

Sustainable Highland Development in Northern Thailand under the Royal Project Foundation

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Abstract

The highlands of Thailand lie mainly in northern region. In the past, agricultural practices in this area were traditionally for subsistence food production under shifting cultivation systems. Since 1969 the Royal Project (now the Royal Project Foundation) was established under the initiative of His Majesty the King to launch its mission in collaboration with the Royal Thai Government, foreign governments, universities, public and private agencies and volunteers. The major activities of the Royal Project are including 1) **research**-on various fields such as crops (vegetables, temperate fruits, cut flowers, field crops etc.) forestry, livestock, fisheries (Goettingen University is actively involved with rainbow trout farming project) and postharvest technology 2) **agricultural extension and development**-the appropriated cash crops and agricultural technologies derived from research have been introduced to the hilltribe people in the 36 Royal Project Development Centres located in 5 Provinces of northern Thailand namely Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Lamphun, Mae Hong Son and Phayao. The intensive efforts have been made to develop the necessary infrastructure, e.g. village roads, irrigation systems and village electricity. The improvement of watershed areas through proper land use planning and management and soil conservation practices has also been carried out in the already slash and burn areas. 3) **Socioeconomic activities**-the hilltribe people in the project areas are motivated to form self-help organizations particularly production groups, village committees and co-operatives. The promotion of education and public health care have also been carried out in the project areas. Finally, marketing one of the most significant of the Royal Project's activities has been run to distribute the products of the hilltribe farmers to the markets and consumers. Through these activities the Royal Project in 1988 had the great satisfaction of seeing its efforts recognized and honored in being awarded the Magsaysay Award in the category of international understanding.

Introduction

Thailand has an area of about 513,100 square kilometers, which can be divided into 4 regions, namely: the fertile Central plain, the mountainous North, the semi-arid Northeast and the topographically diverse South. Total area of northern region is approximately 16.96 million ha (Table 1), out of this about 61 percent is highland (higher than 700 MSL), 30 percent upland and only about 9 percent of low and flat land.

Table 1 Land utilization of Thailand by regions in 1995 (in million ha)

Region	Total Land	Forest Land	Farm-holding Land	Unclassified Land
North-Eastern	16.88	2.13	9.25	5.50
Northern	16.96	7.39	4.67	4.90
Central Plain	10.39	2.39	4.36	3.64
Southern	7.07	1.24	2.91	2.92
Whole Kingdom	5.31	13.15	21.20	16.97

Adapted from: Center for Agricultural Statistics (1998)

The highland area of Thailand are home to over 800,000 tribal people including Karen (50%, Hmong (15%), Lahu (11%), Akha (6%), Yao (6%), H'tin (5%), Lisu (4%), Lua (2%) and Khamu (1%). In addition there are several thousand Shan and Haw Chinese who live in the scattered villages near the border of Myanmar. Although comprising only 1.3% of the country's population; the hilltribe people are not homogeneous and must be considered in light of their individual differences in; ethnicity, language, culture, literacy, socio-economic systems and traditional beliefs. In the past, these people lived in close relation to the surrounding forests, with little access to the outside and the economic services rendered by the Thai public and private sectors, the hilltribes have been relatively self-reliant.

Agricultural practices in the highland are mainly under rain fed farming systems; so-called shifting cultivation (slash and burn agriculture). By this traditionally farming is by all means mainly for subsistence food crops production such as rice, maize, sesame and to lesser extent in the border area still produce opium. Due to tribal population have grown 2.1-4.5% every year, the continuing demand for cropped land inducing the destruction of the forests in the highland (Table 2). Therefore, it is clear that the impacts become more negative and the disruption greater, unless supportive and corrective measures are to be taken.

Table 2 Area of forest in Thailand from 1938-1995 (in million ha)

	1938	1963	1983	1995
Whole Kingdom	36.94	27.18	15.41	13.15
Northern Region		11.58	8.66	7.39

Adapted from: Center for Agricultural Statistics (1998)

The History of the Royal Project

Since early 1960 His Majesty King Bhumiphol paid his visit to the North and afforded Him with invaluable insights into the hilltribes' life and problems as resulting from opium growing which affects not only the security of the nation, but also the deterioration of the watershed areas. In 1969 the Royal Project was established under His Majesty initiative, having the collaboration of volunteers from universities, government officials and foreign experts to perform the works and makes the hilltribes understand the loss caused by forest destruction, to have a better standard of living and to stop growing opium.

