiyaporn is not worried by the volatile nature of market prices. His philosophy of “low-investment cost” farming – he figures he only pays about 2,000 baht per rai per year – has been a constant boon. The organic farmer says he has been enjoying a bountiful crop as well as income. Whereas his peers have to invest at least 4,000 to 5,000 baht per rai on agrochemicals every year, Chaiyaporn claims to still enjoy similar yield results without having to spend any.

“I earned millions of baht. My wife and I always make a profit, come what may. We feel proud that, between the two of us, we are able to set aside a monthly salary of about 50,000 baht each.

Recipe for Success

Chaiyaporn has succeeded beyond his wildest dreams. He owns 108 rai of paddy, has bagged the Ministry of Agriculture’s Outstanding Farmer award multiple times, and has been hailed as one of Thailand’s most successful farmers. What is the secret to his accomplishments?

In the late 1980s, Chaiyaporn and his father learned about organic farming from organic rice scientist Decha Siripat. Decha is director of the Khao Khwan Foundation, a non-governmental organisation that promotes chemical-free farming. He is also renowned for melding cutting-edge technology such as soil testing and microorganism cultivation with the time-honored practices of integrated farming found in Thailand.

Decha encouraged Chaiyaporn and his family to experiment with organic manure and an organic pesticide made from neem, a tropical tree. Chaiyaporn did so and noticed that not only were the organic crops doing well, but the land also retained its fertility, more so than areas where the chemical crops grew. He also spent less on fertilisers, spurring him to expand the family’s organic operations.

Within a mere three to four years, Chaiyaporn had turned his whole plot of land into an organic rice paddy field. As the profits rolled in, he bought more land. He has not been in debt since – a poignant fact given that farmers are counted among the nation’s highest debt holders.

The Road Ahead

Although Chaiyaporn belongs to an extremely tiny fraction of the Thai farming population, he believes that the organic trend is here to stay.

But there is still more room for organic farming to grow. Most of Thailand’s organic crops are produced for export, with the main crop being rice. Other cash crops such as soybeans, peanuts, tropical fruits, asparagus, tea, coffee, herbs, and rubber, make up the rest.

Decha believes the infrastructure and support on organic farming already exist. Making more inroads into marketing and distribution, as well as forging more partnerships between farmers and consumers, will play decisive roles in the movement’s future growth.

“People care more about their health and environment these days. Farmers have to find ways to guarantee that their rice is safe from chemicals,” he said. “Organic farming is the answer.”

*STORIES FROM THE GROUND TEXT BY APIRADEE TREERUTKUARKUL PHOTOS BY DECHA SIRIPAT AND CHAIYAPORN PROMPHAN*

Increasing his family’s yield. Between 1983 and 1999, Chaiyaporn invested heavily on chemical methods and produced an average of 12 tons of rice per year from 25 rai of paddy. However, he could barely turn a profit as he was in debt, having to pay for the chemicals he was using.

Decha then told him to experiment with organic manure and an organic pesticide made from neem, a tropical tree. Chaiyaporn did so and noticed that not only were the organic crops doing well, but the land also retained its fertility, more so than areas where the chemical crops grew. He also spent less on fertilisers, spurring him to expand the family’s organic operations.

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A
LIGHTING UP LIVES

In late 2004, a tsunami swept Jason Goh to the village of Baan Nam Kem in Thailand. What began as any other immediate relief mission soon transformed into the spark for what The New Light Foundation is today.

When most relief organisations had come and gone after tending to the pressing wounds of tsunami victims, Jason decided to tend to the deeper wounds of the village for the longer term.

So in April 2006, the New Light Community Development Centre (CDC) officially opened at the centre of Baan Nam Kem, promoting the value of education and providing the means to receive it.

It has since operated a school specially for students unable to attend the country’s public educational institutions, focusing on the kids of migrant families. It also recognises the needs of families unable to care for their children while at work, and offers the After School Care programme (ASC) as an avenue for kids to spend their time constructively.

However, things are not as smooth as they seem. Jason and his team are sometimes faced with frustrating odds.

“As the school progressed, we realised that the dropout rate was quite high. So we did home visits and spoke to parents. We found out that there is an outstanding need [for their children] to provide in terms of money… food on the table,” Jason explains, understanding the plight of many families, yet disheartened that the children “lost the opportunity to have the most basic right of [a] child.”

A SHINING EXAMPLE

But in order to understand CDC’s true impact, one needs only to take a look at the youths already touched by its light.

Parents were pulling kids out of school because they wanted the kids to work,” Jason explains, understanding the plight of many families, yet disheartened that the children “lost the opportunity to have the most basic right of [a] child.”

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So in April 2006, the New Light Community Development Centre (CDC) officially opened at the centre of Baan Nam Kem, promoting the value of education and providing the means to receive it. It has since operated a school specially for students unable to attend the country’s public educational institutions, focusing on the kids of migrant families. It also recognises the needs of families unable to care for their children while at work, and offers the After School Care programme (ASC) as an avenue for kids to spend their time constructively.

The CDC hopes to provide its youths with a brighter future in the form of a wide range of career choices. Its Youth Potential Development programme (y-POD) aims to equip the teenagers of Baan Nam Kem with a myriad of developing skills – exposing the village youths to musical studies, sports, education and leadership development.

However, things are not as smooth as they seem. Jason and his team are sometimes faced with frustrating odds. “As the school progressed, we realised that the dropout rate was quite high. So we did home visits and spoke to parents. We found out that there is an outstanding need [for their children] to provide in terms of money… food on the table. Parents were pulling kids out of school because they wanted the kids to work,” Jason explains, understanding the plight of many families, yet disheartened that the children “lost the opportunity to have the most basic right of [a] child.”

But in order to understand CDC’s true impact, one needs only to take a look at the youths already touched by its light. Rose is one of them. She grew up in tsunami-ravaged Baan Nam Kem, and having been nurtured by the CDC, now seeks to teach sewing to fellow youths, besides becoming a social entrepreneur herself. “I want to help the girls in Myanmar. I want to teach sewing to these girls who don’t have families,” she elaborates.

Admirable and encouraging, she is an example of relief organisation assistance at its finest. Volunteers who arrive to support the community are always welcome, and it is no surprise that the longer they stay, the larger their impact. The best form of help is a permanent one and Rose is exactly that – a full member of the community who is dedicated to the support of its people and self-sustenance in the long run.

