



It Takes a Village

Sustainable Livelihoods through
a Change of People's Mindset
in Doi Tung



มูลนิธิแม่ฟ้าหลวง ในพระบรมราชูปถัมภ์

Mae Fah Luang Foundation under Royal Patronage

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Enhancing Sustainability by Unlocking the People's Self-Help

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True and People-Centred Sustainable Development Represents a Second Copernican Revolution

In a recent debate at the World Economic Forum, scholars who were discussing sustainable development and the fight against poverty challenged me; they asked me to find a comprehensive and compact definition of the current global search for sustainable development (SD) practices that could enhance people's happiness.

Surprised by the request, I was initially thrilled, but after a moment, I was inspired to take a different path. Instead of trying to define an abstract concept submitted by my colleagues, I decided to describe a real-life human story of self-help as lived by a group of Thai ethnic minorities.

These under-privileged people had managed to build sustainable livelihoods from a starting-point of abysmal poverty, conflict and desperation. I was thinking to the thirty years of economic and social development that had occurred amongst the hill tribes of Doi Tung, in the northernmost region of Thailand, between 1985 and 2015. I responded therefore to the challenge put to me by the sustainable development experts that the overcoming of poverty and the creation of a venture in true human development represents a "Copernican revolution".

Since only a few of my readers may be astrologists, allow me to explain and elaborate on my example of Doi Tung. Nicolaus

Copernicus (1473-1543) was a renaissance mathematician and an astronomer who formulated a model of the universe in 1514/15 that placed the Sun, rather than the Earth, at the centre of the known universe. He was born in Poland and had been educated at the best universities of Europe of his time - the University of Bologna (Italy), between 1496 and 1501, and later at the University of Padua (Italy).

Copernicus was an extraordinarily smart polyglot and polymath who had obtained a doctorate in canon law and practiced as a physician, classics scholar, translator, governor, diplomat, and economist. It was during an observation of eclipses in the year 1500 that he became certain that the existing model of astrology was wrong and should therefore be reconsidered. Starting in 1514, Copernicus wrote an initial outline of his heliocentric theory known only from later transcripts by the title in Latin (perhaps given to it by a copyist), *Nicolai Copernici de hypothesibus motuum coelestium a se constitutis commentariolus*². It was a succinct theoretical description of the world's heliocentric mechanism, without mathematical apparatus, and differed in some fundamentally important details of geometric construction from his later scientific book, published in 1543, which was at the origin of the first Copernican revolution. Copernicus' book *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* (On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres) presented for the first time ever in human history the Earth's triple motions, and demonstrated that the Earth rotates

² Historical information on Nicolaus Copernicus' life and scientific achievements is excerpted and adapted from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicolaus_Copernicus

around the Sun. The Copernican revolution completely reset all previous beliefs - beliefs that had lasted for at least the sixteen centuries of the Christian civilization, based on the opposite and erroneous theory that the Sun rotates around the Earth.

Copernicus was a very creative genius and did not limit himself to the study of astrological sciences. In 1517, he derived a quantity theory of money -a key concept in economics - and in 1519, he formulated a version of what later became known as Gresham's law³. This economic principle states that "When a government overvalues one type of money and undervalues another, the undervalued money will leave the country or disappear from circulation into hoards, while the overvalued money will flood into circulation. It is commonly known as "Bad money drives out good"

At the onset, the Copernicus' discoveries were welcome in the scientific world, as well as among politicians and the religious establishment, which was very powerful in the European 16th century. However, in 1616, seven decades after the publication of Copernicus' book, Galileo Galilei⁴ introduced in Italy the same factual presentation of the solar system.

The theologians of the Roman Catholic Church of the time condemned him as an erroneous heretic, dangerous for society. Indeed, Galileo's writings and teaching were banned and he was condemned to house-arrest for the rest of his life. The reasons of so much resistance to the new scientific evidence were ridiculous: the authorities did not like the burden of changing the calendar currently in use, as the new findings would have required.

Let's "fast-forward" to the past century: in 1939, the Roman Catholic Pope Pius XII described Galileo as being among the "most audacious heroes of research... not afraid of the stumbling blocks and the risks on the way, nor fearful of the funereal monuments"⁵.

³ Copernicus seems to have drawn up some notes [on the displacement of good coin from circulation by debased coin] while he was at Olsztyn in 1519. He made them the basis of a report on the matter, written in German, which he presented to the Prussian Diet held in 1522 at Grudziądz. He later drew up a revised and enlarged version of his little treatise, this time in Latin, and setting forth a general theory of money, for presentation to the Diet of 1528. Source: Angus Armitage, *The World of Copernicus*, 1951, p. 91.

⁴ Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) was an Italian astronomer, physicist, engineer, philosopher, and mathematician who played a major role in the scientific revolution during the Renaissance

⁵ Historical notes on Galileo Galilei are excerpted with modifications from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Galileo_Galilei

In 1990, Cardinal Ratzinger (later to become Pope Benedict XVI) cited some current views on the Galileo affair as forming what he called "a symptomatic case that permits us to see how deep the self-doubt of the modern age, of science and technology goes today"⁶. In 1992, Pope John Paul II expressed regret for how the Galileo affair was handled, and issued a declaration acknowledging the errors committed by the Catholic Church tribunal that wrongly judged the Galileo's scientific positions⁷. According to Stephen Hawking⁸, Galileo probably bears more of the responsibility for the birth of modern science than anybody else⁹, and Albert Einstein called him the father of modern science¹⁰.

In modern scientific research, sociologists believe that a scientific revolution occurs when scientists encounter anomalies that cannot be explained by the universally accepted paradigm within which scientific progress has thereto been made. In fact, in 1962, Thomas Kuhn¹¹ had defined such a paradigm shift in his book "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions". The paradigm, in Kuhn's view, is not simply the current theory, but the entire worldview in which it exists, and all of the implications that come with it. Moreover, scholars of social innovation are now unanimous in sounding the alarm. History repeats itself: no change of common beliefs and of daily behaviours is welcome when it requires people to change their lifestyles. **True adaptive changes require visionary leaders who have the courage and the charisma to show people a new and better path, one that has never been explored.**

A Paradigm Shift In the Life of Generations of Marginalized People

So how are these nuggets of the history of science related to the sustainable development endeavours that occurred in Doi Tung in the past three decades? Through reading these pages and

⁶ Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (1994). *Turning point for Europe? The Church in the Modern World -Assessment and Forecast*, translated from the 1991 German edition by Brian McNeil. San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press. ISBN 0-89870-461-8. OCLC 60292876, page 98.

⁷Vatican admits Galileo was right. *New Scientist* (1846). 1992-11-07.

⁸ Stephen William Hawking CH, CBE, FRSE, FRSA, born in 1942, is an English theoretical physicist, cosmologist, author and director of research at the Centre for Theoretical Cosmology within the University of Cambridge.

⁹ Stephen Hawking (1988). *A Brief History of Time*. New York, NY: Bantam Books. ISBN 0-553-34614-8.

¹⁰ "Propositions arrived at by purely logical means are completely empty as regards reality. Because Galileo realized this, and particularly because he drummed it into the scientific world, he is the father of modern physics, indeed, of modern science altogether". From: Albert Einstein (1954), *Ideas and Opinions*, translated by Sonja Bargmann. London: Crown Publishers. ISBN 0-285-64724-5, page 271.

¹¹ Thomas Samuel Kuhn (1922-1996) was an American physicist, historian, and philosopher of science whose controversial 1962 book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* was influential in both academic and popular circles, introducing the term "paradigm shift", which has since become an English-language idiom

the examples that are presented, you will come to understand what is now crystal-clear to those who have lived and seen the tangible outcomes created in Doi Tung.

Compounded with opium production and trade, decades of deprivation, violence, misery, lack of access to public health, education and market had created a "disaster-zone" of under-development. It was this situation that the Princess Mother, Her Royal Highness Somdet Phra Srinagarindra Boromarajajonani found when she went to live on the Doi Tung mountain. In Thailand, she was affectionately called Somdet Ya (Thai: สมเด็จพระย่า), "the Royal Grandmother" but the various hill tribe peoples, to whom she was a special patron, called her Mae Fah Luang (Thai: แม่ฟ้าหลวง), "Royal Mother from the Sky" or "The Heavenly Royal Mother" for, due to her age, she often used a helicopter to visit poor villages with her team of volunteer medical doctors.

The Princess Mother understood correctly the extent of the disaster of poverty and de-forestation that she found in Doi Tung. However, she also understood that the disaster¹² was not inevitable, not the result of bad luck; instead, she saw how the problem was clearly man-made. Indeed, it was man-made and made by some the worst part of the society of men: traffickers of opium, heroin and human traffickers had created a social system rotating around crime and violence. She saw that to make change happen, there had to be a paradigm shift - a new vision was required.

¹² The etymological origin of the word disaster comes from Latin language: dys-aster, meaning "coming from bad stars".

For example, she often stated "I will plant a forest in Doi Tung" and "Let us help poor people to help themselves". It was an entirely new view of development assistance and development aid. It was no longer about donating cash or goods to needy people; it was about empowering them to be at the centre of their own sustainable development process. That very Copernican revolution of development models has now been recognized as a model of best practice and

it has become the core of the global United Nations' sustainable development agenda for 2015-30. This includes the seventeen sustainable development goals, unanimously approved by the 193 UN member countries, at the 70th session of the UN general assembly in September 2015.

Nowadays visitors at the Royal Villa in Doi Tung stare up at the beautiful ceiling in the main hall. It contains a handcrafted wooden inlay of the Princess Mother's favourite constellations. Designed by the Astronomy Society of Thailand, and fitted with light bulbs representing the stars in the centre of the ceiling, it shows the position of the constellations on October 21, 1900, the day the Princess Mother was born.

However, her favourite studies were not about constellations and astrology. Her "Copernican revolution" was not about the rotation of the Earth or the movement of good and bad stars. Rather, her observatory was her helicopter and her walks among children of Doi Tung. She focused her eyes, her attention, her heart, her first glance in the morning from her balcony to a much more important movement for the Doi Tung hill tribes: she imagined a new rotation of development around the people and the complete elimination of slash-and-burn abuse of the forest. For reality at that time was more that people were considered as "objects of and for development" instead of becoming true participants in their own development process. In this way, she encouraged the staff of her early foundations to focus on a few essential changes in mind-set.