At he beginning research works were carried out on fruit trees and substitute crops to replace opium production. Later the Royal Project has created and actively performed many successive highland development programme in northern Thailand. Its structure has also been adjusted many times, and the project title has been changed to suit the condition and expand scope of work. Up until March 1992, the Royal Project has changed the status by Royal Command, to the Royal Project Foundation. His Majesty the King Himself holds the position of Honorary President of the Foundation, the component of the Board consists of H.S.H. Prince Bhisatej Rajani as Chairman together with 9 appointed committees. Through this way the Royal Project Foundation rendering the public services with effective management system and permanent budget allocation.

Main Activities of the Royal Project Foundation

Along over three decades, the Royal Project has successfully fulfilled His Majesty's wish by placing emphasis mainly on R&D, which lead to the proper cultivation of crops for opium substitution. The mission of the Royal Project Foundation is nowadays fully supported by the Royal Thai Government, foreign governments, international organizations, universities, public and private agencies and volunteers to fulfill its major objectives as follows:-

1. To help the hill tribes for humanitarianism.
2. To help the nation by reducing the destruction of natural resources in terms of forests and watershed.
3. To stop opium cultivation.
4. To conserve soil and make proper use of land, that is to avoid the encroachment of cultivated fields upon forest areas.
5. To produce cash crops for the benefit of the Thai economy.

The area of Royal Project Foundation covers five Provinces of northern Thailand namely, Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Lamphun, Mae Hong Son and Phayao. The four main Research Stations and 36 Royal Project Development Centers were established and activities are carried out to cover 100,840 people in 312 villages.

The work of the Royal Project has evolved the major endeavors, namely research, agricultural extension and development and socio-economic activities: -

1. Research

Various fields of research have been continually conducted such as crops including vegetables, temperate fruits, cut flowers, field crops herbs and spices, coffee, tea and mushroom etc., forestry especially fast growing trees; livestock mainly on pig, poultry, goat, cattle and buffalo; fishery-one of the major experiments is on rainbow trout farming in the highland in close cooperation with Institute of Animal Husbandry and Genetics, University of Goettingen; post harvest technology-concentrates mainly on grading and packaging ready for marketing and processing.

The budget allocation is mainly supported by the government and international agencies. Though, during the past three decades the Royal Project Foundation has been successfully found out and introduced technology to the hilltribe farmers for various kinds of agricultural production, research works still be a must to be further carried out to find better and suitable technology to support the people who live mainly in marginal areas.

2. Agricultural Extension and Development

Appropriate cash crops and agricultural technology derived from research have been introduced to the hilltribe farmers, upon the realization that successful application requires allotment as well as guidance. At the same time the Royal Project Foundation itself has been developed the extension skills and knowledge of the extension staff and enhancing technology transfer to meet the requirement of effectiveness of activities to be transferred.

An intensive effort has been and being made to develop the necessary physical infrastructure, for example village roads, small irrigation systems and electricity. These would be the fundamentally support system to improved access, mobility and providing more chance of cash crop production.

The Department of Land Development by the Highland Land Development Center has been continually working on improvement of watershed areas through proper land use management and soil conservation practices in the already slash and burn areas. In cooperation with the Royal Forestry Department the Royal Project Foundation has been introduced His Majesty's three types of wood for four uses principles to the highland farmers, i e.-wood for fuel, timber, fruit and lastly the conservation of forests and watershed areas.

3. Socio-Economic Activities

The hilltribe people in the project areas are motivated to form self-help organization (SHO) particularly the production groups, village committees and co-operatives. Furthermore, there are also the activities on social and public health development, family planning, narcotic plants eradication and the support for tribal community to prevent the expansive of addiction of narcotic drugs. Alongside education and occupation development for the new generation of the hilltribe people are also one of the major activities to be carry out.

Marketing itself has become one of the most significant of the Royal Project Foundation activities. It involves the promotion of all products to become popular with consumers. The activities start in line from transportation of the products from the farmers to the central point then grading, packing and sale distribution. The processing for value-added agricultural products has also been carried out at the Royal Project canneries. All Royal Project products are marketed under the brand name "Doi Kham", which in northern dialect means "Golden Mountain"

Internationally , through those mentioned activities, the Royal Project in 1988 had the great satisfaction of seeing its efforts recognized and honored in being awarded the Magsaysay Award in the category of international understanding.

Conclusion

Since 1969, the Royal Project has started in a small area. Up till now the activities of the Royal Project have been extended to cover over 314 villages in 5 Provinces. The agricultural produces generated there consisting of over 60 kinds of temperate vegetables, about 20 kinds of cut flowers and 12 species of temperate fruits have been distributed for sales with a systematic marketing approach. Each of which meets with consumer's satisfaction.

The task force on research and development is still the main target of the Royal Project Foundation to strive for and working towards producing new potential agricultural produces and the better or even cleaner environment. It is most quite clear that to do any development work in the highland area, the task has to be comprehensive, complete cycle of development from the beginning up to sell produces in the market. This would definitely leading to sustainable development.

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