Another volunteer touched by the good work done by The New Light Foundation is Eugene Lur. As of May this year, he has returned to Baan Nam Kem a total of seven times, testament to his commitment to the community. So what motivates the social sciences undergraduate at Singapore Management University (SMU) to keep going back every year?

“If I wanted to do what was right, then I could easily write a cheque to donate from home. Not to say that I cannot or don’t do that, but really, it is the love for the children that drives me,” Eugene explains. “We know them by name, and we see them grow alongside us.”

Shwe Yamin Aye – or Yams, as she is affectionately called – agrees. The 22-year-old SMU business student recounts how other student volunteers – upon finding out that she was from Myanmar and could therefore speak the villagers’ language – kept asking her to translate English phrases like “Very good!” and “Good job!” into Burmese.

Though it may seem like such a small gesture, Yams believes that it is proof that the volunteers do indeed care for the children they support, and selfish desires of simply fulfilling school requirements are far from their minds.

Since 2006, The New Light Foundation has been joined by a multitude of short-term volunteers who assist with teaching English and other vocational subjects, as well as helping with manual labour. In the bright – and hopefully near future – it aspires to maximise Baan Nam Kem’s potential as a self-sufficient community, and lift the youths of the village towards an educated and prosperous life.

Watch the original short documentary on Lighting Up Lives. Produced by the Institute for Societal Leadership.

“A Brighter Future”
https://youtu.be/QLas_BYhcy8

“Beyond 80 Hours”
https://youtu.be/evWfFZ87iQc
The nickname of “gypsy pharmacist” perfectly fits Krisana Kraisintu, who made a name for herself and Thailand by living her life through the philosophy of giving. At the age of 65, she is still active and strongly passionate about using her expertise for public good, and shows no sign of giving up.

Krisana’s work has won her numerous international awards, including the 2009 Ramon Magsaysay award for public service – Asia’s equivalent of the Nobel Peace Prize. Her journey to save lives has been featured in numerous documentaries, stage plays, television series and even Thai comics.

WHERE THERE’S A WILL, THERE’S A WAY

Born to a family of doctors on the resort island of Koh Samui, Krisana inherited the spirit of giving from her grandmother, who taught her never to hesitate to make change happen, despite the obstacles.

So, back in the 1990s, when nobody wanted to help her research and develop anti-AIDS drugs – known for its toxicity, complications, and expensive costs – Krisana decided to do it herself. The generic version of AZT was completed in 1995 and was used to prevent HIV transmission from mother to child.

The gypsy pharmacist raced against time to save the lives of hundreds of thousands of Thais living with HIV/AIDS who were dying because they could not afford pricey, imported medicine then. Despite legal threats from patent owners, the world-renowned combinative generic drug called GPO-VIR was successfully invented in 2002. With an affordable price of about 1,200 baht per month, it was later included in the universal healthcare scheme – the national health system for all Thais.

Political promise to provide African countries access to anti-AIDS and anti-malaria drugs during the International AIDS Conference made Krisana decide to quit her high-profile job as head of the Government Pharmaceutical Organisation’s Research and Development Institute, and roam Africa in a bid to boost access to life-saving medicine among the poor. Some of the people she visited suffered from HIV/AIDS and malaria, and were involved in rebel wars.

“There’s no better gift than giving them the know-how so they can stand on their own feet, especially when it comes to making affordable lifesaving drugs.”

Krisana shared how an African president once told her that she would never be successful in making drugs in Africa because she was not African and didn’t speak the language. She told him that she would be the first to know if she could make drugs for his people, which she did.

With her help, the anti-malaria drug Thaitanzunate was introduced to Tanzania in 2003, with the support of the Tanzanian government and Action Medeor. It sold for just 80 cents a dose, and is the world’s cheapest anti-malaria drug. Thanks to its low price, the Tanzanian government included the drug in its national anti-malaria health programme. Half of the country’s 32 million people suffer from malaria.

HER LEGACY

Thaitanza-Vir, Thamasunate and Thamasucan are among 20 anti-AIDS and anti-malaria remedies which Krisana has helped develop in countries such as Benin, Congo, Eritrea, Liberia, and Mali. “I just want the world to know that it’s not just developed countries which can make drugs for the global population. Even the least developed countries can do the same, if one developed country’s know-how is transferred to them,” she said.

Krisana received a sizeable amount of money from the awards she has won, as well as the royalties she gets from the sale of each generic drug she makes. She used some of that income to establish an orphanage foundation – bearing her own name – to pay for the tuition expenses of 25 African children whose parents died of HIV/AIDS.

Krisana was recently appointed dean of the faculty of pharmaceutical sciences at Rangsit University. She doesn’t draw a salary and is tasked to set up a herbal medicine unit, tapping into the benefits of herbal plants in Thailand. She also hopes to produce a young generation of pharmacists, who are equipped with scientific knowledge of herb-based drug manufacturing.

“I will continue making generic drugs, even if I have only a day left to do so. Even if I get to save just a single life, it’s worth it. I just hope that some day, drug companies will stop being selfish and help the tens of millions of people around the world who are dying for want of lifesaving drugs,” she said.
A PEN FOR THE BLIND

Armed with a Masters degree from Thammasat University, Chatthai Aphibanpoonpon has been on a mission to build a more inclusive society in Thailand. The founder and CEO of Klongdinsor believes that people with disabilities need access and opportunities far more than charity. And he strives to make it possible for them to participate in all aspects of life – be it education, sports or the arts – one project at a time.

Chatthai’s journey as a social entrepreneur began with the creation of a tool to help blind students communicate their inner vision. His Lensen pen has made it possible for the blind to “create art that can be felt through your fingertips”.

What was the inspiration behind the Lensen pen as an educational tool?

About six years ago, I became a volunteer at a school for the blind in Bangkok, where I helped students with their homework. I thought it was easy to make and if I thought it was easy to make and if I could help them, so I started making many “toys” and gave them to the kids and teachers to play with. Some worked, some didn’t. The Lensen pen was one of the things I made using wool and Velcro to create a tactile line so the blind can draw. It was an upgrade of an earlier version that I saw.

I thought it was easy to make and if improved, could be a low cost drawing tool for the blind in Thailand.

What were some of your challenges in designing the pen and getting it into production, and how did you overcome them?