Her "new orbits" were about how mothers and children should be safe during birth; how children grow up, how they are educated and take their future into their hands, how the youth plan and execute successful production enterprises to earn profit in a manner based on dignity, without leaving anybody behind. It was about

how people gain the power to choose their own way of life, of liberty and the pursuit of happiness. In the Princess Mother's vision, the nature of the Earth, even in the deforested Doi Tung hills, was the solution, not the problem. An economic forest could become the alternative to illicit crops.

Every morning at sunrise, when today's Doi Tung mothers give a good breakfast to their children, they do not think of Copernicus' discovery that "bad money drives out good". At sunset, nobody remembers Galileo's explanation on how the Sun is at the centre of our solar system. The Doi Tung people - and the peoples of the other countries where the same development model is being replicated - do not care much about the first Copernican revolution. Rather, they think and are grateful to their Mae Fah Luang- inspired evolution.

So yes, a second Copernican revolution has started in Doi Tung and in all the villages of the world where people have discovered the power of their own human dignity. It will last for many more generations.

So to close, I know you too will enjoy your own "total immersion" in this great and successful story of a human struggle for sustainable development.

In 2015, five hundred years after the discovery of the solar-centred system, a new generation of people at Doi Tung are energized by an equally revolutionary people-centred sustainable livelihood. Do you feel the emotions, the passion, and the heat of a so infinite and renewable energy for the whole humankind?





HRH Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn,
Honorary Chairperson
of the Mae Fah Luang Foundation
Under Royal Patronage



Carrying out the Royal Vision:
“Fix Bad Health,
Fix Poverty,
Fix Ignorance”
HRH the Princess Mother,
or Somdej Ya to the Thai people

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The Mae Fah Luang Foundation Under Royal Patronage has retained the vision of HRH the Princess Mother by continuing and furthering her achievements in the field of social development, economy, environmental conservation and the promotion of ethnic culture. It aspires to become a global leader in the field of sustainable alternative livelihood development, and a learning centre in this field that is now acknowledged by the international community. In 1996, HM the King graciously accepted the Mae Fah Luang Foundation under his royal patronage, and appointed HRH Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn as the Honorary Chairperson.





The Doi Tung Development Project: Improving the Well-being, Livelihoods and Environment of the Hill Tribe Communities

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As she neared age 90, following decades of travel to help the poor in remote areas, the Princess Mother agreed she would stay in a permanent home. Wherever that would be, the Princess Mother insisted on continuing her development work. When she saw the denuded hills of Doi Tung, a place she had visited years before, she vowed “I will reforest Doi Tung.” It was this royal initiative that revived the forests and waters of Doi Tung, and transformed the lives of the highland people living there.

In her 60s, when most people retire, HRH Princess Srinagarindra, mother of HM King Bhumibol Adulyadej, began to visit remote areas of the country, bringing with her the volunteer medical staff to tend to those living far from government services. From the hills of the far north to the islands dotting the southern seas, she brought health care, supported schools, and helped provide for those in need. Before then, she had raised 3 children, two who became King, and served as Regent, carrying out the official royal duties, when Their Majesties the King and Queen went on State Visits for much of 1960 and in subsequent years. When she saw personally the poverty of those living in remote communities, she determined to help as best she could.

A pattern evolved in which she would work for some 18 months, then rest at the insistence of her son for half a year at her apartment in Lausanne, Switzerland. She had raised her children near Lausanne, and subsequently kept a small residence there. In her late 70s, she told her private secretary she would stop skiing at age 80, and did

so. Her private secretary knew when the Princess Mother said she would no longer travel to stay in Switzerland after age 90, she meant it. Her private secretary and his staff searched for an appropriate place for a new “home” for the Princess Mother. Doi Tung seemed ideal: the cool hills could remind her of the area around Lausanne, while the Mae Chan Valley below resembled Lake Geneva.

On 15 January 1987, HRH the Princess Mother visited Doi Tung and agreed to live there, but only on condition that she continue her social and economic development work among the neighboring communities. She saw the poverty of the people in the villages of Doi Tung, who barely survived from their shifting cultivation and illicit opium crops. The forests were depleted and the waters dry. She knew the health of the people and their environment went hand in hand.

The Doi Tung mountains, part of the Nang Non range in the national forest reserves of Chiang Rai province, had become denuded of forests and dry. The six ethnic minorities of about 11,000 people living in 27 villages led meager lives, with

no basic services or amenities. Their traditional shifting cultivation could no longer support them as the over-cultivated soils lost fertility, water became scarcer, while their numbers grew. Located in the centre of the Golden Triangle, then the primary source of the world's illicit opium, many turned to opium growing or serving in the local warlords' militias to earn enough money to live. Some sold their daughters into the flesh trade. They faced poor nutrition and health, with the new epidemic of HIV/AIDS adding to their misery. Nearly one in twenty became addicted to the opium so readily available. Lack of education and of opportunities kept them in the cycle of poverty, sickness and ignorance.

When the Princess Mother visited Doi Tung that January day, she told her private secretary Mom Rajawongse (M.R.) Disnadda Diskul, "I will reforest Doi Tung," thus initiating the Doi Tung Development Project. She told those who stayed with her that night at Bhumibol Dam, where she resided during visits to remote villages in the north, 'I want to plant forests on Doi Tung, but it's going to take a long time, perhaps up to 10 years'.

The area around Doi Tung was reserve forest land under the Royal Forest Department. Located along the Thai-Myanmar border, the Royal Thai Army was responsible for maintaining the security of the area. Gen. Pang Malakul na Ayudhya was a colonel in 1987, Commander of Task Force 327 in the Doi Tung area and Deputy Chief of Staff of the Third Army Area. He noted in his memoirs that Doi Tung was rather chaotic then with its multitude of nationalities, ethnicities, cultures

and languages: Akha, Lahu, Lua, Tai Yai, Chin Haw, Yao, and others.

The government designated 93,515 rai (nearly 15,000 ha) for the Doi Tung Development Project. Gen. Pang Malakul was appointed Director of the project for the Third Army. Numerous government ministries and their departments, state enterprises, and the private sector, were all eager to help the Princess Mother meet her vision. The Thai and Myanmar governments cooperated to delineate the 24 km along the north of the project area, still the only portion of Thai-Myanmar land border that has been confirmed. The Thai army, police and Ministry of Interior assured the security of the area. The Mae Fah Luang Foundation was designated to supervise the project, and M.R. Disnadda Diskul, Secretary-General of the Foundation in addition to being the Princess Mother's private secretary, served as chair of the coordinating unit, to synchronize the efforts of the many organizations and assure they worked toward the same objectives.

The Doi Tung Development Project was conceived as a comprehensive project to improve the economic and social conditions of the people of Doi Tung and also improve their natural environment. As M.R. Disnadda Diskul, now Chairman of the Board of the Mae Fah Luang Foundation, explained "HRH the Princess Mother saw the development of people as the key. Sick people who can't work will remain poor. Poor people with no money to see a doctor will become sicker. Those who cannot send their children to school will remain ignorant; with a lack of education comes greater poverty. They are all linked. Solving people's problems requires an integrated approach."

As noted on the website www.doitung.org, “HRH the Princess Mother believed ‘No one wants to be bad but they don’t have the opportunity to be good.’ She believed growing opium and destroying the forests were end results of poverty and desperation, the root causes that made people break the law. Solving the problem requires nurturing the body back to health. When they are strong and rid of disease, they need work so they can help themselves. Once they have work, enhance their education to give them greater knowledge. This will lead to truly sustainable development.”

“As for the problem of drug addiction, the Princess Mother set up a treatment and rehabilitation centre within the Doi Tung development area. She asked, ‘Are not drug addicts people? If they are, then can we not help them? If we can, we will give them a new lease of life. So we should do it.’”

Gen. Pang pointed out, “HRH the Princess Mother had a brilliant strategy to develop Doi Tung. She didn’t ‘put her foot down’ to force changes, but she helped people have better livelihoods, better health, and better education. The people of Doi Tung, who previously tended to lead isolated lives within their own ethnic groups, now had a chance to work together. They spoke Thai as a common language, and started to gain a sense of unity and a feeling of being part of ‘Thai’ society.”

Replacing Opium with Commercial Crops

Dr. Riksh Syamananda, then Director-General of the Department of Agriculture, was assigned to assist agricultural development in the Doi Tung Development Project, a key concern of

the Princess Mother. Upon his retirement, he was appointed Deputy Director of the Doi Tung Development Project and continues today as an advisor to the project.

He recalled, “When I first started working with the Doi Tung Development Project, I was granted an audience with the Princess Mother. She wanted to plant economic forests for the people’s benefit. She said if we wanted the villagers to stop growing opium, we had to give them a replacement crop suitable for the area. Macadamia and coffee were most suited to Doi Tung, as well as chestnuts. She said Thai people love chestnuts, and each year we buy many chestnuts from China. We should try growing it on Doi Tung. These plants were also perennials: macadamia can live up to 50-70 years, coffee 30-35 years and chestnut up to 50 years. Growing them would create a forest, while their fruits can be harvested. Her vision was not far from the reality of today.”

The Princess Mother hired the villagers to plant and tend the forests, which allowed them to learn how to care for the economic trees, getting paid to support their families as they gained their new skills. Others were given new opportunities in non-agricultural work such as weaving or sewing clothes, since hill-tribe villagers were already skilled in handicrafts. She enhanced their design skills, and introduced better quality threads. The Mae Fah Luang Foundation provided technical assistance, implemented the Princess Mother’s wishes, and helped market the products.

The Princess Mother was very particular about quality, especially for goods to be sold under the

DoiTung brand. She said, “People should not buy our products out of sympathy. We have to meet a certain standard, and not make a loss.” She was aware that the project could not help them indefinitely, so that any economic activity had to be self-sustaining. This became the underlying philosophy for production and sales of DoiTung products: with this discernment for high standards and quality, the Doi Tung Development Project has been able to create a successful DoiTung brand under four business units: food (mainly coffee and macadamia products), handicrafts, horticultural and other agricultural goods, and tourism. Since 2000, DoiTung has been self-sufficient.

His Majesty’s Technological Advances and Concepts: From Son to Mother

Dr. Riksh recounted how the Princess Mother learned from His Majesty the King’s royal initiative projects as the Doi Tung Development Project proceeded. One example was the planting of vetiver grass to prevent soil erosion on Doi Tung, which then was expanded into the Vetiver Grass Development Project for further research and development for application elsewhere in Thailand and overseas.

