

Cabbages & Condoms: Interview with Mechai Viravaidya

By Wayne Visser

Background

Mechai Viravaidya is the Founder and Chairman of the Population and Community Development Association (PDA), one of Thailand's largest and most successful private, nonprofit, development organizations. Among the many programmes and projects it runs is the Cabbages & Condoms restaurant in Bangkok, a social enterprise dedicated to raising awareness on family planning and HIV/AIDS.

Through PDA and his other activities, including serving as a Senator in the Thai government and Chairman to of Thailand's biggest companies, Viravaidya has played a pivotal role in Thailand's immensely successful family planning program, which saw one of the most rapid fertility declines in the modern era. The rate of annual population growth in Thailand declined from over 3% in 1974 to 0.6% in 2005, and the average number of children per family fell from seven to under two.

Viravaidya was also chief architect in building Thailand's comprehensive national HIV/AIDS prevention policy and program. This initiative is widely regarded as one of the most outstanding national efforts by any country in combating HIV/AIDS. By 2004, Thailand had experienced a 90% reduction in new HIV infections. In 2005, the World Bank reported that these preventative efforts helped save 7.7 million lives throughout the country and saved the government over US\$18 billion in treatment costs alone. In 1999, Viravaidya was appointed the UNAIDS Ambassador.

Viravaidya has been acclaimed with numerous awards, recognition, and honorary doctoral degrees and it was a great privilege to be granted this short interview about Cabbages & Condoms.

Interview

Conducted by Dr Wayne Visser, Founder and Director of CSR International on 5 April 2010.

Using Cabbages & Condoms as an example, what demonstrable impact can social enterprises make to society's problems?

We originally referred to the Cabbages & Condoms Restaurant as a "Business for Social Progress", which is commonly known as a social enterprise in the West. The profits from

our restaurant directly benefit our NGO, the Population & Community Development Association. The impact has included: promotion of family planning in Thailand, HIV/AIDS prevention through condom usage, poverty alleviation and education in Northeastern Thailand. The restaurant has been a successful social enterprise, and we always encourage civil society leaders in Asia to set one up to help maintain financial sustainability, including with youth groups.

What are the barriers to scaling up social enterprises like Cabbages & Condoms?

The biggest hurdles to social enterprise are good ideas and funds for large-scale endeavours. It is best for new organizations looking at establishing a social enterprise to seek advice from the business community and start small.

What is the role of government in enabling social enterprises like Cabbages & Condoms to succeed?

Unlike the West (the UK in particular) the Thai Government plays no role in enabling social enterprise. The best thing they can do is to kindly stay out of the way.

Can you point to other best practice examples like Cabbages & Condoms (in Thailand or elsewhere in the world)?

Some good examples in Thailand include: The Doi Tung Project, the Her Majesty Queen Sirikit's Projects, and HRH Princess Sirindhorn's Projects.

What personally motivated you to use business as a way to make a social impact?

We needed to ensure that our poverty eradication and education initiatives performed under our NGO had long-term sustainability and were not entirely dependent on outside donations. The social enterprises we have established have earned approximately US\$150 Million over 25 years and fund approximately 70% of our development endeavours. We would not have been able to accomplish half as much as we have without our social enterprises.

More information

For more information about Mechai Viravaidya and his work, please visit the Mechai Foundation website.

Source:

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