Royal Activities

and International Cooperation

The Royal Project

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Foreword

"...the well-being and happiness of the people are a benefit that is difficult to be measured in terms of money."

Royal Speech on the occasion of the Royal Birthday Anniversary (1991)

As the Kingdom of Thailand celebrates the auspicious occasion of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej's eighty-fourth birthday anniversary in 2011, the National Identity Foundation takes great pride in presenting this exclusive publication in honour of our beloved King and members of our royal family.

The world's longest-serving monarch, His Majesty is now in the sixty-fifth year of a remarkable and noteworthy reign. From the beginning, our King has worked unceasingly to bring comfort and relief to disadvantaged people in rural Thailand. This selfless dedication, and that of other members of Thailand's royal family, has improved the lives of the country's poor and needy and, benefitted other countries in the world. To date, over four thousand royal development projects have been initiated; all of which aspire to improve the livelihood and lifestyle of the people of Thailand.

From our experience at the foundation, often through overseas lectures in Europe, Australia and other parts of the world, we have encountered an element of surprise on the part of many people not previously aware of the humanitarian activities of Thailand's monarch and members of the royal family.

This exceptional publication, which portrays nine activities and development projects illustrating the humanitarian aspects of work undertaken by Thailand's royal family over a long period of time, has been compiled from experiences recounted by scholars, practitioners and experts all of whom have taken great pride in serving alongside our King and other members of our royal family.

It is our wish that you, as a valued, overseas friend of our country, will find this portrayal of royal activities enlightening, educational and inspirational; sufficient, at least, to allow us the pleasure of welcoming you back to the Kingdom of Thailand.

Dr Suvit Yodmani
Bangkok, Thailand, 2011

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Note from the Editor

Compassion is the deep concern shown to less fortunate people through humanitarian acts of selflessness inspired by a desire to tackle poverty and alleviate human suffering. In Thailand, such actions are exemplified by His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej

Thailand's royal institution, which has prevailed for almost eight hundred years, endures under the aegis of the Royal House of Chakri and the stalwart guardianship of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej.

A significant turning point in the country's recent history occurred in 1932 when a bloodless coup d'etat transformed the Kingdom of Siam – renamed Thailand in 1939 – from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy, leaving the ruling monarch as a titular head of state.

By chance, constitutional reform presented a unique opportunity for the youthful King Bhumibol to interact closely with the people of Thailand. His Majesty embraced the opportunity with patience and understanding, taking great care not to impede or hinder the business of government. In due course the King earned the love and respect of both the people and government officials.

Subsequent excursions to the remotest parts of the kingdom enabled the Thai monarch to learn firsthand of the plight of marginalised people, particularly ethnic minorities. Desolate villagers, hooked and dependent on the opium trade, were eking out a living on the hillsides of northern Thailand. Indiscriminate slash-and-burn farming methods were turning large tracts of forested land into endless fields of poppies. To the farmers, poppy cultivation was essential to fulfil longstanding trade deals with unscrupulous traders – and to feed the farmers' addiction to opium. Driven by poverty, this appeared to be their only survival option. But opium became both a means of survival and an instrument of destruction for the hill people and their environment.

Confronted by what seemed an impossible task, the King resolved to tackle poverty as the fundamental source of the hill people's hardship and, at the same time, lower their dependence on poppy cultivation. Acting with the farmers' implicit cooperation, and with help from government agencies, His Majesty set out to forge an alternative, sustainable lifestyle that could be adopted by impoverished villagers.

This initiative was the start of a series of royal development projects beginning with the King's Royal Project in the northern hills of Chiang Mai and surrounding provinces. Over time, villagers were given the means to lead an alternative and legitimate livelihood growing fruits and vegetables for personal consumption and sale. It was a project of vital importance; the King's intervention almost certainly prevented a humanitarian and environmental disaster in rural Thailand.

Today, more than four thousand royal development projects, enacted over many years under the principles and spirit of humanitarianism, are well documented, thoroughly understood and greatly appreciated by everyone living in the Kingdom of Thailand. Yet they are less well-known outside the country.

Royal Activities and International Cooperation, released in celebration of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej's eighty-fourth birthday in 2011, portrays some of the projects inspired and nurtured by Thailand's royal family. By embarking on a journey through the pages of this unique publication, readers may gain a useful insight into the origin of these projects and the way they have impacted the livelihood and lifestyle of many people in Thailand and even in the international arena.

Nowadays, royal development projects are administered by appointed managers and teams determined to uphold the humanitarian principles established and practised by His Majesty from the beginning of his reign. The overriding objective in each undertaking is to improve the quality of life of people so they have enough to meet their needs, with additional opportunities to earn a reasonable income for their families.

Throughout his noble reign, HM King Bhumibol Adulyadej has conscientiously elevated the interests of the Thai nation above personal interests. It is not surprising therefore that the citizens of the Kingdom of Thailand believe their country's most redeeming characteristics are embodied in the altruism, concern and compassion shown over many years by Their Majesties the King and Queen and other members of Thailand's royal family. The monarchy stands as a revered institution whose nationwide respect and admiration has been earned as a result of tireless efforts spent improving the health and well-being of Thai people.

The small sample of royal development projects in this publication, all initiated and nurtured by members of Thailand's royal family, are presented out of heartfelt concern for the less fortunate and with infinite respect for the future of mankind.