“When HRH the Princess Mother started the Doi Tung Development Project, she envisioned Doi Tung would one day become an important tourist destination. To facilitate visitors, the government built roads from the valley up to Doi Tung. The Department of Highways had little experience in those days in building roads in the mountains. For their first attempts they used the same road-construction techniques as on the flat plains, expanding each

side extensively. But during the rainy season, the soil [and parts of the roads] would be eroded and washed away. The Princess Mother discussed this problem with His Majesty the King at Srapathum Palace [where she resided in Bangkok]. His Majesty suggested she introduce vetiver grass on Doi Tung, as he had read in a World Bank report that vetiver grass can help prevent soil erosion. The Princess Mother took his advice, and brought vetiver grass from Phimai District, Nakhon Ratchasima, and Tambon Khun Talay, Muang District, Surat Thani, to Doi Tung, where she had a plot of vetiver planted. The Princess Mother visited the plot numerous times, and even tried planting some by herself. When the grass had grown sufficiently strong, she suggested we check to see how strong the roots were, and whether they would be strong enough to prevent soil erosion. We did as she instructed, digging up the grass and spraying water on the roots to clear the soil away. We found the vetiver grass, after only 9 months, had grown roots up to 3 to 4 metres long, growing in thick tufts. Later, when Their Majesties the King and Queen came to visit at Doi Tung Villa, HRH the Princess Mother took them to see the vetiver plot. As a result of the vision of the Princess Mother, and the wisdom of His Majesty the King, we are now able to use vetiver grass to prevent soil erosion.

“Now, if you go up to Doi Tung, you will see vetiver grass grown along the roads and in the villages where soil erosion was once rampant. Many people now make field visits to Doi Tung to study the use of vetiver grass.”

M.R. Disnadda Diskul, then Secretary-General



His Majesty the King and HRH the Princess Mother initiated the Vetiver Grass Development Project to fix the problem of landslide in Doi Tung.

of the Mae Fah Luang Foundation, noted that the success of the Doi Tung Development Project was based on the development principles of HRH the Princess Mother, many of which she had learned from the principles and work of His Majesty the King.

“HRH the Princess Mother studied three of His Majesty the King’s projects in 1987. She visited Huai Hong Khrai Royal Development Study Centre in Chiang Mai herself, then instructed HRH Princess Galyani Vadhana to visit Doi Ang Khang Royal Project and report her findings. Then she instructed me to visit the Royal Chitralada Projects. The point she made here was the need to go into the field to study the problems and needs of the people. When we know the problems and needs, we can then try to think of solutions. We are the chief-of-staff and the team working for the villagers; they are our bosses, not the other way round. We then combine all four areas of wisdom (that from the practical experience and principles of HM the King, of HM the Queen, of HRH the Princess Mother, and of HRH Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn) to find solutions to their problems. We’ll say this problem should be tackled this way, this need should be addressed this way, which principles and applications should be used for this problem or that problem.

“When all the facts have been analysed, the results will be presented to the community, saying, ‘We have studied your problem at length, and from the principles and experience of HM the King, HM the Queen, HRH the Princess Mother, and HRH Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, we believe this could be the solution, as it is based on such and

such a project that has already been successfully implemented. Do you believe that we can solve the problem this way, and do you want to try it?’ If they agree, we’ll take them to visit the royal projects to see for their own eyes. When they have seen and experienced it themselves, they can make their own decision.” [from an interview with Matichon newspaper dated 5 December 2012]

Since 19 May 1989, when the Princess Mother planted the first sapling on Doi Tung, reforestation began in earnest at an average of 3,625 rai (580 ha) per year. Within a little over a decade, 50,000 rai (8,000 ha) of denuded land was reforested. Economic forests of macadamia and coffee provide the basis for value added production, giving the people of Doi Tung improved incomes and greater opportunities. From a desolate land where 100 million illegal opium plants were grown each year, where people lived in poverty and despair, Doi Tung has become a land of hope, a land with a secure future for its residents. Today, the Doi Tung Development Project is recognised internationally as a model of social enterprise and sustainable rural development. Although the Princess Mother passed away 20 years ago, she remains alive in the Doi Tung Development Project, in the work of the Mae Fah Luang Foundation, and in the hearts of all the Thai people.



HRH the Princess Mother plants a teak sapling in Doi Tung on 4 November 1992.

The world will look towards
the Mae Fah Luang Foundation Manual
and the King's Wisdom
that have been proved a success
in many countries.



The Mae Fah Luang Model towards Sustainable Development of the Global Community

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From the Science of the King to the Mae Fah Luang model, shared by mother to son, and by son to mother, towards sustainable rural development, and today onwards with pride to the global community.

A total of 193 countries, together with the United Nations, set the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2016-2031, which are an extension of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which will end in 2015. The guidelines of these development goals correspond with those of HRH the Princess Mother, and what she introduced 28 years ago in the Doi Tung Development Project, under the auspices of the Mae Fah Luang Foundation Under Royal Patronage (MFLF). The experiences learned from the Doi Tung Development Project were compiled into a guideline for sustainable development for better quality of life, or the “Mae Fah Luang Manual” that sets a systematic procedure for survival, sufficient living, and sustainable well-being. His Majesty the King’s principles of Sufficiency Economy were also incorporated into the National Agenda under the present government.

These are some of the things that bring pride to M.R. Disnadda Diskul, Chairman of the Board of the Mae Fah Luang Foundation, and all his staff. M.R. Disnadda recounted the steps leading to this success, to the point where the MFLF has

been invited to help with sustainable alternative livelihood development programmes in numerous countries.

“Our first international venture was in 2002, when the British government invited the MFLF to speak in Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, in the country’s first drug conference. The speech resulted in Mr. Antonio Maria Costa, Executive Director of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), who was in charge of global issues on drugs and crime, approaching us to go and work with him. I said to him, ‘You’ve only heard me speak, I think you should come and see what we’ve done.’ I made my speech in July, and four months later, he was in Thailand. I took him up to Doi Tung, and explained everything to him. When he had seen everything, he admitted that this was a project like no other in the world. This was the first time that we made an impression in the international circle.

“This happened at approximately the same time that Gen. Khin Nyunt, Senior Gen. Than Shwe, and Gen. Maung Aye, top ranking members of the Burmese ruling junta, visited Doi Tung

to ask us to expand the project over the border into Burmese territory. They came in 2000, and by 2002, we were in Myanmar to implement a Sustainable Alternative Livelihood Development programme at Yong Kha village, Shan State. In 2006, MFLF received funding from the Belgian government to implement a livestock project and community enterprise development programme in Balkh, Afghanistan. Next, the Danish government provided funding for MFLF to continue its project there. The project was completed in 2012, by which time MFLF had transferred the project to the local community and the Afghan government through the Ministry of Rural Reform and Development (MRRD). MFLF's Afghan manager was appointed as the manager of the Afghan Rural Enterprise Development Programme under the MRRD, operating under the MFLF's guideline for community enterprise development.

That same year, MFLF was approached by UNODC and the Indonesian government to implement Sustainable Alternative Livelihood Development in Aceh, Indonesia.

"We implemented similar programmes in Myanmar, Aceh and Afghanistan, transferring the projects to the local communities to operate, as a model project that could be adapted in other communities of the respective countries as well. When these projects welcomed visitors on study tours, it also made MFLF more widely known, because we had succeeded with the cooperation of the local communities, with minimum investment."

Then in 2011, MFLF launched the Yenanchaung Project in Magway, Myanmar, followed by projects in Tachileik and Mong Hsat Township in Myanmar's Shan State, in 2012.

"What we did was to introduce the Science of the King and His Majesty's principles, and adapt them to each locale. In Myanmar and Afghanistan, we couldn't understand a word they said, but we had no problem communicating. If we wanted a chicken, we'd draw a chicken. If we wanted a spade, we'd draw a spade. If we are sincere, they will sense it, and work with us."

We went in to change their lifestyle, and taught them to eat everything they grew, and grow everything they ate. More importantly, we found them sources of water, offered them an alternative livelihood. In Afghanistan, we worked with goats and sheep, creating goat and sheep banks, similar to the black pig bank in Doi Tung. That is to say, we provided them with breeding stock, and when they gave birth, they had to give back three lambs, which could then be rotated to others. We didn't even spend all the capital; the sheep bank worked by rotation, with the sheep population increasing all the time. We even made "bare-foot vets" out of villagers who could neither read nor write. At first, the death rate of sheep was 30% per year. We aimed to reduce that to 3% a year, and we did. The sheep were an asset that could be exchanged for cash. When they realized that raising sheep was better than growing opium, they gave up their opium crops.

"This is how MFLF thinks. Do you think it's strange? They couldn't do agriculture; they didn't have a single sheep at first, but they ended up

with hundreds of thousands of sheep. It all goes back to the Princess Mother's inspiration. She guided us, and we just continued her vision. In Yen-an Chaung Township, Magway Region, we took their produce – peanuts, palm sugar and sesame seeds that the villagers brought to us, and made peanut brittle. We improved the quality to extend the shelf life, and made it suitable to sell in shops, supermarkets and hotels in Myanmar. They even had a brand. It all came from the Doi Tung community enterprise model.

"Today MFLF is using this formula with the Pid Thong Lang Phra (Royal Initiative Discovery Foundation or RIDF) to solve the problems of poverty in various provinces such as Nan and Udon Thani. MFLF transferred the knowledge to RIDF and they are now quite capable, although they are still under the supervision of MFLF. Some organisations such as Khon Kaen University have come to learn from MFLF and RIDF in order to help villagers and provide alternative livelihoods such as raising crickets. Khon Kaen University has devised a cricket protein capsule which provides cheap protein. In Europe they sell for 1 Euro each. Soon they will have earthworms and much more.

"MFLF is also working with RIDF to train civil servants, teachers and students, and help them understand the different communities, adjust their attitudes and open their minds so they better understand the problems and needs of the villagers. To measure the success of what the villagers have gained, you have to start by looking at the results in terms of

economy, society, environment, well-being and sustainability. MFLF is a school, a living university. It is a hands-on teacher, one who talks the talk, and walks the walk, with a good track record of success as seen with Doi Tung. RIDF works with these various groups, and they organise study trips to Doi Tung, where they become inspired and want to go back to help develop their own villages. Civil servants find it eye-opening, but whether they can make changes or not depends on the circumstances. Each person is different. They have to totally reform the way they work, remove their former framework and make changes. If they are high-ranking officials, they should not expect a welcoming committee wherever they go. They should not trouble others, but rather see the problems of the villagers as the focal point."

From this concept of Sustainable Alternative Livelihood Development, MFLF has become recognised in the global arena for its track record in solving drug and crime related problems, all of which have poverty as the root cause. Each year, MFLF, led by M.R. Disnadda Diskul, is invited by the Thai government to join the Thai contingent at the week-long conference in Vienna.