The most challenging thing – apart from me not being a designer – is figuring out how to make a tool that blind kids can use by themselves. Everything about the pen had to be considered carefully – size, colour, type of Velcro and wool used, even the packaging.

Cost was an issue too. If the volume produced is too low or if the design is too complex, prices go up. As I wanted the pen to be affordable to schools and blind kids, I had to simplify its function and design in order to get it produced cheaper.

The first version of the pen was made from wood because they can be produced in small quantities, like 50 to 100 sets. It was a good way to test the product and market. After that, we used plastic injection as it was the cheapest option for mass production. So far, I have made 1,000 sets.

What were some initial difficulties in adoption and acceptance of the pens?

Everyone loves new toys. But convincing them to buy and use the pens is a different story. The Thais are extremely generous and donate a lot every year. But because of excessive donation, some people become addicted to receiving things for free all the time. Their mindset of “because I’m disabled or work for the disabled, I must get things for free” was the biggest problem for me. Currently, my pens are made available to those who need it via a donation-based model – individuals or big companies buy and give them to schools.

Even though drawing tools for blind kids have long existed in the market, the art of drawing is not widely taught as it is expensive. Right now, tensen pens are mostly used in art classes but we aim to make it a standard drawing tool for all classes. We are developing a guidebook for teachers to infuse drawing into their current way of teaching.

What changes have you seen in the visually impaired who have used the pen?

They are very happy that they can draw like sighted kids. Their hand movements and ability to visualise things have also improved.

Some schools use the pens during science lessons, where students have to draw what the teacher was explaining, such as trees and mountains, to show that they really understand the concept. This has helped them to improve in their studies.

What was the inspiration behind the Lensen pen as an educational tool?

It was a situational one. The environment does not understand why I do this, as there isn’t much money to be made. But after seeing the social impact I’ve created and how my business has remained sustainable, they have accepted my choice of career.

I think from a commercial aspect, it is not an interesting market to focus on at all. So those who want to help always end up donating money. Most of the educational tools for the blind and other type of disabilities come from developed countries, where the market is viable through government support. And they are mostly expensive tools made affordable. But this isn’t the case in Thailand.

What is your vision for this product or your programme for the visually handicapped?

We want drawing skills to be a normal thing for the blind, using either the Lensen pen or any other educational tool. We hope to develop a new and improved version of the pen soon – complete with accessories and other applications – and distribute it to other countries.

Beyond the Lensen educational pen set, what else do you have planned to help the visually handicapped in the country?

Enabling the visually impaired who have used the pen in the classroom, we have developed a guidebook for teachers to infuse drawing into their current way of teaching.

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Why do you think something like this wasn’t thought of earlier?

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Disability is not an individual problem but a situational one. The environment does not support disabled people. If you think about it that way, then the problem can be solved. I have a lot of friends who are disabled and
BATTLING THE TRANSPORT SYSTEM

If every lift, ramp, handrail and other facilities now available at the BTS SkyTrain, MRT underground and Airport Rail Link (ARL) stations in Bangkok could tell us their stories about how they came to be, all of them would surely say, “Transportation for All (TMA).”

Catalyst Asia spoke with 49-year-old Suporntra Mongkolvut, leader of TMA and the secretary-general of Redemptorist Foundation for People with Disabilities (RFPD), about their work in 25 years, including individual progress reports on the construction, to expose BMA’s tactic.

Despite the ruling, the SAC did not have the power to penalize non-compliance. When the deadline expired, we submitted a letter to inform the Court of the situation. It then sent an inquiry to BMA and received the answer. We then put an end to this saga.

The sooner we can wrap this up, the faster we can provide more pressure on the government and public transport providers to make sure that the completed and ongoing infrastructures projects will have adequate facilities and be fully accessible.

If there is one thing we have learned from this, it is that it takes a really long time to correct past mistakes. Our strategy since then has been to go all in before construction is completed or procurement approved, in the case of the new Bangkok Mass Transit Authority buses.

Why is it that the state seems so unwilling to make public transport accessible to everyone?

The funny thing about this is that most of the time, people stay true to their proposal. Their words, however, rarely translate into action. Then there is corruption.

On the other hand, what public transport providers are they think in school is to come up with the most cost-efficient way to move people from one place to the next. They are not taught to see passengers as human beings or that it is their public responsibility to ensure equal access. In the eyes, we are just numbers, and when you don’t have the numbers, they don’t see the need to include you in their designs. It is understandable but what about families with small children, older people or anyone who may need extra help? It would be crazy to expect all of us to drive.

Public transport and built environment are the areas that have changed the least and continue to hold back the progress we have made in other areas, as a result of the 2007 disability rights law including free education, equal employment opportunity and development funding. What I always say to the state officials and politicians is, “Why not build a system that is adequate and future-proof today? Why wait until you get sued to be something you can prevent now?”

Now, more people understand that this is not a disability issue but one of human rights, and we must hold the government accountable for its failures.

Let’s talk a lot about yourself. Did you always want to be an activist/advocate?

In this life? No. I was set on becoming a national track athlete and spent most of my days training and competing locally and internationally.

However, I was very fortunate to meet past leaders like Narong Patibatsorakij and Topong Kulkhanchit when I was in school. They were trailblazers in every way. I still remember joining the meeting when the Disability Thailand Association (RTI) was founded in 1983.

After more than three decades in this field, what continues to drive you?

Frankly, the fun has waned a bit as long as the problems remain. I do not think I will ever get to see it end. I firmly believe, though, that between the problems and me, I would probably kick the bucket first.

1. 18 years after the first five lifts had been installed in 1999 at five selected SkyTrain stations in response to repeated mass demonstrations led by TMA – more lifts were officially launched at four stations on 3 March 2017 – a little over a month after the SAC’s ruling.