Frank W. Skilbeck, Editor
Bangkok, Thailand, 2011

The Royal Project

Opium-based drug habits

Billed in 1969 as "The Woodstock Music and Art Fair: An Aquarian Exposition", generally referred to as "Woodstock", the organisers of this now famous counterculture concert originally hoped for a turnout of fifty thousand people. They were taken aback when an unexpected, five hundred thousand young souls converged on Max Yasgur's thousand-acre farm near Bethel in upstate New York, USA to participate in an event that was tantalisingly advertised as "Three Days of Peace and Music". The police turned a blind eye as young people "turned on, tuned in, and dropped out" on this iconic occasion, which proved to be a prelude to change around the world: Many in attendance used the event to expound far-out, contemporary ideals and principles that challenged the power structure of the United States of America. The concert went off peacefully, but not before the attention of the world was drawn to the growing use of drugs.

Towards the end of the 1960s, and by the time of Woodstock, the United States could account for around three hundred and fifty thousand heroin addicts in the country. Outside the United States, it seemed few were aware that opium-based drug habits were often fuelled unwittingly by hill tribe farmers in northern Thailand; poor and needy villagers, often on the point of starvation, struggling to make ends meet. This northern location covered almost one million square kilometres overlapping the mountains of Myanmar, Lao PDR, Vietnam, and Thailand. Commonly referred to as the Golden Triangle, it was once one of the world's main sources of heroin poppy production.

Opium poppy cultivation

Early evidence of opium poppy cultivation points to the Sumerians some five thousand years ago, spreading outwards to Egypt and as far as the European Alps some three thousand years ago. Poppies first arrived in East Asia and the Golden Triangle as a result of demand created by the British in the late 19th Century. About one hundred years ago, hill farmers in China's Yunnan highlands began cultivating opium poppies. As the habit spread, opium was imported into Thailand.

World opium production saw a shift in the early 1950s when Iran and Turkey withdrew from the market. After 1949, Mao Zedong suppressed the cultivation of opium poppies in China forcing many hill tribe families to migrate, usually straight to the mountainous region referred to as the Golden Triangle. Through suppression, the communists effectively ended the habit of smoking opium in China, but a steady supply continued to go to the burgeoning markets in the West.

In Thailand, opium use ended in 1959 after it was declared illegal by the government of the day under premiership of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat. Nevertheless, sales of opium – and its derivative heroin – continued to soar as a result of increased demand in the United States and Europe – and protagonists in the protracted war in Indochina.

The vast quantity of opium poppies that once thrived in northern Thailand covered a land area of seventeen million hectares, similar in size to the South American country of Uruguay. In fact, nine million hectares, found five hundred metres above sea level, occupied a land area the size of Portugal. In terms of forested areas, northern Thailand's provinces of Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Lamphun, Phayao and Mae Hong Son account for around one quarter of the entire country's forests. It is no surprise, therefore, that this is where the majority of hill tribes were found including the Hmong, Yao, Lahu, Karen, Akha, Lisu, Lua and Chinese Haw.

The use of opium was outlawed in Thailand in 1959

Slash-and-burn farming triggered large-scale destruction on hillsides

Early farming methods

With the exception of the Karen and Lua, Thailand's hill tribe communities adopted swidden farming years ago on sloping land in the northern highlands at heights above one thousand metres. Sometimes referred to as "slash and burn", swidden farming was the most common farming method undertaken. The steep-sided hills, with no flat ground in between, were unsuitable for conventional farming as practised in other parts of the world across flat fields at ground level. And, as latecomers to the area, most Hmong had to be content with high-lying land left over after other tribes had established themselves on the lowlands.

To farm on sloping land at such dizzying heights they burnt down trees to make ash for fertiliser. The farmers viewed this as a low cost method for rejuvenating the soil because, to them, the fertiliser came free of charge. The area was irrigated by the hand of nature, fed by water run-off from the steep slopes that easily drained and never became waterlogged. After the harvest, the farmers left the land fallow and moved their families to farm new slopes. This farming method was followed for years by generations of hill tribe farmers.

While swiddening may have been appropriate a hundred years ago, because it left land fallow after each harvest and allowed a couple of years for it to recover, it was bound to create problems later as hill tribe families grew in number. Inevitably, the population boom among tribal folk occupying the same land area forced them to farm the same piece of land more frequently than before in order to feed their families. By 1969, fifty-five thousand Hmong, and two hundred and seventy-five thousand villagers in total, fended for themselves on a fixed area of land that was becoming increasingly overworked.

Lack of infrastructure made life difficult for villagers trying to get their goods to market

Compelling reasons for growing opium

Poor road infrastructure in the past meant that some hill tribe villages were a six-hour drive from Chiang Mai. Transporting farm produce to market was not only difficult, but expensive because goods damaged in transit fetched a lower price.

On the other hand, opium buyers were quite willing to trek to hill tribe villages to buy at source saving the opium farmers having to make long journeys. This led to devious and shrewd buyers often setting-up impromptu gambling dens next to buildings where they bought the opium. Farmers were encouraged to gamble away their earnings minutes after being paid, with the unfortunate outcome that poverty continued unabated. On average, a farmer's income from opium was around seven thousand seven hundred baht a year. Had they been able to get their lettuces to market in good condition, using this as an example, they could have earned as much as one hundred and eighty thousand baht a year.

Opium, a traditional painkiller used in the hills, was generally used to ward off hunger pangs. Up to the 1970s, these tribes were subsistence farmers that suffered from protein deficiency and malnutrition was endemic.

Associated Press bureau chief in Thailand, Denis Gray, witnessed the conditions that spawned a demand for opium in the North: "With no doctors on hand, opium became their preferred painkiller and it wasn't long before the drug became their master and their tormentor."