"At first, many countries at the Vienna conference didn't agree with our method of using development—His Majesty the King's principle—rather than suppression to solve the problems. Today, they are all convinced. In the early days, the authorities used to destroy opium crops but we never did. What the US does mostly is to take a plane up and spray herbicide to kill the opium

plants. But the negative effects far outweigh the positive because it has disastrous results on the ecological system. It also adds toxins to the body bit by bit – slow death by poisoning. We are very much against this. Today the US accepts our principles. Germany, at first, didn't agree with our methods either, but early this year they signed on as a partner, sending their people to train with us, embed with us, because we had experience, and the knowledge of development which could be used to help other countries in conjunction with fund donors."

While the rest of the world is revising the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the UN General Assembly Special Session on Drugs 2016 (UNGASS 2016) that will see every country turn towards the MFLF Manual and the Science of the King, at the end of 2015, the MFLF, together with the Royal Projects Foundation, UNODC and Germany, will jointly host the 2nd International Workshop and Conference on Alternative Development (ICAD2). This can be traced back to 2008, when Thailand pushed forward a resolution on sustainable alternative development, citing Thailand's best practices and the theory on Sufficiency Economy so that it became accepted by the UNODC. Later, in 2011, Thailand, together with the UN and Peru, co-hosted the first international conference on alternative development (ICAD1). Representatives from the government sector, development academics, international organisations, over 100 drug crop farmers from 30 countries, jointly drafted the International Guiding Principles

on Alternative Development (IGPs), which was approved by the International High Level Conference on Alternative Development held in Lima, Peru, on 14-16 November 2012.

On 18 December 2013, the United Nations General Assembly in New York approved the IGPs, making it an important reference source for alternative development. This was another proof of Thailand's role in the field of alternative development.

Today, the Chairman of the Board of MFLF spoke on the future of MFLF. "At the moment, MFLF is in the process of shedding its leaves. I was the secretary-general from the start. Now HRH Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn has appointed me the Chairman of the Board, so I can nurture a new generation of Board of Directors to carry on the work, in order to keep up with the times. The original Board of Directors will remain as advisors."

How does M.R. Disnadda think the Princess Mother would feel if she saw what the MFLF has achieved over the past 48 years in carrying out her vision? "HRH the Princess Mother would certainly be most pleased, because we have been able to help villagers to help themselves according to her directions. And if you wanted to repay her kindness, then please use this knowledge to help others who are poor and lack opportunities, so that they can stand tall. This way, you are repaying the country. This is what all of us at MFLF do. We have done what has already been proved a success, that is, the Science of the King, the Queen, the Princess Mother and Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, for the stability of the country."



HRH Princess Bajrakitiyabha (third from right) and UNODC Executive Director Mr. Yury Fedotov (fourth from right) jointly chaired the break-out meeting during the 55th Conference of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs. M.R. Disnadda Diskul (second from right) was the Thai speaker at the conference on the topic “Alternative Livelihoods: Experiences and Challenges of Reducing Illegal Drug Cultivation”.



M.R. Disnadda Diskul in the field with the Afghan team in Balkh, Afghanistan.

"Cultivating Land, Cultivating People"



Embracing the Royal Initiatives: Continuing the Mission of Mae Fah Luang for Her People

Hello! Magazine

Special Issue • October 2015

For years the Mae Fah Luang Foundation under Royal Patronage has successfully implemented the Mae Fah Luang Model for development in Thailand and other countries. As MFLF Deputy Secretary-General, Khunying Puangroi Diskul na Ayudhya has been instrumental, through her dedication, in continuing HRH the Princess Mother's initiatives.

Throughout her life, HRH Princess Srinagarindra, or the Princess Mother, never stopped working for the people. Since 1965, a number of royal projects were initiated due to her determination to see people achieve self-reliance with dignity, to restore forests and to foster sustainable co-existence between man and nature. The Princess Mother established the Mae Fah Luang Foundation to meet her aspirations. Its successes have led to a body of knowledge, the Mae Fah Luang development model that has been applied elsewhere in Thailand and in several other countries. This is the pride of Khunying Puangroi Diskul na Ayudhya who has devoted herself to work for the Princess Mother, first part-time when she was an instructor at the Department of English, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, and then full-time from 1984 until today. For these past three decades she has worked closely, first following Her Royal Highness, then continuing the Princess Mother's mission.

Khunying Puangroi recalled the early days of her work: "Initially Mom Chao Ying (Princess)

Luisa Diskul, M.R. Disnadda Diskul's mother, served as lady-in-waiting to the Princess Mother after her return to Thailand in 1965 to work for the people. Before I entered the royal household service, I would follow my mother-in-law whenever I was free from my teaching job at Chula to assist Her Royal Highness. When my mother-in-law began suffering from a heart condition in the mid-1980s and needed rest, the Princess Mother selected me to carry on the work full-time as lady-in-waiting.

"By the time I started working full time, conditions in the country were already much improved. But the early days were very rough. Her Royal Highness would travel to remote areas in practically in every corner of Thailand, the upper and lower North, the upper and lower Northeast, and both the Gulf of Thailand and Andaman coasts in the South, no matter how difficult to reach them.

"She often traveled by helicopter, as some places were nearly impossible to reach by other means, or even they were accessible by road it would have taken days for her to reach. When traveling to remote islands in the South, she

would sometimes stay overnight on a Marine Police patrol boat. The royal dining room on the boat was only 3 by 3 metres, and after we set up a table and chair there was so little space we could enter only by squeezing in. Once, she visited a red-coded (Communist-occupied) area at Phu Hin Rong Kla in Phetchabun province. The security team tried to dissuade her, but she was determined to show her support for the military engineers building roads there. The helicopter had to land with the engine running and another plane hovering above to guard Her Royal Highness. She stepped down to pat the shoulders of soldiers working in dangerous areas and present them with gifts. The big tough soldiers with their thick unkempt beards broke down as they prostrated in front of her; they did not expect she would go so far to give moral support to people risking their lives.

"When traveling upcountry, she would stay overnight at government guesthouses at irrigation dams. The first thing she would do at the guesthouses was to visit the kitchen staff who cooked for all her team, to show her gratitude. She sometimes gave them hot pot holders she had crocheted as tokens of appreciation. The Princess Mother never overlooked things most people may have missed or ignored. She thought about other people all the time. One of her remarks made a deep impression on me. She said, "I am happy when I see other people happy."

"One of her top priorities was the sick. She always said we must help people be self-reliant; and when people get sick, they cannot help

themselves. It's obvious what a person who suffers a toothache would want. The first time the Mae Fah Luang Foundation undertook a medical mission at Doi Tung with the Princess Mother's Medical Volunteer [PMMV] unit, we ended up with a 'kilo' of teeth. Not one kilogram in weight, but ten kilometers in length when laid in a row! These people never had anyone to take care of their teeth, so whenever they had a toothache they just filled it with opium to ease the pain until the tooth got so rotten it had to be removed.

"The Princess Mother launched the Doi Tung Project when she was 87. It was one of her last projects, and it addressed a full range of problems, from illness to poverty to lack of education. She always considered people as the most important component: she sought to train people to improve themselves, to become self-reliant with dignity, for a better future for themselves and their children. Her initial declaration, "I will reforest Doi Tung," was an ingenious tactic to address many of these issues together. First, the revived forests would help reserve water and replenish the soil. This directly benefited the farmers, as well as those further downstream. Second, those who grew opium were offered a new and legitimate alternative. The Princess Mother hired them to plant trees, and encouraged them to grow economic tree crops like macadamia nuts and coffee. She did not impose this on people, but gave them the choice to grow these crops instead, which they willingly did when they found the tree crops yielded better incomes than opium or cabbages, and they would not

be forced to sell their daughters either.”

Everything was done for the benefit of the people. Even the Mae Fah Luang Arboretum at Doi Chang Moob started after the Princess Mother visited this highest peak of the Nang Non Hills, which was along the main opium trafficking route in the area. Khunying Puangroi recounted, “The Princess Mother visited the place and decided to build a garden to disrupt the opium trafficking route. When the area becomes secure, people will dare to visit, and the large number of outsiders would be an obstacle to the drug traffickers.”

The garden was later expanded as the Mae Fah Luang Arboretum at Doi Chang Moob, greeting visitors since 1996. Covering 63 rai, it houses a diversity of trees, some over a hundred years old, over 3,600 rhododendron and other medium- and small-sized plants, as well as indigenous and hybrid orchids produced in the project’s tissue culture laboratories.

Expanding Education

One of the Princess Mother’s aspirations is that every staff member of the Mae Fah Luang Foundation adopts as their guiding principle the commitment to provide others with opportunity and choice. Khunying Puangroi elaborated “Wherever we go, we will try to give people an opportunity, to open the door so they can go out into the outside world. The world of Doi Tung was in the hills where six tribes lived who could not speak Thai clearly if at all, and where there was a severe shortage of teachers. To maximize the potential of the

people at Doi Tung, we now have eight schools in the project area. We developed a curriculum for these schools based on what the Princess Mother taught us. We do not aim for academic excellence as much as to groom children to be responsible citizens and most important to give them the ability to think resourcefully. We spend money generated from our businesses on things like hiring teachers from England who have now been with us for ten years to develop child-centred learning. We teach children to be responsible, not to steal or lie; simple things that the children comply with. We give them an opportunity to learn from real situations, say, why we must restore forests and whether or not they should cut down the trees they’ve grown.”

Through collaboration with the Ministry of Education, the Mae Fah Luang Foundation has developed a curriculum for the eight schools in the Doi Tung area that incorporates the Montessori approach, project-based learning and hands-on vocational training, as its guiding principle for the development of social and emotional skills. Art serves as a complementary vehicle to expand their imagination. This aims to groom the Doi Tung youth to be citizens with values and conscience, responsibility, initiative, self-reliance and academic proficiency.

Khunying Puangroi added, “When these children grow up and study at a higher level, do you think they will want to come back to their homes? Normally, people who are forced to live in a certain area will move away as soon as they have an ID card and an education. But when you ask the

people from Doi Tung where is their home, they will say with pride they are from Doi Tung, and that one day they will return to their roots. But first they want to venture out and experience the wider world. One Akha girl has become a sushi chef. This year, we organised the 'Colours of Doi Tung' Festival, and she returned to make sushi for sale. Do the people who have left us suffer? Not at all! Their home is still here, so sooner or later they will return, and when they come back they will be proud of what they have learned and encourage the younger generations to expand their horizons."