2. When you don’t have the numbers, they don’t see the need to include you in their designs.
12 years old, three decades later, the highly
worlds is exactly where she belongs.
why living in both for pro/f_it and nonpro/f_it
sponsor-free campaigns and projects, and
Catalyst Asia spoke to her about branding
southernmost provinces.
well as soldiers in three of Thailand's
organic farmers and urban consumers, as
The projects Pradhana have worked on
started in 2014 to bring her magic touch to
Thailand's nonpro/f_it and voluntary sector.
has found her sweet spot as "b positive plus",
sought-after "brand idea and love inspirer"
If working in advertising had been Pradhana
lives better in their own ways. I am a big
believer in doing one thing well. There are
plenty of talented people in the world.
I do not see it as a departure from my old
life. The one big difference now is that I am
in control of my time and how I want to
spend it. I can take on as many not-for-profit
projects as I want, as long as I can manage
my time well.
I believe that brands exist to serve society.
Whether it is selling you quality makeup at
affordable prices or T-shirts to send kids to
school, both add value to society and make
lives better in their own ways. I am a big
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Why not join forces?
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Having worked at several advertising
agencies since 1993, why was “b positive
plus” the next logical step?
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Why not join forces?

How does buy-one-give-one branding
work, and where do you find your
not-for-profit projects?
I find them through friends and co-working
spaces. I volunteer at the Branding Helpdesk
at Ashoka's School of Changemakers once a
month. This was actually the first thing I did
right after quitting my old job in late 2013.
I had occasionally conducted a branding
workshop there for social entrepreneurs and
social good groups. It was at these
workshops that I began to see how my
branding skills could be translated to the
nonprofit world. It opened my eyes to
extraordinary things that were going on.
So when I decided to leave my job, I called
my friend Phoonchan Krawiwatmun, who is
the deputy country director of Ashoka, and
asked her if starting a helpdesk for branding
would be something that people needed.
She said yes, and that was how it all began.
For the most part, I help people find their
‘ignas’ – a reason for being – which is the
intersection of four things: You love it; you
are great at it; you can be paid for it; and
the world needs it. That is pretty much what
your brand is, in a nutshell.
But is this not something you are
supposed to do before launching any
project or starting a business?
Yes. In business, branding is very important.
But you have to understand that unlike a
business, a social enterprise or a nonprofit
is born out of a problem that its founder
recognises and wants to help solve. Their
priorities are therefore very different. When
there are so many things they have to deal
with, from developing and testing an idea to
building a business model and getting funded,
branding is the least of their concerns.

Is this your biggest challenge then – to
raise people’s awareness of the
importance of branding for nonprofit and
how it can enhance their work?
Branding means many things to many
people. Some people think a logo is a
brand. Others think it is hard to do. The thing
is, with great branding, it will give what you
do an extra boost, especially in building
authentic relationships with your “consumers”
and attracting the right kind of people to
support your work. Once I explain the
concept and basic principles to people, they
usually get it right away.
My hope is that the more people I work with,
the more chances there will be for others to
see the benefits of branding and make use of
it, because it will help make your work a lot
easier, more effective and impactful. Why do
you prefer one brand over another? That is
the impact of branding. The key is finding
your ‘ignas’ and when everything clicks, it will
open the floodgates to endless possibilities.

Let’s talk about your sponsor-free ground
rule: Why did you implement it?
To be clear, I have nothing against corporate
sponsorship. What I do have a problem with
is the way some sponsors approach
philanthropic work. I have had bad
experiences in the past, so when we did
Love Is Hear in 2009 [the first-ever concert
held in the country for the hearing-impaired
raised 800,000 baht for the Foundation for
the Deaf], my friends and I decided to just
do it without getting any financial support.
This turned out to be the best thing we could
have done.
Instead of sponsorship, what you get is
friendship. People join your efforts because
they like your idea, care about the cause,
believe in what you do or simply want to
give back. They offer to volunteer their time,
money or talent, anything, because they
want to be a part of it, not because they
want something in return.
Doing this project really changed me. It
marked a shift in my mindset and set a
precedent for everything else that followed.
All you need is one good idea and you build
from there. Do not let money determine what
you can or cannot do.

Way this when you become more actively
involved in social causes?
Yes. This was when I became a serious pursuer,
although some of the seeds had been planted
since my school days. As students at Mater Dei
School, we would visit places like residential
homes and orphanages as part of our school’s
activities. Our school’s motto is “Serviam – We
Shall Serve.” It is the school’s way of teaching
us to help others who are less fortunate, not out
of pity, but because it is the responsibility of
someone who is born with more opportunities.

How do you feel about your life and
work right now?
I am the happiest I have ever been.

In the past, I used to think that
there are problems too big for
ordinary people like us to fix. Now,
I know that we can do anything and
should not have to wait until those
in power get their act together.

These days, there are so many young people
who want to change society. 90 percent of
the people I meet at the HelpDesk are still in
their 20s and 30s. This gives me hope for
the future of our country and I feel incredibly
lucky to be part of their journey in reaching
their goals.

THE
MENTOR AND
INSPIRER OF
SOCIAL CHANGE

INSIGHTS FROM THE INSIDE TEXT BY MATHIRA SUTIWATANANITI PHOTOS BY MATHIRA SUTIWATANANITI AND LOVE IS HEAR
CARING FOR MIGRANTS

Dana Grober Ladek is Chief of Missions at the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) in Thailand – the UN Migration Agency committed to protecting the rights of migrants. With an estimated four to five million migrants in Thailand, the IOM Mission in Thailand operates with 350 staff in 11 project offices. Dealing with the harsh realities that migrants face may seem daunting to many but Dana takes it all in her stride. Her interest in humanitarian work hasn’t wavered since her undergraduate days.

What is it about migration and migrants that got you interested in this field of work?

Migration covers so many different aspects of human mobility and affects so many people. One billion people worldwide are considered migrants. That is one in seven people. Migrants include refugees, victims of trafficking and internally displaced persons. It is always changing, always different. There are so many different roles one can have, working to support migration.

You moved from continent to continent for work. Every continent faces distinctly different issues. What were the different issues you had to deal with?

In Iraq, people were being forced from their homes in very violent and difficult situations. I dealt with internally displaced people – people fleeing within the country – and those who fled across the border and applied for refugee status.

In Central America, you had the economic migrants. IOM’s regional office covers Central America, the Caribbean and Costa Rica. There were undocumented migrants, whom we call irregular or illegal migrants, trying to get into United States to join family or to get a job.

In Thailand, it’s a very different context. This is a receiving country with an estimated four million migrants living in Thailand alone. The majority come in to work from neighbouring countries. Many are undocumented and so, are in vulnerable situations. There are many estimations for the number of such individuals. But it can be anywhere between one to 2.5 million. These migrants are exposed to exploitative circumstances.