His Majesty the King supported national development as a means to help alleviate poverty

Communist insurgency slows development

In the Sixties and early Seventies, Thailand experienced a communist insurgency that hampered government officials trying to do their work in thirty-five out of seventy-one provinces. A major reason the communists were able to make headway was their appealing promise of social restructuring to help alleviate poverty among the local people. His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej, however, was one among few who realized that national development was a more desirable option.

Subsequently, a small reforestation project was set up by Mr. Thiam Komkris, dean of forestry. It was located just outside of Chiang Mai near Bhubing Palace, the royal winter residence located on a mountain called Doi Buak Ha, strategically located one thousand metres above sea level. Professor Pavin Punsri, a plant scientist at Kasetsart University, responsible for introducing commercial grape cultivation to Thailand, believed it was possible to reforest the hills with income-generating orchards. But by 1969 a lack of funds threatened to shut down the Kasetsart project: At that juncture, destiny and coincidence collided.

The King trekked to remote areas to consult with hill tribes

Early activities to investigate crop substitution

Throughout the 1950s, His Majesty the King made frequent trips upcountry. The near-inaccessible hill tribe villages in the mountains were difficult to get to because of their remote locations many hours from a paved road. Today, it is difficult to imagine anywhere in Thailand being inaccessible. His Majesty recalled experiencing what he termed "disco roads", referring to the shaking and bouncing suffered by occupants of the King's car as it navigated unpaved roads deep in the countryside.

In 1968, the King might well have been more than intrigued to learn of the existence of a Hmong hill tribe village at Doi Pui not fifteen minutes from his Chiang Mai residence. As Dennis Grey recalled, "Information on the hill tribes was sketchy. The only way to truly assess their situation was to travel to the mountainous regions and gather research first-hand. Thailand's King Bhumibol did just that."

His Majesty trekked to one village along with some staff and began asking questions, later visiting more villages to ask more questions. No one would have been surprised if these poor, neglected villagers had paid scant attention to their royal visitor, but this was not the case. This particular royal visitor was able to gain their attention because His Majesty neither acted in a superior manner, "nor even much like a king."

The financial reward from cultivating opium or peaches was similar

His Serene Highness Prince Bhisadej Rajani, the Royal Project's chairman, was able to witness this first hand: "The way His Majesty spoke to them…they were very friendly. The King took a keen interest in their lives. They were very frank with His Majesty. (One) particular day," recalled the prince, "His Majesty asked the Hmong what was their source of income apart from opium. They said peaches – the small local peach – and they told the King that the income from opium and from peaches was about the same."

It was a crucially important revelation: His Majesty knew the opium fields would be consigned to history if farmers could be persuaded to grow peaches in place of poppies – for a similar or superior income. The King requested Kasetsart University to earnestly explore the potential, at the same time donating two hundred thousand baht (around $10,000 at the time) from private funds to set in motion in 1969 the Royal Hill Tribe Assistance Project. In 1980 this was renamed the Royal Project and later, in 1992, the Royal Project Foundation.

His Majesty the King and other members of the royal family began making frequent visits to hill tribe locations which entailed a lot of climbing. One story tells of His Majesty walking through a jungle and up a mountain because the King had heard about someone who had grafted three peach trees. Those around had questioned why His Majesty would want to view three peach trees. "Everyone said it was very tough on the King to walk for an hour to see three plants," Prince Bhisadej said. "But His Majesty knew that by going there it

His Majesty, often accompanied by HRH Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, was meticulous in ensuring surveys were specific, detailed and focused

would demonstrate a keen interest. And that was good promotion for the plants."

The King was unconcerned about personal comfort. "There was a meeting arranged with some villagers," Prince Bhisadej recalled. "And they came along and sat on the floor. In front of them were chairs. They were for us to sit in, which is normal. But His Majesty would not sit in the chairs; he sat on the ground with the villagers."

Australian photographer John Everingham accompanied the royal family on some visits. "The interesting part," he recollected, "was the approach His Majesty took; very often working right alongside the poppy fields, teaching people how to do things to make more money than from opium but not going on campaigns to cut it all down. Some governments have done that and upset and angered the people."

Denis Gray recalled the intense concentration displayed by the King on each visit. "The King was extremely focused on the details. As we all know, His Majesty always carries a map: so the first thing to do was to unroll the map and find out the exact location…where the opium fields were…or where a dam was going to be. From there, His Majesty went into precise details about facts and figures – things that an engineer or a social science researcher would want to know."

From his own observations Denis Gray noted that His Majesty was "…not just a politician or a king coming in and breezing through. This (survey) was very, very specific; very, very detailed, and intensely focused."

HM the King greeted by hill tribes villagers

One quirky tradition performed by the hill tribes when His Majesty came to visit at a later time puzzled some of the international visitors accompanying the King. People wanted to know why the villagers put a cloth on the ground for the King to walk on. Many thought it was some kind of superstitious practice, but Prince Bhisadej said they simply wanted to capture His Majesty's footprints, "It was like getting his autograph!" he said.

Prince Bhisadej becomes Royal Project Director

In due course His Majesty asked Prince Bhisadej to be the director of the project. Although the Prince had visited hill tribes on past occasions, and accompanied His Majesty on regular fact-finding tours, he started his own serious exploration of the highlands. The Prince trekked to many villages for days on end carrying a sleeping bag and other essentials in a backpack. Travelling with his frequent companion, Professor Pavin Punsri from Kasetsart University, Prince Bhisadej was able to learn the hill tribes' problems first-hand. "We didn't have much money and we had to act at their level…we could not behave in a superior manner. When I went out I carried my own pack, sleeping bag, boots…and I slept on their verandas."