There are also "Virtuous Youth Camps" for students from two different worlds to come and learn together about the forests. "Children from Bangkok join our camps; we let them learn alongside the hill-tribe children at Doi Tung. We let children from the two worlds meet and study together. Children will learn why we must grow trees, why they are so important."

Expanding on the Fruits of Success in and outside Thailand

At present, the Mae Fah Luang Foundation has accumulated considerable experience in working with local people according to the Princess Mother's initiatives, and has developed a valuable body of knowledge that can be applied to any area, whether in or outside Thailand. In Nan province, under the pilot integrated development and problem-alleviating project based on Royal Initiative, several state agencies work together to develop 21 villages in Ta Wang Pha, Song Kwae,

and Chalermphrakiat Districts.

Khunyung Puangroi explained, "The Mae Fah Luang Foundation has been working with the Royal Initiative Discovery Foundation (Pid Thong Lang Phra) and other agencies in carrying out His Majesty's royal initiatives. We are in charge of poverty alleviation. In Nan, the villagers razed the forests on entire hills to grow corn, applying one litre of chemical herbicide per rai and 2 to 3 times per year. They know it is dangerous, but they don't have much to eat and have no other options, so they have to do it. These chemicals are in the soil and when it rains, get flushed down into the streams and rivers. Many local people are sick from the pesticides. The hills used to be covered by dense forest, and were used years ago by the communist insurgents as their hideouts. But now the forests are gone, so whenever it rains there are severe floods and landslides, killing many people; while in the dry season, there is no water as there are no trees to absorb and store the moisture. Because the Mae Fah Luang Foundation has experience conducting research and coordinating with local communities, we started by communicating with the local people and let them see examples from Doi Tung. We brought them to Doi Tung to give them inspiration, to show them what is possible. Our motto is 'It can be done.' We believe there is nothing we cannot do. There must be a way to do it, whether quickly or slowly."

This project in Nan has solved problems of irrigation, improved soil quality and introduced terraced rice fields that increase productivity and

provide higher incomes for local people through year-round cultivation of rice and other crops, while requiring less cultivated area and restoring forests. It also promotes activities that help reduce household expenditures, such as the Pig Bank and the Economic Crop Fund. When the community's economic and social conditions improved, environmental restoration was able to be addressed through the initiative known as "Cultivating Land, Cultivating People," covering 250,000 rai (40,000 ha) in the province. The operational framework was based on the Royal Initiative of growing three types of forest for four benefits, namely, His Majesty the King's "growing slow- and fast-growing trees" and "natural reforestation" approaches, Her Majesty's "humans coexisting with forest" campaign, and the Princess Mother's "Cultivating Land, Cultivating People" approach, while day-to-day operations were based on the "integrated watershed development" of HRH Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn's initiative.

"The Mae Fah Luang Foundation has introduced its capacity and experience to development programmes in Myanmar (Sustainable Alternative Livelihood Development Project), Indonesia (Sustainable Alternative Livelihood Development Project) and Afghanistan (Balkh Livestock and Community Enterprise Development Project). We applied the same body of knowledge. In Myanmar, the project was launched at Yong Kha Village and Mong Hsat Township in Shan State and at Yen-an Chaung Township in Tachileik."

Khunying Puangroi said, "Myanmar sent us a request and the Thai authorities agreed, so

we went there. We could not speak Burmese but we trained their personnel. We began by addressing the issues related to illnesses, poverty and illiteracy. There, we encourage villagers in the drought-stricken Yen-an Chaung Township to process peanuts, sesame seeds and palm sugar as roasted peanuts, peanut toffee, peanut brittle and sesame brittle under the Happy Owl brand, which is available at the Doi Tung Development Project, Yangon and Pagan airports and leading department stores in Myanmar. We also introduced Goat Banks based on our lessons with the Pig Fund at Pang Mahan: if you can see there, you will find whole hills filled with the Meishan breed. We've bought the breeding stock of goats for them, and we asked them to return some of the offspring so we can provide them to other groups. To treat illnesses at Yong Kha Village, we brought a mobile medical team to tackle malaria, tuberculosis and scabies. Since Yen-an Chaung has had problems with poisonous snakes, we set up a serum bank at the village's health station and trained the midwife to treat people bitten by snakes.

"In Afghanistan, we opened the Karakul Sheep Bank, since shepherding is a common occupation here. Sheep owners who have registered in our programme were provided with free breeding stock, but on condition they return to us any three newborn female offspring within three years, in exchange for veterinary services. The offspring were to be loaned out to other poor families under the same conditions. We also trained children of sheep owners to become para-vets: they rode

motorcycles to go around and vaccinate flocks of sheep. Veterinarians from Afghanistan's Ministry of Agriculture helped train these para-vets on what drugs to use to treat sheep with runny noses and how to administer the vaccinations. Since it is difficult to find a trained veterinarian in such a remote location, the people must be self-reliant. This is like when the Princess Mother arranged for the border patrol police in the remote areas of Thailand to teach children in isolated villages. (Afghanistan has since implemented the model of our project as their national policy.)

"In Aceh, we first tackled malaria by taking doctors from Aceh for training in Chiang Mai for several months until they knew how to treat malaria. They went back to set up their own teams who travel around to test blood. Before this, many who contacted malaria in Aceh succumbed to the disease for lack of treatment. But the infection rate there has since declined from 2.17 to 0.07 percent, and with no fatalities now. This model has now spread all over Indonesia."

Khunying Puangroi added that wherever she goes to promote the Princess Mother's model, she always follows Her Royal Highness's remarks upon embarking on the Doi Tung project: "We don't have to make it big. We do it small but successfully so it serves as a model," and "Nobody wants to be bad, but they are bad because they lack opportunity and choice." Khunying Puangroi said, "These words are the guiding principles for the staff at the Mae Fah Luang Foundation, in that every time we look at people, we always see their potential; we will never think they are bad and

that it is impossible to make things better.

"The Mae Fah Luang Foundation has earned a high reputation internationally. Every year, many people come for a study visit to the Living University at Doi Tung, be they politicians, government officials, students or the general public. Many countries are interested to invite the Mae Fah Luang Foundation as their consultant for anti-drug campaigns. Explaining what is behind the MFLF's success, Khunying Puangroi stressed, "The Princess Mother always said, 'This is not yet a success; don't get too carried away that we are successful'. We never say we have finished. The Princess Mother always said, 'This is just a beginning; we have to continue working; there is no success'.

"The seven years that Princess Mother spent at Doi Tung - from the start of the project in 1988 until her passing in 1995 - are testament that she never did things just for show or window dressing, to start something and then simply abandon it. She undertook it with her own hands and she lived alongside the people throughout the project. Her vision, that we uphold, is essentially true. Just take the things she said before - the problems of sickness, poverty and ignorance; are these still the issues facing the current generation of Thais?

"I must say the Princess Mother was a very progressive Thai woman. She was visionary. She studied hard and read many books. She went abroad to fulfill her dream even when she could not speak a single word of English. The most important thing was that her husband, Prince Mahidol, had been her model. The late



HRH the Princess Mother presents educational supplies and other materials to students in remote areas.

Princess Galyani Vadhana once said that she discovered what the Princess Mother taught her children actually came first from Prince Mahidol, be it how to be a good person, to work for the benefit of the country, and to be responsible. Everyone, from Prince Mahidol, to the Princess Mother and their three children, upheld these guiding principles in their lives. It was part of their DNA. When the Princess Mother initiated the Doi Tung Development Project, she

sent us to study every royal project under His Majesty the King. Mother has learned from her son, but the son's foundation must be traced back to the mother."





A New Life for the Poppy Growers of Doi Tung

Myanmar Times

May 5-11, 2014

ZON PANN PWINT

On the Thai-Burma border, ethnic minorities who fled violence in Myanmar in the 1960s turned to poppy growing in order to make ends meet. Since then, an innovative project to help villagers become self-sufficient farmers of coffee and fruits and makers of handicrafts has encouraged a sustainable and prosperous community.

For years Ajar's family lived frugally off a diet of sweet corn when farmers in his village couldn't produce enough rice for the whole year. Living in hardship, his parents often borrowed money from a well-off villager. Every so often they laboured in other villagers' fields to get money to buy food.

When they found themselves facing a mounting burden of debt, however, they turned to growing poppies.

Today, Ajar's father Law Boe, 77, and his mother Yeh Yee, 67, no longer grow illegal opium. The thatched hut where they lived with their five children has been turned into a two-storey concrete building. And they no longer get into debt.

"They now own a coffee farm and lychee plants, earning secure income from selling coffee seeds and lychee," Ajar, 27, said.

Ajar's family lives in Doi Tung mountain, 1,395 metres (4,575 feet) above sea level in northern Chaing Rai province, Thailand. The residents in Doi Tung are fortunate to benefit

from a visionary project, the Doi Tung Development Project, that converts opium growers into legitimate earners and turns formerly poor labourers into skilled craftspeople.

The Doi Tung Development Project, run by the Mae Fah Luang Foundation under royal patronage, was the brainchild of late Princess Srinagarindra (1900-1995). After visiting Doi Tung in 1987, she made a determined effort to stop opium growing and to improve the living standards of those who reside there.

The inspiration behind the project was her son, who had battled hard to eliminate opium production.

The down-to-earth Princess Mother explained her concept. "I will help them to help themselves, help themselves to help others. I have encouraged them to realise their full potential, making them a lot more independent from others' assistance and allowing them to shape their own destiny."

The project has been taken forward by local residents who have become the artisans and entrepreneurs in three leading enterprises -

handmade textiles, ceramics and products made out of mulberry paper, coffee and macadamia nuts, and plants and orchids.

U Abay La, a sweet and amiable Akha man who works as project manager at the Thai-Myanmar Sustainable Alternative Livelihood Development Project, says Doi Tung is home to many ethnic minorities, a number of whom hail from Myanmar, including the Akha, Lahu, Shan, Lesu and Mwa, who fled from Myanmar in the 1960s because of insurgency.

They scraped out a living practising traditional slash-and-burn farming and growing opium poppies in Doi Tung. Lacking education and work opportunities, farmers turned to drugs and few children from these communities had the chance to go to school.

Looking back, Ajar is happy that his parents no longer grow opium, which he says they were forced to do by circumstances beyond their control.

"In the 1960s, anti-government armed insurgent groups troubled the residents in my parents' home in Kengtung, eastern Shan state, where they used to grow poppies. They left town and finally settled in Pha Hee village years before the project started," Ajar said.

