

A New Dawn in Rural Thai Education

An Interview with Mechai Viravaidya, The Mechai Bamboo School



EDITORS' NOTE *Mechai Viravaidya founded the Population and Community Development Association (PDA) in 1974. In between running PDA's activities, he was appointed to such key positions as Thailand's Cabinet spokesman, the Minister of the Office of the Prime Minister, and Chairman of several of Thailand's largest government-owned enterprises. He was also elected to the Senate between 1987 and 1991, 1996 and 2000, and 2000 and 2006. Recognizing that civil society organizations cannot survive and expand solely on the generosity of others, he established Thailand's first social enterprise to help fund the operating costs of PDA in 1975. Since then, this company has spawned 28 other social enterprises which have contributed significantly to the financial needs of the association.*



Mechai Viravaidya

home villages, thus fulfilling their individual social responsibilities. Our aspiration is to foster a new generation of youth that is sincere and caring. After 13 years of operations of the Bamboo School, we see clearly that future schools can, and must, become platforms for social and economic advancements in surrounding communities. We believe that this approach can be replicated in the neighboring countries of Thailand as well as in most parts of the world.

How has the Bamboo School evolved and will you highlight its commitment to being a lifelong learning center?

Over the past ten years, many of the 9,000 neighboring community members have visited the Bamboo School to befriend students and to train them in local arts and crafts and local delicacies, including crickets. In return, the students have provided skills in modern vegetable cultivation using little

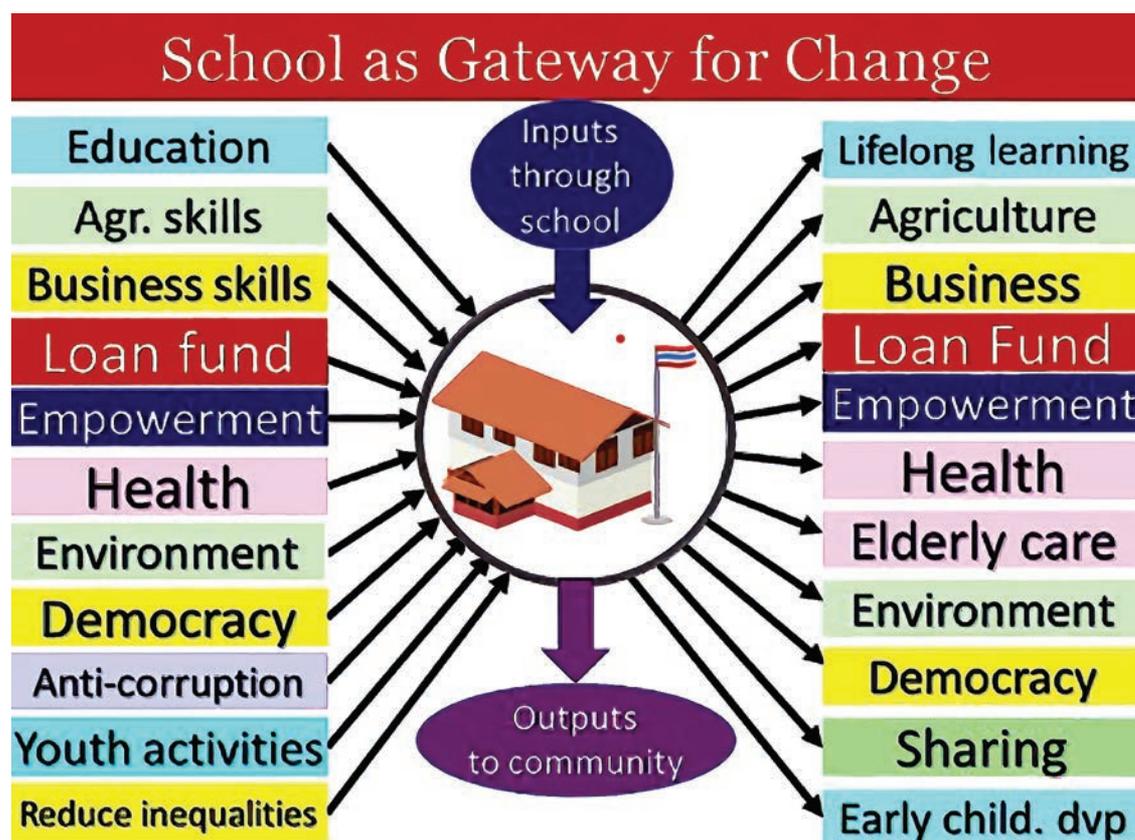
land, little water and light labor. Following the training, poor villagers can borrow from a micro-credit savings and loan fund to start income generating activities by using labor as collateral.

The most recent initiative during the COVID-19 pandemic was the launch of the Food and Income Security for the Elderly by the students and the school which has already benefitted 240 elderly households. The Bamboo School students have played an important role in training elderly citizens in the cultivation of bean sprouts, mushrooms, green vegetables and banana plants, and provided soil, fertilizer and growing containers to grow vegetables in poor soil. Each elderly couple was provided with a one-time grant of \$250 to cover costs. Elderly couples are now growing these crops and are happily working with our students, consuming their produce, selling some vegetables to other villagers as well as to the Bamboo School. The income earned will enable this project to be sustainable without further funding.