Oddly, and without raising any suspicion, the tribes-people appeared to accept the many intrusions and questions. "They knew we were working for the King and they accepted us quite well," commented Prince Bhisadej. "They also knew we were not government officials who would try to stop them from growing opium or something…"

In one location, around Doi Inthanon (Thailand's highest mountain) Prince Bhisadej found Hmong tribal members that had been sent to Hanoi by communists for training. "During the day it was okay," Prince Bhisadej recalled. "The forestry people would pull out before dusk and go down the mountain fearing they might be killed. Quite a few people were killed – forestry people and the like. Because the government couldn't go and help these people they became very poor… (So) we went up."

Prince Bhisadej, the Royal Project Director (left) among the hill tribe villagers

Early experiments with strawberries

Strawberry cultivation was the chosen crop for tribes in the Doi Inthanon region because farmers could expect a return on investment three months after planting the crop. The three Hmong men selected to attempt growing strawberries accepted the proposition because they knew it was part of the King's project and that His Majesty wanted to help them improve their incomes.

"From the very beginning money from the harvest went into their pockets straight away," said Prince Bhisadej. "We took the produce to market for them and they got the money. The three men accepted the idea to grow strawberries because it was the King's project. The next season a lot more people wanted to grow strawberries."

By 1988, those who had mastered strawberry cultivation were earning the Thai baht equivalent of two thousand dollars a year – double the average income in Thailand. Others, growing Japanese apricots, earned one thousand dollars from one-hectare orchards.

Hill tribe villagers earned substantial revenues growing strawberries

Ang Khang valley is ideal for cultivating temperate-climate fruit trees

Work commences at Ang Khang

Located in the northwest of Chiang Mai province, close to the border with Myanmar, Ang Khang valley is five kilometres long and rises one thousand four hundred metres. Enclosed by even higher, limestone peaks, this remote area mirrors scenes from the novel "Lost Horizon"; best remembered as the origin of the mythical Shangri-La. The pristine slopes were once covered with poppies amidst a profusion of wild apples, local peaches and other fruits. But it was the temperate climate that first attracted the Royal Project team to the area; they considered it eminently suited for cultivating temperate-climate fruit trees. Enthusiastically, Royal Project members acquired European text books to learn how to grow temperate-clime trees only to come up against a new problem: "Our temperate fruit textbooks couldn't be used in Thailand because the micro-climate isn't the same," explained Dr. Santhad Rojanasoonthon, chairman of the research section of the Royal Project Foundation.

The project yields a wide-variety of temperate-clime fruits

Introduction of peach trees

Subsequently hill tribe communities were provided with some "introduced" peach tree varieties for cultivation that earned the farmers an average price of around thirty Thai baht per kilogram, depending on the size of the fruit. Apart from peaches, the project team considered cultivating highland staple food crops like rice, wheat, maize, beans and potatoes. Today, the project produces a wide variety of temperate-clime fruits including Chinese peaches, Chinese pears, persimmon, plums, grapes, Japanese apricots, strawberries, passion fruit, and figs. Other fruits, like kiwi, pomegranates, raspberries and blueberries, are undergoing research.

A team surveyed hill tribe farmers to see whether they would be willing to grow site-specific fruits, nuts, or vegetables. Afterwards, they supplied the farmers with plants or seeds and supervised the first planting followed by a period of monitoring. This was not intended as a free service: His Majesty was aware that nothing of value was ever given away free; there was always a small charge for everything. This approach served to impress upon the hill tribes the real value of the work being done under the Royal Project.

Social assistance

Not all villagers are domiciled in highland areas; some are at quite low elevations deemed unsuitable for growing temperate-clime fruits and vegetables. To compensate, additional support is offered by development centres and government agencies through schools, medical care, sanitation and hygiene, social development and the opportunity to develop alternative incomes from non-farming jobs.

Though hill tribes adhere to a male-dominated culture, women have to undertake a disproportionate amount of work in tandem with bringing up their children. The Royal Project Foundation arranges for young girls to learn about children's rights and teaches female empowerment. Its youth vocational development programme offers supplementary occupations and a way of earning a living in non-agricultural jobs. The programme has the added benefit of assisting young people to steer clear of becoming victims of human trafficking and prostitution.

Agricultural extension programmes are a typical example of how to raise the capability of hill tribe farmers; one aim being to make the crop safe. This ensures the products achieve an acceptable standard in terms of quality. The project helps farmers achieve Good Agricultural Practice (GAP) certification for their crops, verifying that products are free from unsafe levels of chemicals. By satisfying customers about food safety, they can also compete with imported foodstuffs.

Hill tribe women undertake a disproportionate amount of work

To aid reforestation, the Royal Forestry Department introduced new, fast-growing trees

Deforestation and reforestation

Years of indiscriminate swidden farming resulted in large-scale deforestation in the mountains. Concerned about this, His Majesty offered to provide compensation to hill tribes for crops grown on tracts of land used in research work under the Royal Project. This was seen as an unconventional approach bearing in mind that the hill tribes were living illegally in a watershed area. "His Majesty said that they were here first," recalled Dr. Santhad. Officials were advised by the King to let the tribes stay rather than go elsewhere where they would possibly destroy other tracts of land.

To reforest the hills and rehabilitate the Ang Khang watershed, the Royal Forestry Department introduced new, fast-growing acacias, pines, and cedars. The King also suggested introducing three types of wood for four types of use, one of His Majesty's sustainable development theories.