"They gave up their earnings from selling opium," he added, "when the project started in Doi Tung in 1989-1990."

In the late 1980s, the Princess Mother and members of the Mae Fah Luang Foundation kicked off the project by assisting about 20 households each from a half-dozen villages in

Doi Tung. The foundation raised awareness of the consequences of destroying the forest and stopped slash-and-burn cultivation.

The project now grows coffee nurseries, employing villagers on the plantation. Profit is divided, with half going to the growers and the other half to the foundation. The foundation is responsible for buying the raw coffee seeds.

In 1994, a coffee roasting factory opened to refine the coffee seeds picked by the villagers.

Today the project area covers approximately 15,000 hectares, benefiting 11,000 people from 29 villages in Doi Tung.

Ajar graduated from agriculture college, he was immediately offered a job as a junior agricultural specialist for the Doi Tung Development Project, assisting agricultural projects in his parents' home town in Shan State.

The project has expanded to help residents in Yong Kha village, Shan State, and villages in Yen-an Chaung township in Magway Region, offering micro-loans and providing cattle to farmers.

Ajar lives with his parents. His sisters graduated middle school and his brother graduated from high school, and all are employed in the Doi Tung project. His mother also contributes to the project by working at the coffee company.

Salakjit Munthamraksa, who works at the project's, pointed at women who were speaking in the Akha language at the weaving factory, one of the income creation projects for ethnic women. "Older women with poor eyesight are assigned to spin," she said, "while young women work at traditional wooden looms."

The factory at the base of the mountain has an outlet attached which offers handmade wooden textiles, ceramic pots and fans made out of mulberry. On the opposite site of the factory is a paper mill where men and women are busy soaking, boiling and sifting mulberry barks to prepare paper sheets.

The first handmade products shop opened in 1990 on the mountain, and now the goods go to markets throughout Thailand.

"In the past I was blind," said Orawan Sophonamnuaykij, an Akha single mother of four who once relied on small-scale farming since she cannot read. "Life as an illiterate is like living in the dark. I was clueless and I didn't know what to do," she added.

She believes that education is very important. However, due to limited opportunities in the past, she hasn't been to school.

Now she had become a skilled artisan, employed by the project which taught her to weave. Her work in the quality control department earns her enough to support her four children.

Two of her children have graduated with bachelor degrees while the remaining two are still at school.

Thanks to the success of the DoiTung brand, the project's commitment to eradicating opium production has been self-sustaining since 2001.

And that means so are the people who work there: no more debt, no more drugs, no more darkness.





An aerial view of Doi Tung in 1988.



An aerial view of Doi Tung in 2008.

The project's ultimate goal of sustainability was based on three principles: health, livelihood and education.



Indonesia Looks at Thai Ways to Wipe out Opium

Bangkok Post

Monday, February 15, 2010

ACHADTAYA CHUENNIRAN

Indonesia is using the Doi Tung Development Project, which aims to eradicate opium cultivation, as a model to improve its people's well-being in the former war-torn province of Aceh, Thai ambassador to Indonesia Akrasid Amatayakul says.

Jakarta wants to learn from Thailand after the Thai government, which is struggling to resolve the insurgency problems in the South, expressed an interest in studying how Jakarta managed to sign a peace agreement with the separatist Free Aceh Movement in 2005.

Although it is believed the westernmost Indonesian province can free itself from its violent past, the people are still struggling to make a living and many have resorted to growing opium.

In the search for a solution, the government has looked to the Doi Tung Development Project, which has successfully encouraged Thai villagers in the North to substitute opium with other crops such as coffee and macadamia.

"Indonesia applauds the project for its fight against drugs," Mr Akrasid said.

"It's also interested in substitute plants which eventually led the villagers to a sustainable economy."

The Doi Tung Development Project was initiated in 1988 by Her Royal Highness the late Princess Mother in remote areas around Doi

Tung in Chiang Rai's Mae Fah Luang district. She wanted poor villagers to abandon opium growing and farming practices that decimated the forests, and begin a healthier mode of living.

They have been taught to grow coffee and macadamia. Their coffee products have proved a big hit with the project operator, Mae Fah Luang Foundation, using them at Café DoiTung, which has more than 20 branches.

The foundation said the project's ultimate goal of sustainability was based on three principles: health, livelihood development and education.

Indonesia is among several countries interested in applying the project's techniques to their own poor communities. Others which want the foundation's assistance are Burma and Afghanistan.

Mr. Akrasid said the project's staff had been sent to Aceh to help set up a Doi Tung model in areas rife with opium farming.

"The Doi Tung project is expected to succeed there," he said. "Aceh people would be impressed by the Thai help."

The root cause of
illegal narcotic crop cultivation,
and other related crimes,
is poverty and lack of opportunity.



From Opium to Arabica

Bangkok Post

Tuesday, July 15, 2008

SUNISA NARDONE

Bokee Lungkeaw epitomises the success of the Mae Fah Luang Foundation, which is now being incorporated into the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs' political declaration on narcotic crop cultivation for 2009.

At the front of the shop a young man climbs up a ladder, stretching from the last rung to arrange rolls of saffron mulberry paper handed up to him. Balanced up near the ceiling, his small frame leans into the high shelf, and he works quickly and with ease. The operation of passing, reaching and re-arranging continues for some time. Staff chat good-naturedly; away from the hot glare of the afternoon sun, the shop hums with quiet activity. At one point the jingle of bells announces the arrival of another customer, and with a final shove of paper, Bokee Lungkeaw skips down the ladder and turns to greet the person.

Bokee is one of the people who work at the DoiTung Lifestyle shop in Suan-Lum Night Bazaar in Bangkok. His shifts typically run for eight hours, and in his time off he lives with other Northerners in dorms next to the Doi Tung office compound. Every day he walks to work dressed in black trousers and a crisp white shirt, a newly-minted man in a big city, navigating his way through the intricacies of his new life. He

is the product of years of sacrifice, and his life intersects with the Mae Fah Luang Foundation in illuminating ways.

The story of the foundation's work in Doi Tung began in 1988, when HRH the Princess Mother, the late mother of the King, initiated the development project there to rehabilitate both the forests and the lives of the people living there. At that time, the region was rife with opium cultivation, and ethnic hill communities were a disenfranchised minority without citizenship or the right to settle anywhere. Illegal logging was rampant, as was slash and burn cultivation, and it was a fertile ground for drug trafficking, human trafficking, prostitution, HIV/AIDS and other diseases. The situation was dire. Like her son the King, the Princess Mother—or Somdej Yah, as she was affectionately known by Thais—combined a nobility of vision with the integrity of long-term commitment to tackling this problem. She was determined to restore harmony between people and nature, and put an end to opium farming so that the people in the region could begin to live a dignified life.

Somdej Yah was born a commoner and orphaned at a young age. By the time she was 15, she was one of the youngest nurses at Siriraj Hospital. Two years later she was offered a royal scholarship to the US. She took that opportunity, setting sail for a country halfway around the world. What follows is a small part of her life story; Somdej Yah's life spanned nearly a century during which she married Prince Mahidol, raised her three children in Switzerland, and lived to see both of her sons become kings of Thailand.

Throughout her life, Somdej Yah strove to get access to education. She was a prodigious reader and loved learning, and tried to create the same opportunities for others to go to school. Somdej Yah always recognised that people are born equal, and it is only opportunity and what people make of the chances that they are given that determine how comfortable their life is.

Bokee is one of those people with the good fortune to grow up within Somdej Yah's royal initiative. Born to parents who had emigrated from Burma, he grew up in Doi Tung. His parents worked in reforestation, which was one of Somdej Yah's first projects there. With a sweep of his arm, his father used to say, "Do you see those pine trees? I put them there. And it wasn't easy." Bokee looks around at the forest of Doi Tung with pride; his parents were part of the ethnic minorities who were given work when the Doi Tung Development Project hired them to transform the desolate over-farmed landscape into the lush forest it is today.

Bokee's life traces the arc of the Foundation's work. Over the course of his lifetime, the Mae Fah Luang Foundation created the model called Sustainable Alternative Livelihood Development (SALD), an update of conventional alternative development that combines the aims of substituting the growing of opium, marijuana and other illicit crops with the know-how to achieve sustainable results. This human-centric approach contributed to the elimination of opium within the Thai border of the Golden Triangle region and has been applied, with measurable success, within Yong Kha, Burma, Balkh, Afghanistan and Aceh, Indonesia.

SALD works on three levels. First, the basic health needs of people are addressed, because sick people cannot work. The next priority is the provision of viable livelihood options, starting with those that provide immediate food security. In the longer term, livelihoods encompass more diverse enterprises with value-adding activities that have higher income-generating potential. When people have achieved viable livelihoods, education becomes the main focus in order to end the vicious cycle of poverty and progress up the virtuous cycle of opportunity.

In March, at the annual UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs (UNCND) in Vienna, over 100 delegations from various countries came together to look to creating a drug-free world, an aim with some urgency given Afghanistan's heightened opium production in the past few years. Thailand initiated a resolution encouraging the establishment of international principles for alternative devel-

opment, and the sharing of best practices and lessons learned in countering illicit narcotic crop cultivation. This was followed up by the foundation's participation at the expert round of the UNCND, where Thailand's input will contribute towards the drafting of a political declaration on narcotic crop cultivation in 2009.

In opening remarks at the UNCND, Dr Antonio Maria Costa, deputy secretary-general of the UN, and executive director of the UN Office of Drug Control, said that Doi Tung proves that alternative development is possible. He said "the Doi Tung Development Project in Thailand, and subsequently in Burma, Afghanistan and now Indonesia, are inspiring. But the idea of shared responsibility needs to be more generously applied and funded, so that the eradication of poverty goes hand-in-hand with the eradication of crops.

Costa touches on a central principle of the foundation—the same principle that was articulated 20 years ago by the Princess Mother. When she saw the destitution in Doi Tung in 1988, she came to an important realisation: the root cause of illegal narcotic crop cultivation, and other related crimes, is poverty and lack of opportunity.

Opium is a crop often grown in areas where there are conflicts because it doesn't require much space to grow, and the dark, tar-like substance that is produced is small in bulk and easily transported by pack animals. Regions like Afghanistan—or in the 1980s, Burma, Thailand and Laos—have poor infrastructure that hinders the efforts of farmers to get their crops to market.

By contrast, local drug traffickers often come to the farms directly to buy raw opium.