ORGANIZATION BRIEF *The Mechai Bamboo School (mechaipattana.ac.th) is an innovative secondary school which is also engaged in community development. The rural boarding school was established to become a lifelong learning center for all and to act as a hub for social and economic advancement in surrounding villages. The school educates 180 students and also has a community development arm which provides assistance and cooperation to small rural schools and their surrounding communities, as well as a Social Enterprise arm that aims to provide financial support to the schools for the running of the school. The Bamboo School is located in Buriram province, Northeast Thailand, near the Cambodian border.*

How do you define the mission and purpose of The Mechai Bamboo School?

The mission of The Mechai Bamboo School is to create a new type of educational institution for rural youth where life skills and occupational skills go hand in hand with academic subjects. We aim to foster good citizens who are innovative change-makers, who are also honest, embrace empathy and are willing to share. The Bamboo School aims to guide the young to respect and practice equality of all forms and to become active community development leaders in their



The next endeavor is to work with other rural schools to launch Food and Income Security for the Elderly programs for citizens in villages surrounding their schools. All 32,000 government schools in Thailand are provided with budgets for school lunches which can be used to purchase vegetables from the elderly. If this concept is accepted on a wider scale, schools can establish sustainable food and income security for the elderly nationwide.

The Bamboo School students are now preparing to generate funds to launch a pilot project entitled “Homeward-Bound” to entice couples who have left the village to return to their parents and children in the home village. A loan fund will be provided for these “homeward-bound” couples to grow vegetables and establish other income generating activities. Apart from the “homeward-bound” project, students will also launch a project early in the New Year to promote gender equality whereby five women and youth will be appointed as “honorary assistant village heads” to introduce new sanitation and environmental activities to combat global warming.

What has made it so critical for the Bamboo School to focus on community development?

All our students come from rural settings. In most rural communities, people are leaving their homes in search of income instead of starting vegetable and other income-generating activities in their home villages. This migration is causing a severe disruption to village life and further exacerbates the problem of rural poverty. When these people were young and studying at schools, they were not taught how to earn income via agriculture or business.

With the help of the private sector, we have introduced poverty eradication vegetable farms and training in income generating activities for students in 122 primary and secondary schools in 40 of Thailand’s 77 provinces. We are confident that these students will one day be able to earn a good income without having to migrate. Apart from income generation, we have also launched many other activities paralleling the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These activities begin in the school and move into the villages. Water, sanitation, hunger, environment, gender equality and education are among the activities chosen and launched in the schools and villages.

Do you feel that the Bamboo School model can be replicated in other parts of the world?

Launching a school like this in other countries would be a most exciting venture. It is important that the private sector plays a significant role in this endeavor. We look forward to this possibility.

Will you highlight some of the success stories from the Bamboo School?

Most students have received university scholarships and many have come back to work at the school. Some have gone home to do rural development work. While at university, our graduates have also launched projects similar to their old school projects for other rural schools and communities. They also help to raise funds. In general, our students are known to be polite and friendly to people with disabilities. Empathy is an important quality of the Bamboo School students. Students with hearing impairment come to the school on a regular basis to teach our students sign language and in return our

students teach them vegetable growing, tissue culture and swimming. All students must use a wheelchair for an entire day each month so that acceptance and admiration to wheelchair-bound is experienced. We have been able to acquire funds from the private sector to help launch poverty eradication farms and set up a savings and loan fund to encourage students to launch businesses.

How did the Bamboo School adapt the way it works to address the challenges caused by the global pandemic?

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the school adopted strict controls and practiced social distancing. Our school is one of the very few schools that has been allowed to open. Our students prepare food for elderly citizens and health workers on a weekly basis, and the school asks for the recipients to arrange for pickup or, in special circumstances, the food is delivered to the village by the school drone which generates a great deal of excitement for the elderly and their grandchildren.

As for the project for Food and Income Security for the Elderly, students continue with training on vegetable growing techniques via online meetings.

What are the keys to driving sustainable change in addressing rural education?

People who are progressive about education should seriously emphasize student engagement and empowerment and creating an atmosphere for practical, real-life learning, student ownership and involvement in their education, as well as community social responsibility. In the long run, we aim to bring some subjects which are normally taught at university down to the school level and turning the school into a future career academy. ●

“The Bamboo School is a school that truly makes real-life learning and skills connected to the curriculum, student voice and choice, empathy building, social entrepreneurship, and community social responsibility.

Often these words are represented in a school’s vision and mission statements, but the evidence is often very superficial or difficult to find. The trust that you have built in your students through the opportunity to lead their own projects, support and work with local communities, take part in the governance of the school, would be the envy of many schools internationally. Again, many schools talk about this, but too often the focus is solely on academic skills which detract from the child as a whole being. Your school is a genuine example of working towards reducing inequality through a flexible curriculum program.”

Karen O’Neill, International Freelance Learning Development Consultant