His Majesty explained: “Growing three types of forests yields four benefits: Apart from the obvious gains of fruits, timber and firewood, there is the important, fourth benefit of soil and watershed conservation.”

The practical benefits of this campaign ensured a sufficient supply of wood for material needs so it was not necessary to fell more trees for domestic use. Reforested areas were preserved more efficiently than simply banning people from cutting down any trees at all.

The Royal Project’s forestry project was conducted in partnership with Taiwan. A demonstration plot with a seedling nursery built at Doi Ang Khang yielded 1.2 million seedlings between 1982 and 1994. The saplings helped preserve the forests. Fruit trees played a major role in reforestation because they are almost never removed, or burnt accidentally, as they are planted as an orchard.

One demonstration plot yielded 1.2 million seedlings between 1982 and 1994

The Rural Development Highway Department laid paved roads to help villagers get their produce to market

Road infrastructure

In the early days of the project, paved roads in the mountains were few in number. Everyone involved was aware of the urgent need for a practical solution to get the farmers' produce to market. The hard work and effort put into the planting phase would not bring in any income if fruit and flowers were overripe, bruised or shrivelled before reaching market.

Consequently, the project team sought the assistance of the Rural Development Highway Department to construct a twenty-two kilometre road from the valley to the lowlands giving access to the markets. Prior to that, everything had to be carried on the backs of pack animals or in helicopters. Even the basic roads built in the early days of the project tended to become waterlogged after torrential downpours. As Dr. Santhad recalled, "We had to use chains on the wheels to drive through the mud."

National and international cooperation

Domestic and overseas co-operation proved invaluable in furthering the objectives of the Royal Project.

The Royal Pang Da, Inthanon, Ang Khang, and Mae Lod research stations together with thirty-eight Royal Project Development Centres, all house researchers and volunteers from several Thai universities and government agencies. They work as volunteers in the name of His Majesty. Most of the research is actually done by universities, technically working under the Royal Project only because work in watershed and protected areas is strictly controlled.

A successful outcome could never have been achieved without the participation of national institutes and agencies unified by a sense of purpose inspired by His Majesty the King. Some of the contributing organisations involved include Chiang Mai University, Kasetsart University, Maejo University, Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives, Department of Industrial Promotion, Ministry of Industry, the Border Patrol Police as well as direct assistance from the Royal Thai government. Strategically, considerable research assistance came also from the Thailand Institute of Scientific and Technological Research of the Ministry of Science and Technology.

On the international scene, His Majesty had already developed strong ties with overseas countries as a result of his many visits abroad in the Sixties. When His Majesty mentioned to members of the diplomatic corps the new Royal Project to develop the North, the king received enthusiastic and immediate support from embassies in the form of donations of temperate and semi-temperate fruit trees. Counted among the donor countries were Australia, France, Indonesia, Iran, Israel, Italy, Lebanon, New Zealand, the UK, and Germany.

Doctor Shen Chang-huan, ambassador to Thailand for what was then Chinese-Taipei, when made aware of the new Royal Project, notified his government of Thailand's need for fruit saplings, vegetable seeds, and expert assistance to develop mountain agriculture. His request met with a positive response. For many years the Vocational Assistance Commission for Retired Servicemen (VACRS) – Kuomintang army veterans – had developed temperate-zone fruit plantations in Taiwan's own central highlands. VACRS chose Mr. Soong Ching-yun, deputy director of one of the farms, to visit Thailand to conduct a first hand assessment of the situation.

Early in 1971, "Papa Soong", as he is still fondly referred to by local folk, began planting saplings flown in from Taiwan. The results were positive. Later, Taiwan was instrumental in setting up the Royal Agricultural Station at Ang Khang and a Taiwanese team agreed to stay in Ang Khang indefinitely to establish a cooperative relationship with the Royal Project.

The Royal Project attracts visitors from all around Asia, and further afield

Profits from coffee, fruits and vegetables were up to three times higher than from opium cultivation

In the spirit of international co-operation, Australia provided one thousand five hundred samplings along with rust-resistant varieties of Arabica coffee developed in Papua New Guinea. Later, Prince Bhisadej commented that a start had been made: "We have introduced the Arabica coffee bean. Before, it was planted in a research station but was not grown commercially…"

Led by Kasetsart-trained experts, small teams of young, Thai graduates went into hill tribe villages to introduce coffee and other crops like kidney beans. Thai scientists in the programme pioneered a technique to introduce successful research into villages. It was discovered that profits from coffee surpassed those from fruit and vegetables. The project's poverty elimination campaign saw other hill farmers growing coffee, fruits and garden vegetables that yielded profits two to three times higher than opium. The drive to introduce substitution crops was fast becoming a one-way street of accomplishments!

The project also attracted the attention of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Fund for Drug Abuse Control (UNFDAC) which established a fund to finance by 1988 some seventy research programmes connected with the Royal Project's research centres. UNFDAC set up an office in Chiang Mai.

One day, while visiting UNFDAC, Prince Bhisadej met four representatives of the Agricultural Research Service (ARS), a division of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

"The ARS funds research work only. They came to Thailand scouting for government agencies interested in finding replacement crops for opium," Dr. Santhad explained.

Prince Bhisadej remembered the occasion: "So, the USDA-ARS came along trying to find people to give money to. They were just about to leave Thailand when I met them. I asked them to come to my house for dinner and I asked Professor Pavin – the fruit man – and some other people along. So we had a talk and we got a lot of money from them. There were separate projects like fruit, flowers and so on.