There has been a flurry of news articles in the recent months covering the fact that in 2007, Afghanistan produced record levels of opium—193,000 tonnes, or 93 per cent of the world's supply. It was also noted that most farmers don't want to grow opium when given legal alternatives. They do so because of a lack of access to legitimate markets and a need to earn a living to support their families. If provided with appropriate support, the foundation's experience has found that farmers prefer to switch to a licit source of income.

Raising living standards in this way involves long-term trilateral commitment from donors, government and the people sharing their expertise of the model. But the benefit of the model is that it targets poverty, not just narcotic cultivating farmers.

In general, current efforts at eradication, whether by spraying crops or chopping down opium fields, have proven largely ineffective in the past 10 years. In April, 2007, Costa wrote in an article published in the Washington Post that Nato forces in Afghanistan are reluctant to engage in opium eradication, for fear of turning even more farmers into enemies who would side with the drug traffickers and terrorists.

Eradication with no viable alternative penalises the poorest people. Instead, a sustained investment in people transforms lives in a peaceful way. Lifting people out of poverty will not only put more money in people's pockets than



The Café DoiTung in Chiang Rai

opium farming, but also educate and empower people to continue their own development without the need for constant intervention.

This is what is happening in Doi Tung. Bokee's parents were wage-earners in the initial reforestation project, which was part of Doi Tung's "quick hit"—to provide immediate income to local people. This allowed the project to develop the long-term interventions of coffee and macadamia nuts, which have more potential for branding and moving up the value chain.

When Bokee was six he walked for three kilometres with the other children in his village

to school, making sure to beat everyone to the classroom. He realised in 4th grade that to continue his education he'd have to concentrate on his studies. His parents always said that he had the opportunity to be educated; whether he took that opportunity was up to him. This determination helped him win one of the Princess Mother's regional scholarships to continue his education through high school. But when he was 16 his father fell seriously ill, and Bokee left school and his scholarship to take a job as a cleaner in the Doi Tung Royal Villa to help support his family.

"It wasn't easy," Bokee says. "My mother

was against me leaving school, and cleaning is considered women's work up in Doi Tung." These were the hardest years for him, when he thought his chance to study was over.

Twenty years after Bokee's parents first planted trees in the North, progress is being made towards a sustainable future for Doi Tung residents. His parents are now both gardeners in the Royal Villa grounds, doing less intensive labour in their old age.

Bokee held a series of jobs with the foundation in Bangkok. He now works in the DoiTung shop in Bangkok which carries scarves, clothes and rugs that have been woven by grandmothers in factories up north. Next door, the DoiTung cafe sells cappuccinos and lattes with coffee that has been planted, pruned, harvested and roasted by ethnic villagers in the North. These activities provide employment for ethnic communities and a percentage of the profits is reinvested in the community's development. The income from these products can help people realise their potential. It can go towards funding a family's first college graduate, taking their first step in the long journey towards security and opportunity.

After five years living in Bangkok, Bokee began to earn enough money to both support his family and fund his education. His old colleagues in the retail department let him use their computers at the end of the working day to do homework. Over time, Bokee got his high school diploma by going to school at weekends. Bokee says he used to be scared of bookkeeping and talking to customers, espe-

cially English-speaking ones, but he has since learned that bookkeeping was good practise for his math skills, and talking to foreign customers increased his linguistic abilities.

Bokee is currently in his second year at Ramkhamhaeng University, where he is studying political science. When asked what he wants to do with his degree, Bokee says he doesn't like living in Bangkok. His eyes light up at the possibility of moving back to Doi Tung to take the role of one of the people who came into his village and first introduced him and his family to the ideas of sanitation, crop rotation and the importance of education.

"People in ethnic communities might have this knowledge by now," he says, adding that "he can go back and prove that it can be done,"

As far as he knows he is the only one of his generation to be pursuing a university degree in Bangkok. Many others educated under the Princess Mother's initiative work in better jobs than their parents did. Some of them work in Bangkok at other organisations. In his view, working at Mae Fah Luang allowed him the opportunity to better himself. His co-workers covered for Bokee when he took exams and had to study. "The people I work with understand that I don't want to be a cleaner all of my life," he said.

When he goes back to Doi Tung, Bokee thinks he'll start by doing simple work, like clearing the road from a land slide, or putting out forest fires. "It's okay, he says, "because it's the beginning of the time when I get to help back there."



“40 years ago,
Thailand had the same narcotic issues...
What’s the magic bullet?
That is the project—
to use Thailand’s programme
as a model to achieve similar results.”



Rebuilding Livelihoods

Bangkok Post

Sunday, July 22, 2007

Deputy Minister H.E. Mohammad Asif Rahimi was recently in Thailand to seek help and expertise in developing and reclaiming the economic capacity of war-ravaged Afghanistan.

H.E. Mohammad Asif Rahimi was born in Afghanistan in 1959. He was educated in Afghanistan, where he studied civil engineering and also specialised in vocational education. He worked for various humanitarian organisations during the period of the Soviet invasion during the 80s and 90s. He began working for the Afghanistan government 3 years ago with the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, where he is now Deputy Minister.

As deputy minister of Afghanistan's Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD), H.E. Mohammad Asif Rahimi's hands are full. There are roads and bridges to be repaired or totally rebuilt; schools and health facilities to be opened; and in the nation's 24,000 rural communities, local leadership to be developed and livelihoods to be recouped.

40% of his countrymen are unemployed: where traditional skills and trades have been lost through three decades of war and displacement, opium has thrived—Afghanistan produced 92% of the world's supply in 2006.

At 48, Rahimi has already surpassed the national life expectancy by 5 years and stands in his nation's literate (28%) minority.

Having seen his nation shaken by years of political instability, foreign invasion, and civil war, Rahimi is now one of the key figures working to bring Afghanistan back to life.

He began his work with MRRD—which is also charged with developing local industry and in case of natural disaster, emergency management plans—three years ago as director of its largest, priority effort, the \$200 million National Solidarity Programme (NSP). He explains that NSP, which reaches all of Afghanistan's 24,000 rural communities, strives to "build community organisations and develop the capacity of the people at the village level."

While he calls MRRD's efforts so far, "successful" and says "travelling around" he sees considerable improvement in the country—particularly in basic infrastructure, school attendance, and employment availability—he notes the efforts are early and have not come easily.

Particularly challenging to progress with rebuilding efforts, he says, have been Afghanistan's lack of human resources (especially engineers) and the lingering security problems in Afghanistan's borderlands.

While he says there recently has been an influx of local talent with the return of many educated Afghans from abroad and efforts at on-the-job training, he stresses that developing capacities of the Afghan population is MRRD's priority and critical for sustaining the Ministry's programmes.

Rahimi spends about half his time travelling within his country, visiting rural communities, where he monitors projects and looks for additional ways to improve policy and impact the life of the people.

On occasions, his efforts also take him farther afield—most recently, for a two-week stint in Bangkok—to study and learn from other national development projects. (Afghanistan has also examined programmes in India, Iran, the Philippines, and Bangladesh, but Rahimi calls Thailand's "quite exceptional.")

While the Thai and Afghan situations may seem extraordinarily different, Rahimi explains that Afghanistan hopes to lift lessons from Thailand's past, successful efforts in opium poppy elimination and sustainable alternative livelihood development.

"40 years ago, Thailand had the same narcotic issues. Today it's an opium free country. What's the magic bullet? That is the project—to use Thailand's programme as a model to achieve similar results," he says.

The collaboration between the two countries began in 2005 when Afghanistan began working

with a team from the Mae Fah Luang Foundation's Centre for Social Entrepreneurship (CSE) to identify alternative livelihoods for those involved in opium cultivation. (Doi Tung is a project of HRH the late Princess Mother's Mae Fah Luang Foundation (MFLF) that has successfully transformed the land and lives in Thailand's Golden Triangle region).

Whereas MFLF's Doi Tung Development Project has helped to develop coffee, macadamia and quality handicraft production within Chiang Rai province, members of the CSE team are working with those at MRRD to revitalise Afghanistan's Karakul sheep population (wool and sheepskin were key exports of the country in the 70s) through the creation of a 20,000-strong sheep bank last year.

The bank of Karakul sheep—which Rahimi explains is a "fat-tail" sheep with "extremely precious skin" (a skin sells for \$40-120)—will soon be distributed among the hundreds of former farmers within poppy-heavy Balkh province, who lost their flocks due to war, drought or displacement.

Rahimi comments that the programme is critical to helping the region's destitute to regain their livelihood, and while he says it is too early to measure the programme's impact on poppy elimination (it is also difficult because of other poppy-eradication efforts in the province), the United Nation's Office of Drugs and Crime has reported no opium poppy has been produced in the province this year.

Rahimi's recent visit to Bangkok was to build on the sheep bank's success and initiate a complementary Afghanistan Rural Enterprise Development Fund (AREDF) program, which will aim to revitalise other local, historical Afghan industries.

Citing "Thailand's successful programme with micro, small and medium enterprises and record of creating quality products with cultural attachments," Rahimi hopes to tap the similar potential he sees in Afghanistan's traditional carpet and garment trades.

"Carpets and culturally inspired garments have deep roots, but unfortunately, during the last 30 years, tradition was lost to the war and a generation passed away. The market was lost to other countries."

He says that during the visit to Thailand they also discussed developing dried fruit and nut products, which are grown in Afghanistan's highlands, and should find a demand in the Southeast Asian market.

Early days

While Rahimi spent his two weeks in Thailand working 10-hour days to hone the design for the programme, he says that it is still only in its early stages and will have to be reviewed by various Afghan ministries and key donors, which are likely to include the World Bank and Canadian and US funding agencies.

Rahimi estimates that it will take a year to complete the design and funding aspects of the programme, but acknowledges it will take significant capital investment, government support, and probably much time to recoup the process, raw materials, and skills needed for the industries, "once our highest source of income", to penetrate the market again.

He comments that through his three years of work with the government, he has learned people do not always have the patience for this.

"The expectation of the people is different from that they have for private industry and organisations. They demand speed—not only long term rhetoric—but they want to see changes in life immediately."

At the same time, Rahimi sympathises and agrees, saying that he believes the government must and can provide both the immediate relief as well as the long term planning that is needed to develop a country in a postwar period.

"It is a very big challenge and requires out-of-the box thinking." For this he says it helps to look into experience of other countries, and has hopes that Thailand is far enough out of this box.

Speaking positively of the pragmatism, sincerity, understanding and sense of urgency those he has worked with in Thailand have shown, he has "hopes these grassroots discussions with Thailand will produce even closer diplomatic ties for the future" (and maybe an embassy).