Employers may confiscate their passports or not pay their wages. They may be underpaid – under the minimum wage – or they might be trafficked or smuggled.

What are the most pressing challenges being faced right now in Thailand?

The first one is trafficking and smuggling of women, children and men. The Thai government has done a lot to improve the
situation of trafficking, but it still exists. We still have individuals who are being trafficked here or being treated like slaves, either in a factory or on a farm or in the fishing industry.

The second challenge is more recent, with the refugees we are resettling. There are currently over 100,000 refugees in nine refugee camps along the border with Myanmar. Some of them have been there for decades and are waiting for resettlement. There are also urban refugees in Bangkok. Globally, we are seeing a lot more xenophobia, resentment and less of a political interest by governments to resettle refugees. That has affected IOM’s work in Thailand, where we’ve had to recently suspend resettlement.

The third challenge is the undocumented migrants and the vulnerabilities they are exposed to, like bad working conditions or having their wages withheld. Just not having any security in terms of their lifestyle and livelihood. They can move about freely because they are not documented. It is such a big population here in Thailand. The government has many campaigns working to document as many migrants as possible, but there are still many who have not gone, and probably will not, go through the process.

IOM works with the government and other non-government organisations – classic example of tri-sector collaboration – dealing with very complex issues. What stance does IOM take in tackling these pressing issues?

One has to balance advocacy with assistance. IOM recognises that our access to these populations throughout the country depends on our strong relationship with the government. For example, I recently met with Deputy Prime Minister Prawit and I did bring up some
suggestions that IOM has to improve the situation of migrants. At the same time, we are not going to tell the Thai government how they need to run their country. Thailand has been a member state of IOM for 30 years. We consider ourselves their partner. We feel that we can work with them to assist these vulnerable populations.

Is there a particular Asian or Thai way of managing issues, compared to the other continents that you have been on?

It is very different from other cultures that I have experienced. The Thais are very friendly and respectful, but also somewhat reserved. And that is something that I always take into consideration. I step back and look at things from their perspective, and understand that I am a foreigner in their country. I am a migrant as well, and so I need to be respectful of their values, culture and system. I am trying to learn Thai, for example.

Do you see commonalities that locals, sometimes fail to see between themselves and migrants?

I think that the most important commonality is that we are all looking to improve our lives, whether one is a Syrian refugee who flee to Bangkok in the hope of being resettled to another country, or one is here because one is very interested in migration issues and want to work for IOM. The human condition is, in general, this desire to improve our lives. That is what we need to remember, and that is the simple goal of many of the migrants who come to Thailand.

They either want to improve their lives or the lives of their families back home. That is something everyone can relate to, whether you are a native Thai or a foreigner in Thailand.

What is your main message on migration from someone who has been in this field your entire career?

I think everyone needs to recognise the contributions of migrants to society. Our migrants here in Thailand are the ones building and cleaning the apartments that we live in. They are taking care of our children and grandparents, serving us food, driving the car around or the tuk tuk. Migrants are the ones who are doing very difficult work that nobody else wants to do. We could not have built these amazing skyscrapers in Bangkok without the work of migrants. They are a vital part of society, especially for Thailand, which has less than one percent unemployment rate. If tomorrow, we lose those millions of migrants, the country would suffer. Migration also allows us to, without leaving our home country, experience so many different cultures. In Bangkok, in my child’s school, there are 50 different nationalities.

It is not easy work. Sometimes the issues seem so insurmountable. What keeps you going?

When I got the opportunity to go into the field and witness what we are doing. We are providing that bit of hope to migrants who are in desperate situations — whether by providing food to an individual in an immigration detention centre or informing a refugee that he or she will be resettled to a new country.

Just last week, I was up north in Mae Sot and I visited one of these refugee camps. I spoke with a family who was just informed that they will be resettled to Australia — to see their joy, knowing that after living for many years in a refugee camp, they were going to be able to finally start their life in Australia. So, meeting them and knowing that we are improving their lives in very little ways is really what keeps me engaged and passionate about this work.
ROAD SAFETY ADVOCATES

Had it not been for its charismatic chairperson Ratanawadee Hemniti Winther, the year 2011 would have seen the end of Asia Injury Prevention (AIP) Foundation Thailand. But five years on, the organisation has relaunched itself and surpassed the 100,000 mark in creating a new generation of safer road users, while continuing to make headway in advocacy efforts to boost road safety awareness and strengthen legislation and enforcement in Thailand.

Catalyst Asia spoke with Ratanawadee and enforcement in Thailand.

How did you become a road safety advocate?

My interest in road safety began with the first job I had in Denmark. I worked with many road safety experts as the Education and Training Manager at the International Department of the Danish Road Safety Directorate, focusing on consulting and capacity building in the education and transport sectors, with road safety programmes thrown in.

It was only after I joined AIP Foundation Thailand 11 years later that I stepped into the role of a road safety advocate. It was my first foray into the nonprofit world as well – a big change, in many ways – from taking a huge pay cut to asking people for donations. This job made me realise that my life before was more about making a good living. Now, I’m doing what I’m supposed to do – fighting for people who are voiceless to make Thai roads safer.

Right now, AIP Foundation Thailand is still the only non-governmental organisation that is a member of both the Ministry of Education’s road safety committee, and the sub-committee under the national Road Safety Directing Center. This helps us immensely as we attract the cooperation from local officials and stakeholders, which in turn, benefit the schools and communities that are part of our programme.

I’m very surprised to learn that your organisation focuses on helmets and school-based road safety education. Is this why your organisation is the only road safety non-profit in Thailand? How is this even possible?

To be fair, there are other organisations that tackle specific areas in road safety, such as drink driving or research. But it is just one of the many things that they do. On the other hand, AIP Foundation’s mission is to provide lifesaving knowledge and skills in developing countries, with the goal of preventing road traffic fatalities and injuries. We work on the ground and at the policy level.

Once I got here and visited the schools that were part of Helmets for Kids (HK) – the foundation’s signature programme that was first launched in Vietnam in 2000 by former US President Bill Clinton – I saw that there were good things about the work. What was needed was a change in approach.

During the first few years, we just focused on building partnerships at the national level and worked as part of the road safety network. When we launched HKF again in July 2012, it was under the Department of Disaster Prevention and Mitigation’s Thailand Helmet Vaccine Initiative.