"I proposed cultivating flowers to the USDA people and they thought it would not work because flowers are very delicate things and the hill tribes are very rough people! Well, we suggested they compare it to opium; the opium flower needs a lot of delicate work and you have to look after the plant very well and have a lot of patience."

The cultivation of flowers was suggested as a substitute for opium poppies

The USDA gave The Royal Project three million Thai baht to start a flower project

Finally, the USDA gave three million baht to the Royal Project to start a flower project free from any overriding conditions thanks largely to the trust engendered by His Majesty and the respect gained through the King's work.

The additional financial support resulted in a substantial expansion of the Royal Project. Research was conducted into the practicability of raising strawberries, potatoes, onions, silkworms, dye plants, mushrooms, and a variety of chrysanthemum called pyrethrum used in making insecticides. Altogether, eighty-four projects were funded by the USDA between 1973 and 1987. Doctor Santhad recalled with some humour that the USDA-ARS imposed a strict discipline on Thai researchers: "The ARS really forced everyone to write long and detailed reports!"

In time, USDA funding was phased out but the project still received around one-third of its annual budget of seventy-two million Thai baht from external sources. Another third continues to this day to come directly from the Privy Purse and the final third from the Royal Thai Government. The United States, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, UNDP, and Taiwan continue to provide substantial financial backing for work undertaken by the project.

"More, and regular, government funding came when the Royal Project became a foundation," Dr. Santhad observed. The government, he explained, was able to set aside funds annually for a foundation, whereas support for a private entity was less regular.

Research at Suan Song Saen

An experimental station for temperate zone fruit trees was established by the Royal Project at Suan Song Saen, Doi Pui, on the outskirts of Chiang Mai, some one thousand, two hundred and twenty metres above sea level. A team of plant specialists from Kasetsart University began work grafting Australian peaches to local root stock. They tested other, temperate-clime fruits for suitability at that altitude. Researchers learned that Australian peaches, at that time, were not suitable for local cultivation because they need a longer period of chill than could be provided in the northern Thai climate at Suan Song Saen.

Royal Pang Da Research Station

Further research work was conducted at Royal Pang Da Research Station some forty-seven kilometres north-east of Chiang Mai. This station was originally set up as a plant propagation site for temperate trees. However, the station's convenient location, and its easier access to water from a nearby dam site after the station was expanded, meant work could be expanded to cover a greater variety of plants catering for all thirty-eight Royal Development Centres. Various methods of propagation are performed here including layering, grafting by stem cutting, bud cutting and cutting with local rootstocks.

Many of the Royal Development Centres are below one thousand metres above sea level. As this research station is only seven hundred metres above sea level more research work has been performed there on semi-tropical plants such as strawberries, avocados, papayas, mangos and lychees as well as flowers including roses and chrysanthemums.

The Royal Pang Da Research Station, therefore, is one of the main research stations for propagating plants used to substitute for opium cultivation. Other crops cultivated at this station, such as fruit trees, help to rehabilitate and sustain the local environment.

The Royal Pang Da Research Station propagates plants to substitute for opium poppies

Fruit trees provide environmental protection

Inevitably, the question arose as to why deciduous fruit trees were chosen for Thailand's northern region: They take a long time to reach maturation to produce fruit and they require constant attention. Whilst that is true, it is also a fact that deciduous fruit trees are well-suited to heights above one thousand metres; heights where opium poppies are cultivated. Moreover, they are a long-term investment and the Royal Project was focused on creating long-term enterprises. With care, the time invested in fruit tree cultivation could achieve this objective.

At high altitudes, and on hillsides sloping greater than thirty degrees, these fruit trees grow into natural, productive forests that help bind the soil, trap nutrients and slow-down water run-off to lower areas. Later, His Majesty also introduced vetiver grass known for its dense root system as an efficient binder of sloping land. Subsequently, the North became a centre for royal investigations into the properties of vetiver in preventing soil erosion and topsoil degradation.

Fruit trees take four to five years to become productive. In the interim, farmers have to cultivate faster-growing cash-crops like vegetables and flowers. Over fifty different kinds of vegetables are grown in the Royal Project area including Brussels sprouts, leeks, celery, zucchini, turnips, Japanese cucumber, parsley, Chinese cabbage, potatoes, radishes, fennel and endives. By integrating deciduous fruit tree cultivation with vegetables, farmers were able to enhance food security and, in time, they were bound more closely to their land. Eventually, this ended the farmers' itinerant way of life that had supported indiscriminate methods of opium poppy cultivation largely responsible for the destruction of around four thousand hectares of forest by 1987. This crucially important point led to the Royal Project placing great emphasis on fruit tree cultivation.

The North became a centre for studying vetiver grass as a means to prevent soil erosion and topsoil degradation

Villagers also formed community forestry groups to preserve forested areas and to educate others of the need to conserve and prevent soil erosion. The Villager Forest project educated villagers to fell trees for timber or firewood in selected and approved areas, and informed them where not to fell trees. In return for permission to cut down some trees, villagers were asked to plant tree saplings in other locations to help the process of reforestation.

Self-help through self-management

The Royal Project team was faced with a philosophical dichotomy: should the project be a "provider" or should the team teach villagers to practice self-help? Theoretically, the Royal Project could continue to help villagers indefinitely; or teach self-sufficiency so villagers could stand on their own two feet. Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach him how to fish and you feed him for life. The project chose to teach self-help through self-management.

