

Environmental Case Study

Family Planning In Thailand

One of the most successful birth control programs in the world is in Thailand, where the annual population growth rate fell from 3.3 to 1.2 percent between 1972 and 1995. The number of children an average woman would have in a lifetime dropped during this period from 5.8 to 2.2. Much of this progress was due to the leadership of Mechai Viravaidya, the founder and director of the Community-Based Family Planning Service (CBFPS) of Thailand.

Concerned about the environmental and economic effects of rapid population growth in his country, Viravaidya could see that the top-down approach to family planning used in Thailand was ineffective. A different approach—one focused on the wants and needs of poor people, especially in rural areas—was needed. Having been chosen to escort the Thai Miss Universe on a publicity tour in the early 1970s, Viravaidya was well-known in his country and had developed an expertise in using the media to influence public opinion. He decided to use his new-found fame and skills to do something positive for his country.

When Viravaidya started his campaign, birth control was a foreign concept to most Thai people. The whole subject was embarrassing and not something discussed in polite company. Few people knew anything about modern methods of contraception. The first thing CBFPS decided to do was to try to overcome the taboo of discussing sexual issues in public. Humorous billboards and signs on buses, public contests to build stacks of birth control pills and blow up condoms like balloons, songs and jingles on the radio, and free condom giveaways made the subject of family planning a familiar and even popular topic. Children learned about family planning in school and took material home to educate their parents.

Viravaidya became one of the most well-known figures in Thailand. His good-natured but indefatigable promotion of birth control earned him the nickname of Mr. Condom. Financial incentives were offered to community members willing to distribute contraceptives as well as to villagers who practice family planning. Having a poster in the front window proclaiming a household as one enrolled in the CBFPS program became a source of pride.

CBFPS worked on more than birth control, however. Viravaidya recognized a need to change the socioeconomic reasons that cause people to want large families. Rural development projects designed to increase family income and to provide educational opportunities were undertaken as an important part of family planning. In 1977, the program changed its name to Population and Community Development Association (PCDA) to reflect a belief that the solution to the population growth problem is located at the village level. People will tend to have fewer children if they are confident that the ones they have will survive. Among the greatest threats to children's health are malnutrition and lack of clean drinking water.

In 1970 when Viravaidya started his work, about 25 percent of all Thai children died before age five, mainly from infectious diseases. The PCDA now helps finance and build rainwater catchment systems in villages to ensure a year-round clean water supply. Ways to improve agricultural and livestock output are taught to ensure greater financial security and a better food supply. Today, infant mortality has been cut by 75 percent and parents have lowered their desired number of children from 7 or 8 to 2 or 3. This means both less pain over lost children and real progress toward a stable population.

Individual participation is a key factor in the success of PCDA programs. No handouts are given; each person is responsible for paying back loans. The PCDA approach has helped villages become self-sufficient. It encourages villagers to find a path to a better life and lets their own efforts and desires determine how far and how fast they will go. Ethical Considerations

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Trying to change people's beliefs about something as basic as sex and family planning can easily infringe on religious beliefs and social traditions. Does a society's goal of stabilizing population justify interfering with people's right to privacy and individual freedom?

Minority groups in Thailand and elsewhere believe their populations are already so low that they are in danger of disappearing in the larger majority culture. They claim a special right to have as many children as they like. Altogether these minority people make up a large population. If you could make world population policy, would you grant their request? Where would you draw the line?