Once the programme was relaunched itself and surpassed the 100,000 mark in creating a new generation of safer road users, while continuing to make headway in advocacy efforts to boost road safety awareness and strengthen legislation and enforcement in Thailand.

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AIP Foundation Thailand has, in recent years, stepped up advocacy efforts by joining forces with, among others, Save the Children and the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration to increase helmet awareness, expand road safety education programmes and push for legislative changes in drink driving, speed management, driving licences, public transport, and use of seatbelts.

But as long as our attitude towards road deaths remains unchanged, we won’t be able to make much progress. Since 2011, the rate of road traffic fatalities in Thailand per 100,000 people has gone down to only 36, from 38. It is worrying, to say the least.

Still, road safety isn’t rocket science. When Sweden introduced the concept of Vision Zero in 1995, its approach to road safety thinking was: “No loss of life is acceptable.”

I believe that the sooner we start accepting this line of thinking, that every loss of life matters, humans make errors, and the right to road safety is not a privilege for a select few, the closer we can get to building a system that will protect and empower every single one of us.

*In the 2015 Global Status Report on Road Safety released by the World Health Organization, the estimated figure of total traffic fatalities in Thailand is 24,237 or 66 deaths per day. ©

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CONSUMER PROTECTION
IN THE DIGITAL AGE

It is truly amazing what one baht can do to create Thailand’s most vocal defender of consumer rights.

Three decades of bus rides home had changed Saree Ongsomwang’s perception of consumer rights forever. After paying 3.50 baht for the fare, the bus conductor handed her a 2.50-baht ticket. She asked a passenger next to her if he had been cheated as well. “Every day,” he replied. The irritated bus conductor asked why the two passengers had to fuss over just a single baht, thus kicking off Saree’s mission in consumer protection.

“Lodging one complaint is worth more than just whining 1,000 times,” says the director of the Foundation for Consumers – Thailand’s only national consumer advocacy agency that operates based on a participatory process. When receiving complaints from individuals or groups, the foundation works with its extensive local and regional network to seek redress.

Born in 1963 and a native of the southern province of Ranong, Saree left her nursing profession to work as a consumer rights activist. Outspoken and determined, her campaign had succeeded in removing caffeine from painkillers and putting the names of drugs on container labels. In 1994, she helped found the Foundation for Consumers, started a magazine called Chalad Sue (meaning “Smart Buy” in Thai), and helmed a radio programme to inform the public about sub-standard products and educate them on consumer rights.

CALLS OF SUCCESS

Since the foundation was established, it has received thousands of complaints on all manner of subjects, ranging from beauty clinics offering unsafe services to structural national policy issues in areas such as energy and telecommunications. In 2016 alone, a total of 3,622 complaints were filed.

Saree has witnessed this ethos take hold in Thailand to a far greater degree than when she started the foundation. “You can see the increased confidence in the number of people who are lodging complaints. The foundation’s network is increasing everywhere,” she points out.

Promoting sustainability and ethical consumerism has long been one of the main tenets of the foundation. “We work for consumer protection, but we don’t solely think about typical consumer issues. Instead, we encourage citizens to be active in society,” explains Saree.

The foundation’s principles include ensuring value for money when buying things, and encouraging consumers to live sustainable lifestyles. Its watchdog function has helped keep companies in check, leading to more ethical practices and upgraded production standards by raising awareness among consumers and urging them to have higher expectations.

The foundation has complaint centres in 40 provinces, but the main office has a dedicated staff of only five, along with a team of volunteer lawyers and a committee of experts.

FORGING AHEAD

With over 20 years of experience playing the role of David to the moneyed Goliaths of Thailand, the foundation’s greatest victory perhaps came in 2006, when it became the lead plaintiff in a successful suit lodged with the Supreme Administrative Court to block the privatisation of the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand.

More traditional consumer advocacy campaigns have met with similar success. The key, Saree says, is for the public to refuse to be passive, even in the face of seemingly overwhelming odds.

“We tell them, if you do nothing, you’ll get zero results. If you’re an active citizen, I don’t believe that you’ll always get your rights, but I believe that you can get a better result.”

At present, Saree has called on the government to speed up work setting up an independent body to ensure consumer rights protection. The body must comprise consumer representatives to work with the government and private sector.

Several consumer concerns have yet to be solved, including efforts to pressure the Food and Drug Administration to implement the labelling of genetically-modified foods, and prod the National Broadcasting and Telecommunication Commission to force telecommunications companies to collect mobile phone call charges on a per-second basis for every package that they offer to users.

What motivates Saree to continue doing good work though? She recollects a story of a fourth grader and what one baht did for him. The child could not open a tin box of candles and had asked the foundation for help. A one-baht coin inserted under the lid easily did the trick. “It showed me something small can make a big difference,” she muses.
THE RESCUE SQUAD

“When I first became a Bangkok MP, I visited a government-owned rehabilitation and vocational centre that helps former prostitutes, where I saw an 11-year-old child knitting. She told me that her stepfather had sold her to a brothel and that the police had rescued and placed her at the centre.”

That incident, recalled Pavena Hongsakula, changed her forever. She had gone home that day in tears and decided she wanted to be involved in helping women and children who were vulnerable, abused and exploited. That was in 1998.

Since then, Pavena – who has held various ministerial positions including former Deputy Minister for Labour and Social Welfare – made it her personal mission to help these women and children while performing her legislative duties. However, it soon became clear to her that her work in Parliament – while important for long-term policy matters – did not address the immediate needs of those being abused and exploited.

So she set up the Pavena Foundation for Children and Women and the Pavena Rescue Squad – a one-stop quick and effective rescue operation that is a phone call away.

The squad springs into action when a request for help is made by the victim, her family, friends or a government agency. Its nationwide emergency number has received more than 113,000 calls to report rape, prostitution, missing persons, trafficking and to seek justice.

**A FIERY MISSION**

The Pavena Foundation has a surprisingly small team for the amount of work done.

Pavena explained that her extensive network and connections with the government and police, both locally and overseas, has allowed her to get things done quickly and efficiently. She noted that apart from speed, maintaining confidentiality is critical for a successful rescue operation.

“The strength of the foundation is our approach. Two days ago, a couple of horseharks beat up a young lady who had borrowed from them out of desperation. She came to us for help and stayed here while we coordinated with the police, who managed to make an arrest. Our staff had to escort the victim everywhere, including to the police station.”