As a matter of policy, hill tribes in the project area are encouraged to form self-help entities, particularly rice banks, production groups, and cooperatives. Cooperatives are a well-known starting point for self-management of a community and form a part of His Majesty the King's "New Theory" of development.

Poor farmers lack the capital needed to launch a business, or to keep a business going through difficult times. This problem was addressed by the Royal Project by providing credit to finance agricultural development or maintain rice and food banks. The Bank of Agriculture and Cooperatives provides credit to some centres to ensure farms survive. Over the years, this form of cooperation with the bank has continued to grow.

No one wants to see the return of hunger pangs forcing people back to cultivating opium poppies. For convenience, rice banks have been set up in several villages where rice can be borrowed for immediate consumption against the next harvest. At the end of the season, borrowers replace the "borrowed" rice so there is always a reserve of "food capital" available for the next person or family.

Some villages have their own "rice banks"

Health care and drug addiction

Those engaged in the Royal Project were quick to realise that close attention had to be given to the physical wellbeing of villagers. In the earlier days, a large number of hill tribe people were malnourished and prone to the kind of diseases the developed world could only gasp at in amazement. Subsequently, villagers in need of health care, nutritional advice, guidance on family planning and so forth were visited by doctors and nurses from Chiang Mai University Hospital. Medical teams complemented vaccinations for common childhood illnesses such as polio and rubella by concentrating on virulent, Asian-oriented illnesses like Japanese encephalitis B. Government clinics in development areas provided assistance in terms of general medical care.

In a region that for years had been afflicted by uncontrolled opium cultivation, drug addiction was an important but totally unacceptable spin-off that had to be addressed and eliminated. Without able-bodied farmers, the Royal Project's crop research programme could never be implemented by the target group. In 1983 the foundation's treatment programme was expanded when it became obvious that treatment centres in Chiang Mai would not be able to cope with the problem.

The physical wellbeing of villagers is essential in the fight against poppy cultivation

"It is a habit, like smoking," commented Prince Bhisadej. "But these hill tribes…they smoke opium not tobacco. It is also medicinal. If you've got a bad stomach, you smoke opium. It is used as a medicine and also if you work hard and it's cold you smoke opium and it's very relaxing."

The detoxification programme includes classroom education and support groups. Surprisingly, many addicts want to break the habit; they want a better life, and see the Royal Project's campaigns in an attractive light because the campaigns are not coercive even with the active support of the police and paramilitary Border Patrol Police. Generally, police try to prevent drugs from entering each community and help to rehabilitate users. But they are tough on dealers. Everyone, it can be said, plays by the King's rules.

Nong Hoi, one of the project's key villages, conducts regular detox campaigns. The village headman explained why the Royal Project's detoxification and education campaign were important: "We started the project because we could see the waste. The Royal Project would not get anywhere if the people involved were addicted to narcotics."

Addicted villagers felt it was time to stop. Forty-year-old Mr. Neng, an addict for twenty years explained: "The Border Patrol Police informed me of this programme under the Royal Project. I joined because I wanted to stop. They are stopping it everywhere these days…I have nowhere left to go."

Providing essential health care for villagers

Formal education in villages

The Royal Project Foundation works not only with local authorities to provide basic education to hill tribe villagers but also to teach agriculture and forestry. Children are also instructed to stay clear of opium and the undesirable aspects of drug abuse. Schools can be found in areas where few teachers would be prepared to live. Instead, it is left to Border Patrol Police to provide education in conjunction with primary education authorities.

To meet this requirement, primary education schools are established in some villages or within walking distance of a village, and run by the government following a standard curriculum. The foundation provides scholarships for some children to continue their secondary education in Chiang Mai or Chiang Rai.

Children are schooled to understand the undesirable effects of drug abuse

The Royal Project buys products directly from farmers for marketing throughout Thailand

Marketing and sales

Introducing new cash-crops to farmers was essential but that alone was not enough; the farmers' produce had to be marketed and sold. In 1985 the Royal Project established a marketing arm with project staffers and volunteers who bought fruit, vegetables and other products directly from the farmers at the prevailing market price less twenty percent to cover expenses.

"We have marketing both here [Chiang Mai] and in Bangkok; cold transport and lorries," explained Prince Bhisadej. "Our market is mostly Thailand, but we have one food processing unit here at Chiang Mai University. I think they are doing guava juice now. There is one at Mae Chan in Chiang Rai. They export frozen strawberries and baby corn."

In effect, the marketing team buys around one third of the produce to sell on to urban areas. The rest is sold locally and to visiting tourists. Project volunteers grade, package and sell the produce. The project earns annual revenue of around thirteen million dollars from highland farmers.

As part of the project, three, small-scale canning plants were set up at Ban Yang in Chiang Mai, Mae Chan in Chiang Rai, and one at Chiang Mai University (mainly for research) to process the hill tribes' and lowlanders' agricultural products. It took time to get fruit to market with the result some was ripe or overripe before it could be sold. Food canning plants address this problem.

"The King's idea was not to throw ripe peaches away but to have them canned instead," explained Dr. Santhad.

The first food-processing plant was set up in Ban Yang in 1972; the other one in Mae Chan was set up in 1975 and was very successful. Today it is called the Doi Kham Food Processing factory producing over one hundred different products. The earlier factory in Ban Yang, Chiang Mai processed canned products for thirty years before being turned into a museum set up under the auspices of HRH Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn. However, the original food processing plant is still in operation even though a new plant has been opened.