He adds that he hopes Thais realise the important international role they can play in steering developing nations toward successful models of human resource development and economic growth.

Because of the working demands of his trip, Rahimi didn't have the chance to see much of Bangkok or the country, but says he hopes for the opportunity to come back soon, not to visit one of the country's famed beach resorts, but MFLF's Doi Tung Development Project, and maybe an OTOP fair.



'Helping others' means
helping them to help themselves.



Working with the Wa

Bangkok Post

Sunday, May 18, 2003

USNISA SUKHSVASTI

MR Disnadda Diskul is taking the successful Doi Tung opium
-substitution programme across the border into Shan state

One fine day—January 19, 2002, to be precise—a delegation from Thailand took a bumpy car journey from the border town of Tachileik to Yong Kha village within the Burmese border. The trip, which followed a 53 kilometre dirt road, took them a full two and a half hours. But despite the isolation of the location, the trip proved to be a historic one that just might help turn a new page in Thai-Burma relations.

The group consisted of Col San Pwint leading the Burmese delegation, and MR Disnadda Diskul, CEO of the Doi Tung Development Project on the Thai side. The aim of the trip was to meet Wa chief Pau Yu Yi, to discuss a possible drug substitution project in the remote area of Burma.

It was a follow-up from a previous day's meeting between MR Disnadda and Burma's First Secretary of State Peace and Development Council Gen Khin Nyunt, a meeting that in turn was a follow-up from a meeting on March 8, 2001, between a Burmese Goodwill Mission led by Chairman of the State Peace and Development Council Senior General Than Shwe and a Thai delegation led by then prime minister

Chuan Leekpai in Chiang Rai, during which Burma stated its interest in working with Thailand on drug eradication. On this occasion, Gen Khin Nyunt took MR Disnadda's hand and asked him to extend the Doi Tung Development Project into Burma.

On their subsequent meeting on January 18, 2002, MR Disnadda told Khin Nyunt, 'I have come to deliver personally.' A Thai government backing of 20 million baht, approved by Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, had been secured for the project.

The cordial handshake with the Wa chief shown in the picture says it all, and quelled MR Disnadda's anxieties over whether an invitation from the Burmese government to help initiate a development project among the Wa would be genuinely appreciated by the villagers of Yong Kha themselves.

After all, it wasn't something imposed on them from the central government. The essential ingredient of development projects, he strongly believes, is the real participation of the villagers themselves, providing a shared vision into what



M.R. Disnadda Diskul (left) gets the thumbs-up from Wa chief Pau Ya Yi, accompanied by Kittu Limchaikit, former Secretary-General of the Narcotics Control Board of Thailand, and Col San Pwint.

they really need. For the past 15 years, villagers on the border with Thailand's northern province of Chiang Rai, part of the notorious Golden Triangle, have seen their friends and relatives on Doi Tung gradually improve their livelihood as a result of HRH the Princess Mother's Doi Tung Development Project. Based on the concept of stopping the supply of opium and opiates by way of sustainable alternative development projects, they were encouraged to substitute opium poppies with other marketable crops such as macadamia nuts and arabica coffee

and other income-generating work such as handicrafts, which now earn them a regular and sizeable income. This was also done without any negative impact on their cultural identity. That was enough proof for the Wa in this section of Burma's Shan State, and they didn't need any further convincing.

"Doi Tung II" MR Disnadda calls it. Hardly had the news circulated than the energetic CEO was bombarded with warnings and criticisms about his dealings with a government that is accused of maintaining a track record of

human rights abuses and dictatorial leanings.

"Democracy? Human rights? Who cares when it's their survival we are talking about!" remarks MR Disnadda in the typical outspoken fashion that is his trademark.

He refers to what he calls the "survival world", the third of three categories of human communities, comprised of the so-called civilised—or material—world, the world which still retains traditional spiritual values much like that which can still be found in Thailand where religion creates a balance between material and spiritual matters, and the survival world where people are still struggling to fill their mouths and stomachs on a day to day basis.

That was the world of Doi Tung in the early days of its development, and that was what Yong Kha is like now. On his early visits to the area, MR Disnadda noted that villagers suffered from malaria and scabies, and it is the health aspect of their well-being that he is addressing first.

"I am simply applying the tried and tested principles of HRH the Princess Mother," he explained. "She believed the first step to helping people is to address their health. Only when they are physically fit can we move on to the second step—poverty eradication. And only when they are no longer eking out a hand-to-mouth existence can we begin to think about their education, which is the third step."

Today, eight years after the passing away of the Princess Mother, he finds her philosophy just as valid and practical as before. He was

appointed by His Majesty the King as the private secretary to the Princess Mother in 1967, and has since worked tirelessly on her multifarious development projects which include the Mae Fah Luang Foundation (of which he is secretary-general), the Princess Mother's Medical Volunteers, the Prosthesis Foundation, and, last but not least, the Breast Foundation to combat breast cancer.

"What I have learned from HRH the Princess Mother is the desire to help others with no personal gain or benefit whatsoever," enthused MR Disnadda, "and by 'helping others' I mean helping them to help themselves."

MR Disnadda has, however, put in his penny's worth of value-added to the projects by ensuring that all the products are market driven, for true sustainability. When the Mae Fah Luang Foundation opened its doors in the early '70s, it was the first to pay cash in exchange for embroidery by the Hmong hill-tribe villagers. The embroidered pieces were then turned into couture items by the late fashion designer Prince Kraisingh Vudhijaya and shown in Thailand, Hong Kong and Denmark.

His choice of macadamia nuts as a substitute crop was entirely driven by local and international markets. "Since the natural foliage on Doi Tung included various species of nuts, I looked into macadamia nuts which are highly in demand," he explained. "The total world production in 1988 was 8,000 tonnes, half of which came from Hawaii. Since Thailand could grow as good pineapples as Hawaii, if not better, I thought

why not macadamia nuts? By-products include lush forests—of hardwood at that. Furthermore, picking nuts from the ground is labour-intensive, and that would generate work for the villagers.”

His love for numbers, combined with a more practical urge to be in management, led him to get a degree in Business Administration. The blue-blooded son of Prince Disanuvati and Princess Louisa Diskul, he was sent to England after completing Mathayom 3 at Bangkok Christian College, to attend Sutton Valance School in Kent. Then, while hoping to get into Cambridge University, he took a variety of courses at Maidstone Technical College to get a feel for different subjects.

"Eventually I fled to the USA because of a broken heart," he laughs heartily. "The East Coast reminded me too much of England, the West Coast was too bikini-oriented, so I opted for the Mid-west."

At the end of a long Greyhound bus journey to Indiana University in Bloomington, he was surprised to see the entire Thai student community lining up to welcome him. "Later on, when we became friends, they confessed they were misled by my name into thinking I might be a pretty girl arriving in their midst!"

Apart from a three-year stint at the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB) after his return to Thailand, his career has been dedicated to serving the Princess Mother.

Though slight in build, his strong presence fills the room and he is not shy in making his opinions known. This sincerity of ideals, combined

with his forthright manner, has earned him respect among the international drug suppression community.

He does not mince words, and has no qualms about pointing fingers at the world superpowers to criticise their way of addressing the drug problem.

"How many billions of dollars have you used in your drug suppression programmes?" he boomed out during the 46th session of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs in 2003 at the Nations Drug Control Programme headquarters in Vienna last June. "Does it work? No. Sustainable alternative development alone won't work either. There will be drugs as long as there are warlords, or terrorists, mafia and drug gangs for that matter. How do you stop the warlords? Stop selling guns and ammunition to them!"

Not an easy pill to swallow, to say the least, and distinctly reminiscent of David and Goliath. And yet in this case Goliath has acknowledged David's experience; the Doi Tung Development Project was included in UNDCP's book, *The Private Sector is a Protagonist of the Community Response to the Drug Scourge in the East Asia and Pacific Region*, which presents 13 pilot initiatives that "have set agendas and made a difference in the path the world has taken."

MR Disnadda himself is the only Asian core member of the UNDCP's Steering Group on Alternative Development.

It seems the world is watching MR Disnadda's next move. For him, it is all in a day's work. All it took him was a click on the Internet to check out

the Commerce Ministry's website to find out what would potentially be the best alternative crop for Doi Tung II. It sounded almost too simple to be true, and so beautiful in its simplicity.

"Soya beans!" he announced with great fanfare. "In 2001, Thailand imported a total of 1.6 million tonnes of soya beans at a cost of 27 billion baht."

Thailand uses soya beans in various industries including feed mills, drinks and cooking oils, but when considering opportunity costs, Thailand's farmers are better off growing other crops.

"I have challenged myself to help 100,000 Wa villagers earn an income of 5,000 baht per person per year. Though a safe goal would be 10 years, my own goal is five, if only to drive me that little bit harder.

"I need to find the best seeds, the best fanning methods, and bring together scientists, agriculturists, importers, members of the public and private sectors, and soya bean farmers to sit down with the Wa villagers to ensure that every step is done in the best possible way from nursery to harvest. This will ensure a product of high value-added that will satisfy the importer."

He has been accused of being a traitor to the nation and the international community at large, when taking the sensitive issue of economic sanctions against Burma into consideration. MR Disnadda brushes this off with no uncertain disdain.

"I don't believe in economic sanctions against [Burma]. Sanctions are akin to destruction. Those who can't help themselves are bound to resort to less than acceptable or ideal behaviour. We

have to help them, not turn our backs on them."

He hints that a Doi Tung III project might be in the pipeline, and although he is hesitant at this point to go into detail, a visit this February by a five-member Afghan delegation to observe Thailand's drug eradication programme might be a hint of things to come. He is just as enthusiastic about another project "that will reach out to billions of people".

At the same time, he is getting ready to inaugurate his latest baby—the Hall of Opium located at the Golden Triangle, costing a total of 400 million baht for research and construction. The museum, which attests to Disnadda's belief in "edutainment" as a way of stopping the demand for drugs, prides itself on being the most comprehensive archive on opium and opiates in the world, tracing back its history for 5,000 years.

Even at the age of 64, with a track record of three angioplasty treatments in the past eight years, Disnadda shows no signs of slowing down, doctor's orders notwithstanding. "I get a great amount of contentment and satisfaction from these projects. I alone have the opportunity to be standing here in this position. It makes me want to get up in the morning and go to work, and to do the best I can each day."

A sign in his office reads, "I Do Not Suffer from Stress, But I Am A Carrier". That message probably says it all.







The Mae Fah Luang Foundation under Royal Patronage
Bangkok, Thailand

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