Hearing about the lives saved and the amount of follow-up work that was needed after every rescue operation – from providing victims shelter to rehabilitation and a long-drawn legal process – it is clear that Pavena and her team are undaunted by the tedious work.

Despite concerns from friends and family about her safety when taking on criminals and gangs, Pavena remains unfazed. She is single-minded and clear about using her authority and connections in the government to launch rescue operations.

“Victims come to me because they know no one else dares to do it. I have done this for so many years, so I cannot stop. It is my responsibility to do it. If I don’t, who will I am not afraid. The ones who are doing wrong should be the ones afraid. They are the criminals.

“But I don’t work alone. I work with the police, who have the power to make arrests. So our rescue operations must involve the police. When I go overseas for rescue missions, I work through the Interpol, embassies and diplomatic channels.”

Pavena explained that her work involves travelling to far-flung provinces outside of Bangkok and to places in Indonesia, Malaysia, Bahrain, South Africa and South Korea.
She pointed out: “I insist on being present to ensure that the victims feel protected. I will stay with them when the authorities question them after a rescue operation. The girls are fearful of what will happen to them. The leaders of the brothels or the gangs will try to terrorise our taskforce or the girls when the raids are done. This is why police presence is always needed.”

Overseas, the help Pavena needs from government officials for rescue operations are just as crucial. “Let me share with you a case. We received an SMS from South Africa asking for help. The message included the location where four Thai girls were being held. In the past, victims had to rely on others to contact us but now, they can reach out to us on the web, Facebook and through text messages via their mobile phones.

“So one of the girls sent us their location. Working with Interpol, we flew to Johannesburg and met the ambassador before going to a police station in Cape Town. We were chaperoned all the way. A warrant of arrest was issued within three hours, and we managed to rescue the girls within 11 hours upon arrival.”

Such is the pace at which the team needs to work to ensure victims are reached quick enough for a successful rescue. The situation is constantly changing as the traffickers may move the victims to other locations.

The only constant in their work is the fact that complete eradication of exploitation and abuse seems almost impossible.

Pavena noted that the pace with which help is made available to the vulnerable is slow as many of the victims are underprivileged and have limited access to authorities to raise these issues up on their own.

So far now, the foundation continues to carry this burden and responsibility with much pride and panache. Pavena is hopeful that as they continue to do what they can, they will be able to make headway with legislative and political will to better address the issue some day.

Eight jobs, three continents and four sectors were what it took Tul Pinkaew, 37, to prepare for the role of his life — engineering sustainable change through creative campaigns that have, among others, mobilised millions to ban illegal trawling; saved over 6,000 rural schools from closure; stopped violent films from being shown on buses; persuaded over 100 hotels to take shark fin off their menus; and broken the taboo on depression and counselling.

Catalyst Asia spoke with one of the region’s finest, who, since emerging onto the nonprofit scene in 2007, has been on a neverending quest to make the strongest impact. We talked about solving sustainability problems with communications, overcoming skepticism, and Tul’s plans to advance the next evolution of social change in Thailand with his three-year-old media and PR agency, SideKick.

**What led you to set up SideKick?**

SideKick is the culmination of my life’s work. Around 2009, I realised that my job as media lead in a non-governmental organisation (NGO) is just one part of a bigger effort — a campaign.
When NGOs want to effect policy change, they go to the media or policymakers with a case study or pilot project to raise awareness on a particular issue, and get the government to take action. This model of social change is lacking, especially since we have entered the digital era. I knew that if I wanted to become the kind of campaigner I needed to be, I had to start building new skill sets to be able to work on policy development and use commercial tools like concerts or events to mobilise the mass public. To be clear, the mass public here means the urban middle class.

My agency focuses on helping our heroes who are trying to change the world and find the audience that they have been missing—the mass public—to translate grassroots success into policy through newsworthy and engaging campaigns. Often, we see good non-profit-led projects disappear after the funding runs out, but if people in the country can see and recognise the value of such work, this will bring support, continuity and sustainability. This is why I believe that communications is the heart of social change.

Is it because the urban middle class are less likely to be affected by social problems, hence they tend to engage less?

That might be true, to a certain extent. They have long been viewed as “apathetic”, “passive” and “useless” in social movements. But during my two years as the founder and director of Change.org Thailand, we proved that if we can clearly explain how a problem that happens elsewhere affects people in the city and their everyday life, tons of people would take action because they see that change, be it positive or negative, will affect them too.
In my opinion, this is more of a communication problem than a lack of interest or concern. You just have to learn to speak their language, find the right channels to reach them, tell better stories to get them passionate about the cause, and inspire them to action.

Has this been your biggest challenge then – to prove that digital media and the urban middle class hold the key to the future of social change?

Yes. Back in the late 2000s, most people thought that this was just a passing fad, that we would all return to the way things were. It was quite tough for me because no one understood the campaigns I was proposing. They all looked at me like I was crazy.

It is understandable that they would be hesitant to try something new. Their way had worked for decades. Meanwhile, people who do want to change are still figuring it out. In a way, I see Sidekick as someone who can help these organisations manage change and transition to the new reality.

On the other hand, there are still a lot of misconceptions about campaigns because the word itself is often used as a fancy substitute for one-off events or viral marketing. This perpetuates the idea that campaigns are superficial, fleeting and a waste of money and time.

This, I agree with, because that’s not how a proper campaign is done. To develop an effective campaign takes a lot of research and planning – from finding a case study that will serve as a solution to the problem raised to engaging policymakers to make sure that by the end of the campaign, the proposed solution will be accepted and incorporated into the country’s long-term strategy. It is a lot of work and will be the organisation’s responsibility to maintain the momentum and keep people engaged post-campaign.

What is your end game, if there is even one?

Doing good is addictive, and the more impact you see from your work, the more impact you want to make. This is why my goals and jobs continue to change. For now, I want to support the growth of our civil society through raising the awareness of the urban middle class and inspiring them to get into social activism. I’m really looking forward to the day when we’ll become like the US or Europe, where there are thousands of single-issue interest groups and clusters.

Then, there is a new video-only platform that I’m currently developing called Kao Dee [Good News], to share inspiring stories of people across the country who are trying to bring about change and make an impact on society. The intention behind it is to counterbalance any sensational media coverage, and inspire more people to form groups, take action and change the world together.