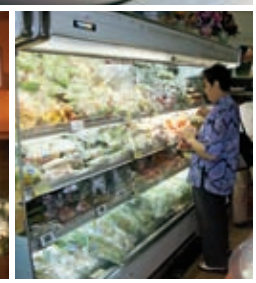
Canning factories ensure surplus produce is not wasted

Product branding and distribution

In due course the foundation developed product branding and distribution in Thailand to support the agricultural produce grown under the auspices of the Royal Project. In Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai and Bangkok, hill-grown products like tomato juice, lychee fruit, bamboo shoots, baby corn are processed into jams or canned goods for local distribution and for export. Products sold within Thailand carry the brand name Doi Kham (or Golden Mountain), instantly recognised nationally as the logo of His Majesty the King's project. Fresh produce, on the other hand, is stamped with the "Royal Project" brand and distributed nationwide through many outlets including the large, international supermarket chain Tesco-Lotus.

Royal Project brand

Royal Project produce also enjoys international exposure on routes flown by Thai Airways International one of the foundation's largest and most important customers. Each day, the catering department of Thailand's national airline prepares around seventy-five thousand in-flight meals for forty-eight different airlines serving Bangkok international airport. By supporting the Royal Project, THAI's catering department plays a major role towards improving the quality of life of hill tribe people in addition to bringing high quality products to the attention of the airline's domestic and international customers.



Working in conjunction with the foundation, THAI complies with international standards for product specification. EurepGAP (GAP being an acronym for Good Agricultural Practices) is a common standard for farm management practices created in the late 1990s by several European supermarket chains and their major suppliers. The aim was to introduce conformity among different retailers' supply standards, which had hitherto created problems for farmers. Today, it is the worlds' most widely implemented farm certification scheme initially used in Europe. Following improvements, it developed into a worldwide standard known as GLOBALG.A.P. Today, these standards encourage farmers to develop high quality fruits, vegetables and other agricultural products.

Mandarin Oriental Bangkok executive chef Norbert Kostner, an advisor to the Royal Project Board, evaluates produce with Prince Bhisadej the prime contributor to the success of the Royal Project

In Bangkok, several well-known, five-star luxury hotels carry Royal Project products because of the proven quality and freshness of each item. One of the better-known (and a long-standing customer) is the renowned Mandarin Oriental Bangkok. The hotel's long-serving executive chef, Norbert Kostner, an advisor to the Royal Project board since 1993, gives advice on just about everything from the ideal, fully-grown size of a cabbage to the preferred size of a rainbow trout! There are subtle reasons for such idiosyncrasies: Whereas most Asians prefer to share a fish meal among friends (the bigger the fish the better) a restaurant in an upscale hotel must serve a fish that fits the plate of a single guest.

Mr. Kostner's advice was supplemented by practical assistance: "I went to Italy and brought back a lot of seeds, but more like the kitchen-garden varieties. They started growing these under the auspices of the foundation…and they grew beautifully…from basil to rosemary to sage."

The Royal Project gradually expanded to the point where it was no longer just producing and marketing fruits, vegetables and flowers: In a valley next to Doi Inthanon, Hmong and Karen hill tribe farmers successfully produce around eighteen thousand kilograms of rainbow trout each year to be sold in city restaurants.

Assistance to foreign countries

As the Royal Project grew more successful, requests for assistance poured in from neighbouring countries, with Myanmar, Yunnan province in southern China, and Lao PDR among the first.

Today, Myanmar is second only to Afghanistan as the world's largest source of opium and they are most anxious to find a practical solution. In time, the foundation was contacted by other countries, including Columbia, Peru, Bolivia, Mexico and Pakistan, all seeking assistance to address their own drug crop problems

In Afghanistan, in 2008, around one hundred and fifty-seven thousand hectares had been given over to opium poppies according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) which has an office in Bangkok and offices in other affected countries. The director of UNODC in Afghanistan, Antonio Maria Costa, estimated the Taliban earned some one hundred million dollars from the opium trade in 2007 alone.

Gary Lewis of the UNDOC in Bangkok said, "There's a lot to be learnt from what we have achieved here. What we need to do is to try to stabilize the situation (in Afghanistan)…and in such a way that we can establish an environment for the kind of interventions that have proved successful in Thailand."

Dr. Santhad is less sanguine, believing it is perhaps unrealistic to emulate the success of the Royal Project in countries like Afghanistan "…until they cease fighting."

Afghanistan is seeking a practical solution to address its opium problems

His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej, the world's "Development King"

Reasons for success

Asked to comment on why the Royal Project has enjoyed such success, project director, Prince Bhisadej summed it up succinctly: "…through the money getting into the pockets of the hill tribes…they are driving cars!"

Apart from its tangible success, the Royal Project has received recognition of another kind by winning the Ramon Magsaysay Award in 1988 for International Understanding; and later the Colombo Plan Award in 2003 which identified it as the world's most outstanding opium-replacement project, and the only scheme to successfully eradicate opium poppy cultivation through positive measures.

His Majesty the King's empathy with the plight of one of the poorest segments of society has made Thailand's king one of the most respected development scientists in the world. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 2006 presented His Majesty with its first-ever Lifetime Achievement Award in recognition of the King's work. As he personally bestowed the award on His Majesty, UN Secretary-General Kofi Anan said:

"Your Majesty has made an extraordinary contribution to human development. As the world's 'Development King,' Your Majesty has reached out to the poorest and the most vulnerable people of Thailand – regardless of their status, ethnicity or religion – listened to their problems, and empowered them to take their lives in their own hands."

Royal Activities
and International Cooperation

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“...the well-being and happiness of the people
are a benefit that is difficult to be measured in terms of money.”