

## CSR Thailand: 'Fishing' lessons to enrich the poor

**'Mr Condom' Mechai Viravaidya finds new chink in armour of his biggest foe — poverty — and he wants to spread the word, writes Nauvarat Suksamran**

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Mechai Viravaidya, dubbed "Mr Condom" for driving a successful campaign to help reduce the country's birthrate since the early 1970s, is pushing an equally important grassroots agenda, but this time it is to alleviate poverty by promoting increased self-reliance and avoiding handouts.

The state has subsidised numerous projects to enhance the livelihood of low-income earners and the underprivileged across the country. However, this approach has barely scratched the surface as many schemes have failed to tackle the problems at their root.

Mr Mechai, a former politician and social activist, was among the first Thais to pioneer the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in the country four decades ago.

With CSR, businesses, particularly large companies, have implemented programmes that contribute to the sustainable development of local communities and society at large.

The basic idea is that companies take responsibility for the negative impact they have on society, specifically people's well-being and the environment, and engage in projects that make up the difference by giving something back to the community.

Throughout 44 years of his work to address poverty in rural backwaters, Mr Mechai, who established and chairs the Mechai Viravaidya Foundation, has put his efforts into promoting long-term social sustainability through his participation with various CSR projects and social activities.

The schemes range from birth control, an area he has championed for years, reduced mortality rates and poverty alleviation.

Mr Mechai has also launched projects focusing on human resources development under the Village Development Partnership (VDP). Private sector groups and organisations have joined in the long-term projects to combat poverty where it counts.

"Projects that only rely on subsidies have never been successful. On the other hand, the schemes that encourage people to look inward and come up with constructive ideas have enabled communities to survive poverty and pull them out of their backwardness," he said.

He stressed that the old-school social welfare system, which relies heavily on giving handouts, had very little chance of fulfilling their objectives if it did not change tack and improve people's labour skills and community empowerment. This gives the poor the much needed "capital" they need to devise their own ideas on how they can tailor solutions to their own problems.

People who are used to waiting for help from the government are the least likely to be able to stand on their own feet. Destitution and poverty is something that cannot be put on hold until the government subsidies or handouts arrive.

"I have always focused on creating opportunities. Many good ideas to improve people's lives don't always need to depend on big money to materialise," he said.

Mr Mechai, however, insisted that private businesses and organisations should play a wider role in making communities more financially independent.

Essentially, forging a sense of independence has start at a young age, according to Mr Mechai who founded the Mechai Pattana School in Lam Plai Mat district in the northeastern province of Buri Ram.

He said it all boils down to early education as schools form an integral part of molding productive human resources. It is there, he said, that values such as depending on oneself can and should be instilled and passed on.

Schools impart knowledge, teach about virtues and stoke a child's curiosity. But children need to be enticed to explore and initiate new and constructive ideas, a quality which will stay with them for the rest of their lives, experts say.

This helps them to acquire the ability to innovate and create products which they can use to make a living from and enjoy a sense of financial security.

Mr Mechai said students at the school had committed to growing 400 trees and doing 400 hours of community service in exchange for not having to pay any tuition fee.

In addition, selected students attend field classes at the Birds & Bees Resort, the foundation's hotel in Pattaya, Chon Buri, three times a week. Full board accommodation is also provided.

"We tell our guests our income is used to support the students' tuition fees," he said.

Beyond academic knowledge, Mr Mechai said students at the Mechai Pattana School are trained on vocational and life skills. Through this, they become more mature and independent than most of their peers after graduating, he added.

The Stock Exchange of Thailand Foundation also provides a budget to communities that win the annual Mechai Viravaidya award in the field of countryside social development. The money finances developmental projects, which in turn generate jobs.

This year's winner was the Ban Tha Maphrao community in Krabi's Klong Thom district.

Several years ago, vast swathes of the mangrove forests in tambon Klong Phon of Ban Tha Maphrao were damaged by an invasion of shrimp farmers.

To help nature reset itself, people in the community pooled their efforts to reclaim the forest area by replanting mangrove trees where the shrimp farms used to be. As a result, thousands of rai of the mangrove forests have since been restored to their pristine state.

About 70% of the residents in the community, or over 2,000 people, earn around 500 baht a day from selling mangrove crabs, black crabs and other marine life they catch in local waters. Some residents also make traditional fishing gear to earn extra money.

Others earn more from running fruit orchards, growing vegetables and tapping rubber, which makes for steady sources of employment. Today, young people in the community do not necessarily have to migrate to big cities in search of jobs.

A community fund was also registered to disburse loans to residents so they no longer have to turn to financial institutes for credit.

Ban Tha Maphrao is also a model for seven neighbouring communities that have adopted a similar developmental approach, although details of the project implementation vary according to the communities' social and environmental needs.

So far, the communities honoured with the Mechai Viravaidya award include: the Tambon Neon Khao Kho Community Organisation Council in Rayong; the Hak Muang Nan Foundation in Nan; the Institute for Sustainable Agriculture Community in Chiang Mai; a Tha Sao community enterprise in Kanchanaburi; and the Inpaeng Network in Sakon Nakhon.

"The key to success is a good leader. What makes a good leader is good community, where all sides including villagers, schools, teaching staff and students know how to share knowledge and help each other out," Mr Mechai said.

He said he spends most of his time tending to CSR projects and the Mechai Pattana School.

He also joins several social service agencies and works on a sufficiency economy project for community development. Somehow, he also finds time to serve as chairman of the Thailand Environmental Institute Foundation.

"Don't ask me if I'm tired of working over the past 40 years. Instead, ask me how proud I am of what I have done. It's better to say that I just want to work [for society]," he said.



Mr Mechai walks around the Birds & Bees Resort in Pattaya where a woman, left, gives a thumbs-up to signboards bearing life mottoes. The resort is also where students from the Mechai Pattana School are trained in vocational and life skills.



Members of the Ban Tha Maphrao community in Krabi pose for a group photo. The community won this year's Mechai Viravaidya award in the field of countryside social development.



Mechai Viravaidya attends an activity with students chosen to receive training at the Birds & Bees Resort.