In my previous jobs, I was always the “pioneer” and went full speed ahead in everything that I did, but you can’t run a business like that. Given a choice, I’d move to the countryside in a heartbeat and live like a hermit. But if I do that, I’m not going to make any difference, am I?
I was introduced to the hybrid concept of social enterprises when I began to think about ways to further increase the efficiency of organisations with a social purpose. I am very enthusiastic about the existence and work of organisations with an altruistic purpose, including intergovernmental and nonprofit organisations, and I was seeking to further improve their long-term performance so as to maximise their social returns on investment.

I looked to the private sector to understand what the main fundamental drivers behind businesses are. What keeps the private sector ticking, I ask. Coming, at least partly, from a world in which objectives and successes are too complex to identify and measure – every person aiming to achieve social impact can testify to the multitude of dimensions that their projects may need to take into account – I found in the private sector the concept of profit.

Ultimately, profit determines the success and death of businesses. It is what drives efficiency and sustains an organisation.

Linking profit to social impact was the conceptual bridge I needed to build.

BUSINESS WITH A SOCIAL PURPOSE

I initially tested this concept with my first hybrid initiative. I launched LUSH in 2009 in Bangkok – a series of high-quality, site-specific and immersive nightlife events and music festivals – where 30 percent of the profit is donated to carefully selected projects aiming to achieve social and environmental impact.

My vision was to focus on quality experiences that customers are willing to pay for, rather than rely on their charitable will. The idea was to propose an extraordinary escape experience combining music, lifestyle and other forms of art in highly unusual and impressive places (think helicopter landing pads, street markets, and five-star hotels), which ultimately led to generating even more profit by attracting an increasingly large crowd of followers.

LUSH’s branding had to be cutting-edge and appealing to potential customers, focusing mostly on communicating the strength of the services offered rather than the concept’s charitable aspects.

THE ORIGINS OF DINE IN THE DARK (DID)

I was looking for a way to incorporate social impact into the core of business models, instead of donating money, which simply outsourced the generation of social impact to third-party organisations. This led me to consider the business model of dining in the dark.

I wanted to demonstrate that the visually impaired could provide high quality hospitality services. They are incredibly talented when given the opportunity to train and learn, and can achieve a level of service equivalent to experienced employees of some of the top-rated hotels in Bangkok. I empowered them by letting them manage the pitch-dark dining room on their own – to prepare tables between each shift and adjust the dining room’s layout according to the number of guests.

So why was Bangkok the right market to introduce such a restaurant? The reasons are three-fold:

1. The concept has yet to be introduced to Asia. No such restaurant existed in the region at the time.
2. Hunger for innovation. Bangkok is a place where food is very important, where both locals and tourists crave for new experiences in the culinary domain.
3. Mainstreaming of social enterprises. The concept of businesses with a social purpose was progressively being discovered and gaining significant momentum in Thailand.

THE KEY DIMENSIONS OF THE DID BUSINESS MODEL

I did not focus on marketing the social dimension of DID to avoid depending on the altruism of others to support the visually impaired. Instead, the marketing relied on sophisticated, lifestyle-oriented branding by focusing on the restaurant’s three unique niches:

1) It is an exclusive and extraordinarily immersive experience for guests to be in a pitch-dark environment. The welcoming lounge looks beautiful, the dark dining area is comfortable, the music is relaxing, and the service is outstanding.

2) Guests can indulge in an enjoyable and entertaining culinary guessing game, with wonderful dishes incorporating multiple sensory dimensions and designed jointly by experienced chefs. Our menus are surprises to be discovered in the dark, and what was served will only be revealed at the end of the meal.

3) The restaurant has a social impact dimension, as it provides employment to the visually impaired. Guests are most impressed with this aspect – they rave about it and spread the word to their friends, giving us recognition via word of mouth. They become our repeat customers and often request for the same person who served them the first time, remembering them by name and creating very strong and lasting bonds with the staff.

THE SOCIAL PURPOSE OF DID

The most important fact to highlight is that we are not a nonprofit organisation. We are a business, with social purpose at its core. We believe that the only people who have
the skills to work in darkness are the visually impaired. They are our skilled collaborators, whom we have trained and empowered to run a business and make a living. In other words, it is because we are providing high quality experiences that we are financially sustainable, enabling us to create social impact over a long period of time.

We do not consider ourselves as helping the visually impaired. Rather, we work hand in hand with them to create joint benefits. This philosophy is what ensures that employing the visually impaired is not just a gimmick but is a genuine, innovative business model, because:

1. **It raises awareness**
The restaurant provides an enlightening opportunity to take on the perspective of the visually impaired through role-reversal.

2. **It empowers**
The DID team trains the visually impaired to front the restaurant and builds up their confidence by encouraging them to showcase their hospitality and language skills in a fast-paced environment.

3. **It provides jobs**
DID offers the visually impaired well-remunerated employment opportunities, which are otherwise all too rare in Thailand. The recruitment process is competitive and candidates are hired based on their interpersonal, professional and language skills.

**LOOKING AHEAD**

I am currently in the process of developing my next project – the world’s first cafe and coffee counter employing visually-impaired persons. I am confident that it is possible to empower and develop their skills to operate cafes in a regular setting. Unlike large, high-end concept restaurants such as DID, cafes are highly replicable, allowing for the creation of a large number of positions for the visually-impaired across Asia.

We aim to develop a significant number of branches in the form of franchises, targeting large private or public agencies. We hope to develop the cafe’s flagship venue in Bangkok this year, followed by five additional branches across the city later on. Expansion to other locations outside of Thailand is planned for 2018.

**About the Author**

Julien Wallet-Houget holds a Master of Science in Global Politics from the London School of Economics, a Bachelor of Arts in International Relations from the Graduate Institute of International Studies in Geneva, as well as a Bachelor of Laws from the University of Law of England and Wales. He has worked for the United Nations Development Programme in Thailand, the World Trade Organization in Switzerland, and for various think tanks, foundations and other nonprofit organisations, including the Mechai Viravudh Foundation in Thailand and the Khonkaen Foundation – both headed by some of Thailand’s most prominent philanthropists.

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**BUSINESS MODEL**

2. **Hunger for innovation**

**A HYBRID PROFILE OF SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP**

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**DID**

**OUR EASTERN JEWELS**

3. **It provides jobs**

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